

CHINESE MIGRATION AND THE POLICY OF “SOFT POWER” IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. The article analyzes the role of migration in the implementation of China’s “soft power” policy, particularly in the context of Central Asia. It explores how channels such as diasporas, educational and cultural centers, tourism, and business relations contribute to the formation of China’s cultural and economic influence in the region.

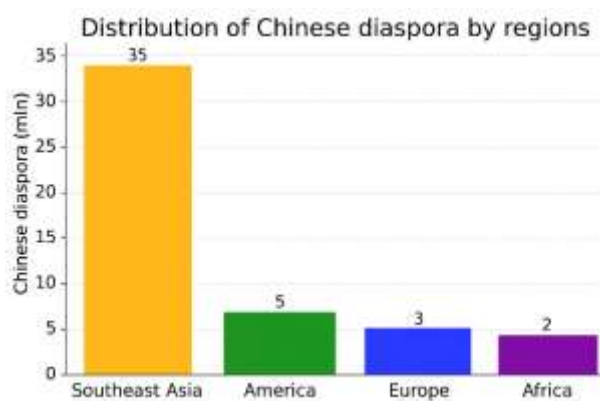
Keywords: China, Central Asia, migration, soft power, diaspora, Confucius Institutes, cultural diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by the processes of globalization and the deepening of transnational interconnections. These processes have strengthened interdependence among states through international division of labor, technological exchange, and information flows. At the same time, migration—whether driven by economic interests or aimed at educational and cultural exchange—has become a decisive factor in the new balance of geopolitical and cultural forces[1].

In recent decades, the principle of “soft power” has taken a central place in China’s foreign policy strategy, aimed at improving the country’s global image and expanding its sphere of influence. As Joseph Nye emphasizes, *soft power* is not about coercion or economic pressure, but rather about the ability to shape preferences through cultural appeal, values, and diplomacy[2].

To implement this concept, China employs instruments of education, culture, language, and economic diplomacy. The countries of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—due to their geographical proximity, rich natural resources, and strategic transit potential, have become a key testing ground for Beijing’s “soft power” policy. The region, as a linking belt of the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), is gradually transforming into a center of economic and cultural cooperation [3].



China’s activity in Central Asia manifests not only through economic engagement but also via educational and cultural collaboration. Through Confucius Institutes, student exchange programs, cultural festivals, and

the work of diasporas, China promotes its culture and language policy. This process contributes to the establishment of long-term relations based on trust and cultural dialogue between China and Central Asian states.

Thus, international migration today is not merely a demographic or economic phenomenon but an integral component of geopolitical, cultural, and strategic influence. China’s “soft power” policy in Central Asia—through education, culture, and business diplomacy—creates new opportunities for regional stability and cooperation.

Chinese Migration and Diaspora as Instruments of Influence

The Chinese diaspora (*Huaqiao*) has played a significant role in global economic and political processes since the early 20th century. In

Southeast Asia—particularly in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand—large Chinese communities have become key pillars of local economies, enabling Beijing to expand its influence through trade, investment, and cultural ties[4].

Although the number of Chinese migrants in Central Asia is relatively small, their economic activity is high. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Chinese entrepreneurs engaged in construction, trade, and services have become deeply integrated into local markets. According to Marlene Laruelle, this represents a form of “infrastructure-based cultural influence,” in which economic activity serves as a medium for cultural integration[5]. Similarly, A. Brady argues that the Chinese diaspora functions not only as an economic actor but also as a political and diplomatic resource[6]. Institutions such as the *United Front Work Department (UFWD)* and the *Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO)* utilize diaspora networks to advance China’s global interests. Diaspora leaders often act as intermediaries with local elites, facilitating Beijing’s foreign policy implementation.

The diaspora also plays a diplomatic role. The OCAO and UFWD maintain systematic communication with overseas Chinese communities, positioning them as “trusted envoys” who promote China’s interests abroad. Moreover, through cultural events, language schools, and festivals, the diaspora effectively reinforces China’s “soft power” projection.

Education, Language, and Cultural Centers: The Role of Confucius Institutes

Education occupies a leading role in China’s cultural diplomacy, and Confucius Institutes are its most visible embodiment. These institutions promote Chinese language and culture, organize cultural

events, and facilitate academic exchanges to build a positive national image.

