

The Construction of Cultural Softpower and Nation Branding through the Promotion of Language: The cases of the American Binational Centers and Chinese Confucius Institutes

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The present article suggests that, with the apogee of globalization, culture has become an important discussion topic in the international agenda, primarily because of the international fear of a “global mass culture” and the loss of national cultural identity. Along with these subjects, new concepts have started to gain popularity and importance around the world in relation to cultural promotion, such as Creative or Cultural Economy, Creative Cities and Creative Industries. Two recent concepts that have gained international attention are the international relations theory of “soft power” and the business strategy of “Nation Branding”, both connected to the idea of promoting a positive image of a country. In this article, two cases will be used to describe this scenario, but targeting specifically the promotion of language for the development of a positive image. First, this paper analyzes the historical background and development of the American case of Binational Centers. Second, the article traces the reasons and spread of the Chinese Confucius Institutes. At the end of this paper, it is not only possible to observe the success of both initiatives in language promotion and imaging, but also the importance of promoting culture.

Key-words: Language. Softpower. Nation branding. Binational Centers. Confucius Institutes

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1. Introduction

Much has been discussed since the early 90's, about the rise of globalization, in relation to cultural and creative economics, as well as cultural policies, especially towards fighting against what specialists call a "global mass culture". New terms and concepts emerge to explain this phenomenon, as well as to become tools on how to work around it. Cultural diversity, Creative Economy, Creative Cities, Cultural industries are a few of these examples. Gaining global attention, due to the alarming rapid changes caused by globalization, culture, creativity and the arts have become important topics in the international agenda and necessary discussion topics in the global politics arena. Along with international security, human rights, as well as other matters, culture and cultural diversity have become central preoccupations internationally.

With respect to international relations theory, new cultural theories and policies have been developed in recent years to further explain and study these events with examples such as the softpower theory, created by the American researcher Joseph Nye, and the concept of nation branding.

In this sense, this paper analyzes two different cases of language and culture promotion as a tool for cultural softpower, targeted at the development of a positive image of a nation. The first case is the example of the United States, which created a cultural foreign policy, in the late 1920's, with the objective of spreading and promoting the American culture and English language through the creation of Binational Centers in various countries. The second case focuses on the recent Chinese initiative for the promotion of its language and culture, with the rapid spread of Confucius Institutes all over the world. At the end of this paper, it is possible not only to observe the success of these two different institutions for the construction of a cultural super power, but also to understand the reasons for their success and obstacles to come.

2. Language and cultural diversity

"It is not possible to have culture without society, nor society without culture" (2005, p.4), stated Cesnik and Beltrame. "Without culture, 'we wouldn't have a

language to express our consciousness and our ability to think and rationalize would be considerably limited'. Culture defines society by the capacity it develops to create elements which allows society to recognize itself" (2005, p. 4).

With the end of World War II and the apogee of globalization, nations have become more and more concerned with culture preservation and the adoption of cultural policies to stimulate and promote local culture. National identity, therefore, has become a priority to States around the globe. To Leonardo Brant, "identity is the key concept in the construction of cultural policies. Not only does it give a sense to cultural territory, but it incorporates inside itself symbolic elements shared by a group in a way to guarantee its sovereignty as a nation" (2009, p. 34). Brant also suggests that, "the cultural identity of a population is generally recognized by their unifying elements, like territory, language and religion" (2009, p.34).

In this sense, it's also important to mention cultural diversity, which, for Goldsmith has become "a mechanism to maintain the distinction of national cultures front of what is conceived as general tendencies of cultural homogeneity of globalization" (2005, p. 93). In a way, globalization brought with itself the concern with loss of national sovereignty, since culture and cultural diversity in all its forms, language, arts, gender, territory, are the basis for national identity and power. As Goldsmith concludes,

To think about globalization and cultural diversity forces nation-states to reflect and 'investigate about the character of their national cultures'. Both represent challenges to the traditional notions of national sovereignty, citizenship and power of the State, having as consequence the rising speech about cultural citizenship and the new necessary devices for its complete accomplishment. (...) As the Nation-States recognize their internal diversity, as well as the diversity of the nations, and develop devices needed to comply to this diversity, this space opens up, with the opportunity for cultural and innovation exchange (2005, p. 112-113).

