China According to China
Web-Based Nation Branding of Chinese Culture, Geography and History

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Abstract   Confucius Institutes (CIs) are administered by Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), an organisation affiliated to People's Republic of China (PRC)'s Ministry of Education. One of the main stated purposes of Hanban is the promotion and diffusion of Chinese culture and Mandarin language abroad through CIs activity, both cultural and didactic. In this respect, the Confucius Institute Online (CIO) website, with contents available in Chinese, English and other languages, serves as a powerful instrument in pursuing Hanban's mission. As CIs are partially influenced by the PRC Ministry of Education in their policies and activities, they are thus subject to scrutiny on grounds of political motivation and are object of controversy. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate how the CIO website illustrates the main features of Chinese culture, history and geography. In doing so, the present analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the *modus operandi* adopted by Hanban when describing PRC in terms acceptable to PRC itself.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Concept of Soft Power and its Extension to PRC's Cultural Diplomacy Programs. – 3 The Confucius Institute Online Website: Structure and Contents. – 4 The Confucius Institute Online Website: Contents Analysis. – 5 Conclusions.

Keywords   China. PRC. Cultural diplomacy. Soft power. Web-based charm offensive. Confucius Institutes. Hanban.

1   Introduction

In the first part of this paper, I will present my general theoretical framework, which borrows many of the analytical 'tools' from the conceptual 'toolbox' given by cultural studies (Barker 2012, 108-9). I adhere to the concept of 'soft power' proposed by Nye (2004, 2006) and applied specifically to the Chinese context (2005, 2011, 2012). Secondly, I will describe the main features of the CIO website, with particular attention to the sections that give a defined outlook on Chinese culture, geography, and history. I will dedicate particular attention to the 'Self Learning' and 'Experiencing Culture' sections, being them the richest sections of the CIO website from the point of view of the discursive practice on Chinese

identity through representation of its own culture, geography and history.[1] The website itself can be intended as a 'discursive' device able to boost the capability to acquire, maintain and increase soft power for PRC. In accordance to this perspective, in the third section of this work I will analyse the website contents with particular attention to the phenomenon of 'orientalism' as described by Said (1978, quoted in Barker 2012) and of 'reorientalism' and 'reorientality' as described by Schmidt (2013). My aim is to give a report on the representation of China's cultural, geographical and historic features that emerge from the CIO website material. This kind of issue could represent the actual Achilles' heel of the whole project, threatening to hinder PRC's attempt to move its charm offensive (Pan 2006; Kurlantzick 2007). On the basis of the results of my analysis, I will offer an evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies applied by Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban)[2] in the construction of the CIO website, as well as the possible heterogenesis of ends to which such an operation could lead.

2 The Concept of Soft Power and its Extension to PRC's Cultural Diplomacy Programs

Soft power, as stated by Nye (2011, 11), is a multi-faceted concept and its definition, in a similar way to the one of 'power' and of its manifold forms,[3] "is surprisingly elusive and difficult to measure". In opposition to hard power, this form of influence is more subtle and difficult to grasp and maintain. Soft power is not measurable and is more difficult to be obtained and used in comparison to traditional power. A country's soft power assets lead other parties to define the given country as attractive, potentially admirable and enviable. The principal aim of soft power is to allow its holder to obtain a certain result or outcome without threats, display of economic

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1 In this context I will refer to the foucaultian term 'discourse' and to its productivity in the context of knowledge creation as defined by Barker (2012). Discourse is as an act of production of meanings, definitions and by extent narratives that are considered trustworthy and 'true', due to the role and position of the social actor performing the act itself, might it be a statutory body or a scientific or intellectual elite.

2 'Hanban' is the short common name for 国家汉语国际推广领导小组办公室 *Guojia hanyu guoji tuiguang lingdao xiaozu bangongshi*, officially translated in English as 'Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language'.

3 According to Boulding (1989, 15, as quoted in Nye 2011, 10), "power is the ability to get what we want". A corollary to this definition is given by Nye (2006): "power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want. There are basically three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots), and attraction (soft power)" (URL `http://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/`) (2013-09-04).

and/or military might, or promise of any other potential retaliation. The other end often does not need to be convinced, as soft power had already prepared a secure path for the achievement of its desired goal. One of the elements that may lead to a soft power increase is a country's economic strength, even though this particular form of power can be used in a way that could be either hard or soft. Among the features that can tentatively be identified as able to guarantee a more reliable source of soft power, culture, political values and foreign policies are amongst the main features that can ensure an increase in a country's soft influence (see Nye 2006).

The government of PRC has stated in many occasions its concern about the issue of soft power and its desire to control its derived influence. In his report to the seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 15th October 2007, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and President of the PRC, stated as follows:

> In the present era, 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, and the Chinese people have an increasingly ardent desire for a richer cultural life. We must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress.