As of 2024, there are 13 Confucius Institutes operating in Central Asia:

Distribution of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia

Country	City	Institute
Kazakhstan	Astana	Confucius Institute at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University
Kazakhstan	Almaty	Confucius Institute at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
Kazakhstan	Karaganda	Confucius Institute at Karaganda Technical University
Kazakhstan	Aktobe	Confucius Institute at K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University
Kazakhstan	Almaty (2)	Confucius Institute (second site in Almaty city)
Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek (BHU)	Confucius Institute at Bishkek Humanities University
Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek (KNU)	Confucius Institute at Kyrgyz National University
Kyrgyzstan	Osh	Confucius Institute at Osh State University
Uzbekistan	Tashkent	Uzbek–China Confucius Institute at Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies (TSUOS)
Uzbekistan	Samarkand	Confucius Institute at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
Tajikistan	Dushanbe	Confucius Institute at Tajik National University (TNU)

Country	City	Institute
Tajikistan	Buston (Chkalovsk)	Confucius Institute at Mining-Metallurgical Institute of Tajikistan
Turkmenistan	—	No Confucius Institute established

Source: *Global Times*. “Confucius Institutes in Central Asia.”

As of 2024, there are 13 Confucius Institutes operating in Central Asia: 5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 each in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and none yet in Turkmenistan. The first institute, established in 2005 under the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, offers language courses, HSK exams, and cultural festivals[7]. Through these centers, China is promoting its educational system and cultural values across the region. According to UNESCO (2023), more than 15,000 young people in Central Asia are studying Chinese. This process clearly reflects Beijing’s model of “influence through human capital.” Through educational programs—including CSC scholarships—thousands of Central Asian students who studied at Chinese universities later become “cultural bridges” in bilateral cooperation. At the same time, some Western countries have voiced criticisms of the activities of Confucius Institutes. While these institutions have been evaluated in terms of academic freedom and transparency, in Central Asia they primarily serve to enrich the educational and cultural landscape.

Tourism, Business, and Cultural Diplomacy

Tourism has become a key form of human mobility in the 21st century. According to UNWTO, international tourist trips reached 1.3 billion in 2023. This sector promotes labor migration and educational exchanges. For example, the number of tourists traveling between China and Central Asia reached 1.2 million in 2023.

Tourism often lays the groundwork for long-term migration. Individuals who first visit a country as tourists may later return as students or workers. Thus, tourism serves as a practical component of “soft power,” enhancing cultural diplomacy.

Business is also an integral part of migration processes. Within the BRI framework, China’s infrastructure projects in Central Asia have



attracted thousands of labor migrants. At the same time, through “diaspora economies,” Chinese entrepreneurs invest in local markets, accelerating economic integration.

As Joseph Nye notes, “soft power is the ability to attract rather than coerce.” China achieves this through cultural events, language courses, scholarships, and business partnerships. Cultural diplomacy not only exports culture but also creates a favorable environment for migration and long-term cooperation.

Results and Contradictions of the “Soft Power” Strategy in Central Asia

China’s “soft power” policy in Central Asia produces a dual effect. On one hand, it expands educational, cultural, and economic opportunities, contributing to modern infrastructure development. On the other hand, it raises concerns in local societies about “cultural expansion” and economic dependence.

Researchers such as Nyíri (2020) and Rolland (2021) describe this policy as having a “twofold impact”: promoting cultural integration and

educational exchange while simultaneously increasing political influence and control over resources[8]. Therefore, the key challenge for Central Asian states is to balance cultural-educational cooperation with the preservation of national interests and identity.

Conclusion

Chinese migration and the policy of “soft power” are interrelated processes shaping a new geocultural reality in Central Asia in the 21st century. Through diaspora, education, culture, and tourism, Beijing strengthens its influence in the region via intellectual and cultural means. This process simultaneously creates both opportunities and challenges.

For the Central Asian states, the main task is to maintain cooperation with China in balance with their sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic interests.

Thus, China’s “soft power” policy acquires practical meaning through migration. Its effectiveness depends on two factors:

1. The degree of cultural equality and mutual trust;
2. The potential for joint development of education and human capital.

If these factors harmonize, migration will become not only an economic necessity but also a sustainable foundation for cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

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