3. Softpower and Nation branding

Softpower also emerges as an alternative instrument of international influence (NYE, 2008, p. 95). The term softpower, in the theory posited by Joseph Nye, opposes the theory hardpower, much used in the United States. Through studies on the political actions of the United States, Nye identified that, for the most part, the

country used its "hard power", in other words, the use of force to get the desired results. Nye noted that the country used mostly what he called "carrots", or payments, and "sticks", threat of the use of force, however, power could be conquered in another way which should be explored. If power is precisely the "ability to influence the behavior of others to gain the result you want" (NYE, 2004, p.1), then softpower could be employed for the same purpose as hardpower. For Nye, the resources that generate softpower come mainly from the country's culture. In Nye's words:

The soft power of a country lies primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when the country demonstrates allegiance to them at home and abroad) and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and as having moral authority) (NYE, 2008, p. 97).

Joseph Nye believes that "a country may achieve the outcomes it desires in world politics because other countries want to follow it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects" (DING & SANDERS, p. 9). To Nye, softpower is "directing, attracting and imitating force" and it comes primarily from intangible resources such as culture.

As one of the most important components of a country's softpower, culture attractiveness not only influences various aspects of people's lives and plays a vital part in social development within a country, but also has a direct impact on relations between countries and helps a country to achieve important foreign policy goals. Within this process, the factor of "image" plays a crucial role. (DING & SANDERS, p. 9)

The concept of "Nation Branding" came along with concepts such as Creative Industries and Cultural Economics, also at the time that the term "global mass culture" or "homogeneity of culture" appeared in the international agenda. Nation branding is a marketing concept or strategy which works as "corporate branding technique" but applied to countries instead of businesses. In this scope, concepts such as "place branding" and "city branding" are also used. Some examples of successful nation branding are the U.K.'s "Great Britain" strategy and the "Cool Japan" in Japan, along with "Creative Tokyo".

As Teslik better explains it,

It's nothing new for nations to care about image, but the past ten years represent a turning point in the methods states use to manage their reputations. (...)Countries now hire firms to help them launch sophisticated branding campaigns aimed at luring foreign investment, facilitating trade, improving private-sector competitiveness, or even securing geopolitical influence. (TESLIK, 2007)

4. United States: The Binational Centers

After the United States entered the First World War, it created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), with its director George Creel, to expand American culture throughout the world. Some of the measures adopted by Creel to ensure this expansion were window displays, in which American businesses abroad would display images of the efforts of the United States in the war, as well as in business catalogues, created reading rooms with American books and magazines, and offered free English Classes, “using language to sell an ideological message” (Rosenberg, p.79). According to Rosenberg,

Creel worked to project America's image as a powerful, industrialized, free and just society that others should emulate. “What was needed were short descriptive of our development as a nation and a people” he wrote, “our social and industrial progress; our schools; our laws; our treatment of workers, women and children...” Explaining the American dream, Creel assumed, would promote converts and imitators and accelerate global acceptance of an international order based on American values (1980, p. 79)

Another important measure employed by Creel was to promote the United States through film. The film division of the committee soon started developing documentaries, later it also worked in the production of feature-length movies, all with positive messages of the “American way of life”. With this innovative measure, Creel encouraged movies from Hollywood and its export around the globe, as well as controlled the coming of foreign movies into the United States, guaranteeing that all movies promote the U.S. and never revealed a “false” image of America. After the

war, however, the committee was shut down, although what did remain was Creel's efforts to promote an image of all that is American around the world.

Because of Creel, American books, movies and press dispatches by 1920 were becoming familiar around the world as Gillette razors and Heinz ketchup. And the job of opening the world to American information and entertainment had taken on a new importance. Creel proved that America should be "advertised" through the mass media, and his efforts had lasting effects on America's position on international communications (ROSENBERG, p. 81)

With the depression, after World War I, the image of the United States internationally became more and more negative. As trade became more difficult, businesses began to shut down and negotiations began to dimmer. With that, many divisions of the State Departments shut down. Almost all countries, by the 1930's had already established government offices targeted at cultural diplomacy or exchange, whereas the United States only created similar agencies after 1938.