On 29th November 2014, Xi Jinping, the current General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and President of the PRC, addressed the members of the Central Foreign Affairs work conferences stressing the importance of soft power for PRC's diplomatic relations (as quoted in Swaine 2015, 8-9):

> There is a need to win understanding and support from various countries in the world for the Chinese dream, resolutely maintain territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, safeguard development opportunities and development space, strive to bring about a deep convergence and mutual beneficial cooperative network. At the same time, we need to raise our soft power and tell good stories on China's development.

On this regard, one of the main strategies adopted by the PRC's Government has been the foundation of the Confucius Institutes (Nye 2005; Breslin 2011, 10). Confucius Institutes belong to a non-profit cultural institution regulated and administrated by Hanban, an organisation affiliated

to PRC's Ministry of Education, founded in 2004. The official constitution and by-laws of the Confucius Institutes (Hanban 2014) state that:

> Confucius Institutes devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multi-culturalism, and to construct a harmonious world. […] Adhering to the principles of mutual respect, friendly negotiations, and mutual benefit, the Confucius Institutes shall develop and facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language overseas and promote educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other international communities.

Confucius Institutes operate worldwide, in the same way of other cultural institutions like Dante Alighieri Institutes, Goethe Institutes, Cervantes Institutes and Alliance Française. Each Confucius Institute can collaborate with local schooling institutions in order to found branches called 'Confucius Classrooms'. Confucius Classroom are smaller centres that offer Chinese language and culture courses. At the present time, according to the figures reported in one of the pages of the CIO website, circa 1,100 between Confucius Institutes and Classrooms are registered as active (CIO 2014a). Unlike other cultural institutions, Confucius Institutes have often been met with suspicion. Influenced by the PRC Ministry of Education in their policies and activities (Hartig 2010, 1), Confucius Institutes are thus subject to scrutiny on grounds of political motivation and are object of controversy. The refusal of some universities to host a Confucius Institute in their facility has its base in the concern about the peculiar arbitrariness of the teaching strategies adopted: the fear that such a strong and influential language and culture school could affect the freedom of research induced some universities to decline the offer of funds granted by Hanban. The suspicion or the actual report of human rights violation in the context of hiring practices lead some universities to abandon the partnership with the PRC Ministry of Education (Ramzy 2014). One of the most recent episodes regarding Hanban controversial *modus operandi* is the 'Braga Incident'. What Pan (2006) might have been suggesting as a possible point in the Confucius Institutes Headquarters agenda, the attempt to weaken Taiwan's international cultural influence, became factual when a page regarding the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, based in the Republic of China (ROC), was allegedly torn from many copies of the book of abstracts of the XX Biennial Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS), held in Braga and Coimbra (EACS 2014).

In light of the above-mentioned considerations, the following analysis of the official CIO website is a contribution in the general study of Hanban and Confucius Institutes work and, on a wider perspective, of the PRC cultural diplomacy programme and rush for soft power. As stated in the *Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2014* (Hanban 2015), CIO website registered users were stated around 3,250,000. According to the report, 280,000 students enrolled to at least one of the 24,519 courses and 891 teachers were employed in order to offer a competitive web-based real time didactic service. The necessity of the website analysis is due to the strong potential that such a platform offers in terms of accessibility, ramification and diffusion of both teaching and educational materials. The nature and contents of the said materials can be analysed as the result of a discursive practice in which the producer of the discourse can not only forge the very concept and meaning of 'China' but also spread it through one of the most powerful and accessible means of communication.

3   The Confucius Institute Online Website: Structure and Contents

CIO website is active since 2009 and it has been labelled as "the most expensive website in history": in 2010 the Ministry of Finance of the PRC published a report on the winning bid for the website development and maintenance: its estimated cost was approximately 35.2 million Yuan (5.6 million dollars, almost 5 million euros) (Henochovicz 2012).

Until year 2013, the website URL address was `chinese.cn` and it mainly featured Chinese language materials and Chinese culture educational articles. This version of the CIO website presented itself as a Tower of Babel, offering contents translated in 46 different languages. According to the European Confucius Institutes Conference held in Bologna in May 2013, the number of languages should have been increasing and the website contents should have been available in 57 different languages.

From 2013 on, the online platform has been converted into a learning-oriented portal with the current URL address `chinesecio.com`.