Rosemberg noted that, in the period, the United States was slow in the move to establish an information and cultural relations apparatus. For him,

Not surprisingly, the first agencies that were finally established were specifically directed toward Latin America, America's own special sphere that seemed to be the target of growing Nazi influence. Only after the United States entered World War II did the government become actively involved in promoting American information and culture outside the Western sphere (Rosenberg, p.204).

In 1936, after an inter-American conference in Buenos Aires, Roosevelt proposed the creation of a Division of Cultural Relations, as an effort to enhance the cultural relations between the United States and Latin America, which was later opened in 1938. In that same year, Nelson Rockefeller, who had concerns in relation to the region due to the Standard Oil's operation, traveled around Latin America with a group of businessmen, only to return home with the growing concern of Nazi influence in the region. With that concern in mind, Rockefeller proposed the creation of a new agency for the promotion of pro-American information. The president, therefore, created the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), placing Rockefeller as director. The office promoted the American entertainment industry with films and

radio programs in Latin America, and even promoted pop culture, through Walt Disney Studios, with “Disney characters dancing in Brazilian fiestas, riding with Argentine gauchos, and crossing the formidable Andes” (Rosenberg, p. 207), as Rosenberg cites as examples. After the increasing of American influence around the world, the Cultural Relations Division from the State Department, “established ‘cultural centers’ offering classes in English language and United States history and literature” (Rosenberg, p.208).

At the time that the United States viewed the opportunity to “spread” its culture, there weren’t yet the concepts which we are using today, as Nation Branding or Softpower, however the ideals and concept behind their initiatives are similar to the policies used today. One of their initiatives that only developed in the 1920’s was the launching and spreading of what the embassies call “American Spaces”.

By “American Spaces” Dawn Mccall better explains that,

American spaces are by definition a partnership between the U.S. Embassies worldwide and their local hosts. At American Spaces, people from almost every country on the globe have first hand access to all things American. American Spaces are a place where people learn English, meet and interact with American experts and speakers, view American exhibits and multimedia installations, stay informed through the Centers’ media resources, and in some countries, access to the internet where internet access is otherwise limited or restricted.(U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT, 2012)

As defined by Livia Fialho,

American Spaces are programs designed by the State Department to provide foreign citizens with a window into American culture and values. For nearly a century, they have been a staple of American public diplomacy efforts. For instance, the first Bi-national Center was established in Argentina in 1927. The programs can take many forms, from small libraries to high-tech cultural centers. Their presence should represent “an enduring symbol of U.S. commitment to a long-term relationship with a host country, and to the American ideal of freedom of information.” (...)As of January 2013, there were 849 American Spaces in 169 countries. In 2012, they received a total of 16,425,481 visits. (2013, p.1)

The number of American spaces in a country varies according to the bilateral relations and foreign policies between the two nations, as well as the embassies and local partnerships. Fialho also mentions that, “American Spaces allow for the engagement with foreign audiences and provide them with insight into American life, policies and culture through a variety of mediums” (2013, p. 2). Aiming at different target audiences, the State Department inaugurated several different kinds of spaces, such as American Centers, Information Resource Centers, American Corners and Bi-national Centers. These spaces must provide English language learning, exchange program alumni activities, information about the United States, American Culture and study opportunities in the U.S. For the administration of these spaces, there is an Office of American Spaces, which is one of the branches of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, working in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (FIALHO, p.2).

Specifically, the Bi-national Centers, also known as BNCs, are spaces mostly spread in Latin America, which have as its main objective the spread of knowledge about America. The first BNC ever opened was in Argentina on 1927. They function as independent non-profit organizations, with most of their funding coming from the fees of the English courses offered in the center, but work in collaboration, or are connected to the State Department. Some of the activities that may be provided by BNCs are English classes, TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) examinations and preparatory classes, as well as the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) and an Education USA Office (FIALHO, p. 4). Some programs may also be offered as a mean to promote a positive American image, such as lectures, exhibitions, movie sessions, or other cultural activities.