The present version of CIO website offers fewer language options: the languages have been reduced to 7 options (in the order: English, Chinese, French, Korean, Japanese, Russian and Spanish), even if some contents (such as documentaries and short educational articles) are provided in languages not currently listed, for example Thai and German. The general user accessing the website home page can choose between the sections

"Learning Chinese", "Experiencing Culture" and lastly "More".[4] This third option gives direct access to a miscellaneous cluster of links such as the news page, the official website blog, information about Hanban and Confucius organised competition 'Chinese Bridge', and to a mapping of the Confucius institutes and classrooms. The main body of the home page depicts a bone china teacup with blue decorations filled with green tea, placed on top of an operating laptop computer browsing one of the pages of the website itself. Particular stress is put on the didactic function of the portal, with two buttons that lead directly to the "Live class" and "Self-learning".

The "Self-learning" section offers a vast selection of short documentaries and reading materials organised either in entire courses or single lessons, and divided into categories: "Difficulty Level", "Learner Category", "Format", "Content Category", and "Language". The contents are organised under the following labels: "Culture", "Travel", "Business", "Entertainment", "Leisure", "Animation", "Movies" and "Teaching Resources".

The "Experiencing Culture" section offers the user the possibility to choose between different sections: "Culture Discovery"; "Culture Courseware"; "Culture Videos"; "Culture Gallery"; "2009-2011 Cultural Resources". Contents for each section are organised into a wide array of categories: "Food", "Travel", "Folk Custom", "Chinese Kung Fu", "Drama and Opera", "Tea and Wine", "TCM" (Traditional Chinese Medicine), "Literature and Arts", "People" and "Cultural Heritage".

The macro section "Culture Discovery" is the richest in number of articles focusing on the main features of China, with regards to its culture, geography and history. Every sub-section offers articles both in Chinese and in the language chosen by the user. In the "Food" section it is possible to peruse a large amount of texts regarding one of the most important and renowned items of Chinese material culture: regional cuisines in all their manifold variety. The "Travel" section offers a wide array of articles introducing the reader to the PRC's main geographical features: the sub-sections are organised accordingly to geographic areas. Every item offers a general survey on the geographic features of a specific city or area, as well as touristic suggestions about sightseeing opportunities, places of interest and historical sites. The "Folk Custom" section presents a wide selection of articles related to traditional festivals and folk crafts, while the "Chinese Kung Fu" offers an insight into the different schools that keep Chinese martial arts alive. The "Drama and Opera" section features a number of introductory articles about Chinese theatrical arts as well as several synopses of some of the most known traditional plays, such as the Kunqu Opera *The Peony Pavilion* or the Beijing Opera classics. The "Tea

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4   All the assertions in this paragraph and in the following ones, whereas not differently stated, are based on the contents of the CIO website.

and Wine" and "TCM" categories are rich in contents about many highly prominent items of Chinese material culture, from tea and wine production and consumption to theoretical and practical information about traditional Chinese Medicine. The "Literature and Arts" and "People" sections are the most branched ones: the first gives an insight on folk literary, musical, artistic, handicraft and performance arts, while the latter presents a list of historical characters' biographies, spacing in a time-line that goes from the pre-Qin historical period down to present years. The "Cultural Heritage" section is divided in two different categories: tangible and intangible traditional Chinese culture.

In conclusion, the CIO website offers a platform that presents itself as leviathan in dimensions and potentiality. The educational and didactical material, available for free and in great amounts, could cover every aspect of Chinese geography, history and culture. Hence, theoretically speaking, the platform could well serve as a flawless device for both the purposes to contribute to the PRC's soft power enhancement on a cultural and diplomatic basis, as well as to pave the ground for discursive practice.

4 The Confucius Institute Online Website: Contents Analysis

As stated before, the CIO website has been an enormous investment by the PRC's Ministry of Education and Hanban. The large amount of funds allocated to the development of the web platform has kindled the fire of Chinese netizens' protest, who argued that the same amount of money could have been directed to other more compelling issues, such as the improvement of the national educational system (Henochowicz 2012). Beside the economical point of view, the CIO website presents other problematic aspects. Technical issues related to the connection are generally a common problem, especially when using free online services. During the virtual fieldwork necessary to the data collection for this paper, I encountered several page-loading problems, both from private and university internet server connection. Whether it is arguable that the connection speed can make the difference if a user tries to access video documents, the loading procedure of a preview page with only small images and text could last several minutes. This kind of issues has persisted throughout the years: I started analysing the CIO website contents in 2013 and, to the present day, I have not detected sensible improvement.

Beside the debatable technicalities, a number of the analysed sections present content-related problems: apparently, there is not a strict update schedule at work. Numerous sections, e.g. the "Tangible Cultural Heritage", have not new contents since 2014, with the total amount of items available limited to five. These articles present an issue of linguistic nature as well. Considering that the majority of the potential users could approach

any Confucius Institute or their web-based counterpart in order to engage with Chinese culture (Hartig 2010, 7), the lack of translation can prevent the comprehension of any article contents, frustrating its main educational purpose. Although it is not possible to put under scrutiny the nature of the contents and the topics covered in the several articles, the final result is a general heterogenesis of ends.

In the attempt to valorise China's symbolic capital, the content editors of CIO website could not avoid to stumble upon some clichés. According to Schmidt (2013, 656-60), the representation of Chinese culture features hides the inherent peril of actually giving a portrait of an 'idealised Other'. Notwithstanding the positive purpose of offering a good picture of China and 'Chineseness', the outcome ends up being the result of a process of 'reorientalism'. The tendency to keep the description of China's geographical, historical, and cultural features to its very surface creates an idealised and beautified 'front region' (Goffman 1976, 114) that has no connection with the real 'back region' on which it should supposedly be based. Even though it is not realistic to expect from an allegedly government-run cultural agency to confront itself with sensible or problematic topics, a certain inclination to address controversial subjects is detectable only peripherally. There is a tendency to offer a naïve and stereotypical portrait of ethnic minorities that live inside the borders of the PRC, as well as the redefinition of the Country's national borders (CIO 2014b). This kind of cultural divulgation cannot be interpreted as an efficacious way to render the widely praised ethnic cultural variety of PRC's different minorities and it is not an efficacious way to understate an international controversy or to mitigate the general opinion on domestic issues.

To name a significant example, as detectable in (CIO 2006), 'Taiwan' is straightforwardly defined as "台湾省", *Taiwan shen*, literally 'the Province of Taiwan'. The geographical representation of a Country through its border depiction in maps has never been objective and unilateral. With the introduction of satellite cartography, the issues related to border tracing and territorial claims did not get less thorny, to the point that Google company is compelled, due to different territorial laws, to render national borders accordingly to the Country in which the Google Maps service is accessed (Sparkles 2014; Yanofski 2014). Such a statement as a territorial claim finds little resonance or relevance in the context of students' reading material, but is nonetheless conveying controversial and non-verifiable information to possibly unaware users. On the subject of Chinese intangible culture, the selection of featured articles is limited to a few items and has not been updated since 2014 (CIO 2014c). The texts describe (without any translation available) the supposed core-features of folk art and Chinese traditional craftsmanship, namely: the abacus, the shadow puppetry theatre, paper cutting, New Year pictures, and guqin zither. If compared with the analogue section present in the old CIO website, this version is

poorer in contents and the selection of topics confirms the doubts cast by Goffman's work.

These considerations are connected to one of the main problems associated with soft power. According to Nye, a country, in order to obtain and maintain a might of attraction, must in the first place respond to a requirement of consistency. In Nye's words, "what China seems not to appreciate is that using culture and narrative to create soft power is not easy when they are inconsistent with domestic realities" (Nye 2012). Even if there is not a direct backfire to the PRC's choices on how to promote its indisputable cultural prominence, these very strategies achieve far less than could be expected.

5   Conclusions

Soft power is the ability or possibility to alter another party's behaviour without recurring to a display of hard power, which is instead a more tangible and quantifiable mean of direct or indirect coercion, for instance through military or economic might. Soft power can be acquired in different ways. A Country willing to enhance its soft power can do so by developing and strengthening its cultural diplomatic strategies, although this is not the only required element. Political values and fair foreign policies are other components that might grant to a Country a great asset of soft power when combined with cultural attractiveness.

The PRC's Government is no stranger to the concept of soft power, and in the last decade has shown itself willing to gain and use such form of influence. With regards to cultural diplomacy and valorization, a huge effort has been made in order to make Chinese culture more relevant and diffuse its features worldwide. Since 2004, the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms project has been one of the means through which Chinese language and culture have been made more popular and more accessible in almost every Country. While the number of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms surpasses a thousand units by now, the whole project has been backed by an online platform, the CIO website since 2009. This website provides original contents and teaching materials for both educational and cultural purposes.

In 2010 the Hanban/Confucius Institutes online counterpart has been labelled as one the most expensive websites in the world. Its contents are, as a matter of fact, almost uncountable and written articles, short documentaries and photographic material cover a wide variety of topics. Although the potentiality of such a gigantic website are easy to appreciate, a number of features make it far less efficient than it could be.

The geographical, historical, and cultural features presented in the contents of this web-based archive are not immune to the general critiques

moved to Hanban. While the foundation of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms is under scrutiny due to the domestic and foreign issues connected to the PRC itself, the contents of CIO website resonate with the same problems. Moreover, a critique can be moved on the basis of a process of constant 'reorientalism' and beautification of a shaky 'front region'.

In a wider perspective, soft power cannot be achieved on the ground of only one of its basic elements. Without the will to question the importance of a Country's cultural credit to the world, the lack of consistency between the idealized picture of China given by Hanban/Confucius Institutes and the stance of the PRC in both domestic and foreign issues cannot lead to an actual gain of soft power.

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