In Brazil, for example, the first BNC was launched in January of 1937, in Rio de Janeiro, called “Instituto Brasil – Estados Unidos” (IBEU). At that time, the institute not only offered English classes but also classes on American History for pilots, nurses and doctors, in addition to educational scholarships. Shortly after, in 1938, a group of intellectuals, including the famous Brazilian writer Érico Verrísimo from the south of the country decided to open a Binational cultural center in Porto Alegre, a region in which the population of Germans or of German descendent predominated. The idea of Verrísimo was to bring to the region American language and culture, as a means to reduce the European political and cultural influence in the region, but

also to counter the nationalist German ideals found in the region then (NOGUEIRA, p. 3). In that sense, the period marked the spread of BNCs throughout Brazil, with the launching in São Paulo in that same year, that is, 1938, in Fortaleza in 1943, Belém in 1955, among others. In Brazil alone, there are today more than 30 BNCs throughout the country (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2014).

5. China: The Confucius Institutes

The English language became the mandatory language towards the end of the 20th century, through the efforts both of the United States and the United Kingdom, with the spread of numerous cultural centers, the promotion of cultural activities abroad, the English language and through the offering of scholarships to foreign students. Today not only does the world have a positive image of the United States vis-à-vis democracy, tourism and culture, but the language transformed itself into a global language. In most countries, especially in big cities, you will find the majority of people speaking English, or at least having the basic knowledge of the English language. In some schools, learning English has become mandatory for businesses and business negotiations. It has become essential, also, for students who desire to apply for continuing studies at the Master's or PhD levels or intend to apply for a scholarship.

As China rapidly began to develop and demonstrate its economic potential, it became part of an important emerging economy along with Brazil, India, South Africa and Russia in the so-called BRICS. This growth has led to an increase on trade and investment, raising the interests between China and many countries around the globe. However, although China has achieved such rapid development, there has been a major concern of the Chinese in relation to internal politics, which Hunter better explains,

There is a consensus among economists that, if there are no major international upheavals, China will become the second largest economy in the world within the next five years. It is already a serious competitor of the USA and other advanced economies in the acquisition of oil, minerals and infrastructure contracts in Iran, Saudi, Brazil, and elsewhere. Its political influence has increased dramatically in the past five years, especially in

Asia and in Africa. (...) A global shift of power of this magnitude, however, implies potential international armed conflict. China's extraordinary domestic economic growth although positive on the whole for the majority of the population, has also inevitable given rise to social tensions that could occasion mass protests. The two main likely flashpoints are land-grabs and environmental destruction, and extreme inequalities of wealth. (...) The Chinese government, therefore, is under serious international and domestic pressure. (HUNTER, p. 380-381).

According to Hunter, there are two major rising concerns for China, the first would be its relationship with the United States, as there is friction between the two countries, since the U.S. have a superior military power in relation to China and as the author calls is an "aggressive and unpredictable superpower"(2009, p.381). Not to mention that with China becoming an emerging economy, it has also become a threat to the United States.

The other major concern would be in relation to Japan. Japan is a country that has had a bad history with China and has as its close allies the U.S. and Taiwan. It also appears to have a competitive grudge with China with respect to industrial and military power. As Hunter affirms,

Given a historical and cultural background, in 'softpower' and 'moral leadership', and intense but hopefully non-military competition within the USA and other states, it may be logical to expect that China will use peaceful means to project itself on to the world stage, for example, through culture, education, and media presence. Areas where Chinese softpower is already apparent are those of Chinese religion and traditional culture; Chinese universities and Mandarin as lingua franca; Chinese media, tourism, and sport; Chinese Diaspora, and Chinese cultural/political presence in the Southeast Asia and Africa. (Hunter, p. 384).

To the author Jeffrey Gil, there are other factors that could have also shifted the Chinese diplomacy towards a softer power. Gil first mentions the Chinese economic development, giving the Chinese leadership and the public a greater confidence in the country. Another factor mentioned by Gil is the world's reaction to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, making China realize that it needed to improve its friendship with its neighbors. Most important of all is the undeniable fact that the use of hardpower to achieve its goals has not worked. Gil also mentions that researchers have found that American softpower has been decreasing since the end of the Cold

War, and China could well take this opportunity to place itself at the forefront (2008, p. 117).

Gil states that China divides its soft power strategy into two components: “the tools of culture (Chinese culture, arts, language and ethnicity), and the tools of business (aid, trade, investment and the appeal of China’s economic model)” (2008, p. 117). One of its key instruments for softpower through tools of culture is the promotion of the Chinese language. According to Gil, the Ministry of Education’s website states that,

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) is an integral part of China’s reform and opening up drive. To promote TCFL is of strategic significance to popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the economic and cultural cooperation and exchange between China and other countries around the world, and to elevate China’s influence in the international community (2008, p. 117-118)

Hanban, the Chinese name for the main organ for the promotion and the spreading of the Chinese language worldwide, was first created in 1987 as the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL). Note that 12 state ministries and commissions take part in the structure. Its main objective is to make the Chinese language more available worldwide.

Since 2004, China has created non-profit education organizations, similar to BNCs, Alliance Française and Instituto Cervantes, called Confucius Institutes, with the aim of promoting Chinese language and culture abroad. “Each Confucius Institute is set up through a partnership between a Chinese university and a university in the host country”, Gil explains (GIL, p. 118). All of the institutes are coordinated by the headquarters in Beijing. According to Gil, “thus far, China has spent a total of US\$26 million on the Confucius Institute project and has plans to expand it further in the near future. It aims to have established 500 Confucius Institutes by 2010 and 1000 by 2020” (2008, p. 118).

As stated by Hanban,

As China's economy and exchanges with the world have seen rapid growth, there has also been a sharp increase in the world's demands for Chinese

learning. Benefiting from the UK, France, Germany and Spain's experience in promoting their national languages, China began its own exploration through establishing non-profit public institutions which aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries in 2004: these were given the name the Confucius Institute (HANBAN, 2014)

According to the Hanban website there are currently 443 Confucius Institutes and 648 Confucius Classrooms around the globe (HANBAN, 2014). Other initiatives that followed the launching of institutes and classrooms, were the expansion of offers of scholarships for foreign students to learn mandarin, as well as a the creation of an online learning platform for Chinese as a second language, called Confucius Institute Online, which is a basic online self-learning website with different modalities or levels and courses targeted for different purposes, such as Chinese for business, for tourism, etc. (CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE ONLINE, 2014)

Gil already identifies some positive results prompted by the Confucius Institutes initiative. As the author notes,

There is certainly evidence to suggest that the promotion of Chinese language learning has been successful in creating a positive image of Chinese and attracting learners. Commonly cited statistics say that there are currently 30-40 million people learning Chinese around the world and it is by no means difficult to find examples of the increased popularity of Chinese language learning in individual nations. (...) It is reasonable to say that China's efforts have contributed to creating a situation in which Chinese is seen 'as providing a kind of popular cachet, the way English long has'" (2008, p. 119).

6. Conclusions

Culture now receives greater attention in the international agenda. It has become a global concern in terms of preservation because it is a fundamental instrument for the construction of the identity of nations, and a tool for the development of symbolic power. It is necessary to rethink new concepts and policies for solving contemporary problems, such as the ones caused by globalization. The challenge imposed is one of reorganization, of having a new perception for the promotion and work with culture and creativity in the interconnected world we live in today.

We see that governments can use culture to boost its performance internationally in an alternative way. In other words, they can formulate a foreign policy that focuses on national and cultural identity. They can, at the same time, turn these elements into vehicles for development, including economic development.

Among the possibilities for the promotion of culture and sustainable development, there is the promotion of language as both a tool for constructing a positive image, as well as preserving national identity. Joseph Nye's international relations theory of "soft power" emerges as a framework for understanding cultural promotion as a State policy. Connected to the intangible and the symbolic, "softpower" has to do with the development of the image of a country through attractive products and actions which help promote a nation in terms of political, economic and cultural strategies. Cultural diversity, creativity and entertainment then become instruments for the consolidation of a distinctive image and the establishment of power before the world. Along with softpower, countries have started to adopt the concept of "Nation Branding", with which marketing and business strategies are used by countries as a new way to improve their image worldwide.

Two different cases were used to demonstrate this scenario, employing, more specifically, language promotion as a tool. The first case, that of the American Bi-national Centers, explains the history behind the promotion of the English language and the success that followed it.

On the other hand, the second case explores the Confucius Institutes from China, an initiative designed to promote the Chinese language through partnerships between Chinese and foreign universities.

Both initiatives, though in different periods and for different reasons, demonstrate how nation branding and softpower can be used to improve a country's images in the world. The cases are examples of success in the promotion of language. They also underline the challenges, for States, with respect to the maintenance of such policies, and to researchers, with respect to measuring of the impact of softpower prompted by the institutes, since this type of power deals with intangible resources and elements.

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