

# China' Image: A Theoretical and Practical Framework

IULIA MONICA OEHLER-ŞINCAI

Institute for World Economy (IWE), Romanian Academy

Calea 13 Septembrie, 13, Sector 5, Bucharest

ROMANIA

[monica.oehler@iem.ro](mailto:monica.oehler@iem.ro), <http://www.iem.ro>

**Abstract:** *The present paper has three main research objectives. First, we define a country's image through its principal dimensions, channels of communication (including the Public Diplomacy) and impact on the international relations framework. Second, we underline the specific determinants of China's image worldwide. The literature review emphasizes this country's distinctive "assets and liabilities", taking into account the role played by the political system in the Chinese economy, external factors, associated with the generally accepted norms and values, the geographical distance that hinders the direct contact and mutual understanding. Third, on the basis of recent studies, we analyze how China is perceived in different regions/countries and demonstrate that the economic rationale of international relations is stronger than that induced by a partner country's image.*

**Keywords:** *Country image, China, Public Diplomacy, International Relations*

**JEL Classification:** *H00, F50, O52, O53, Z00*

## 1. Introduction

In this paper,<sup>1</sup> our first objective is to focus on the conceptualization of a country's image (CI), taking into account all its four dimensions (functional, normative, aesthetic and sympathetic) as incorporated in the 4D model (Buhmann, Ingenhoff, 2015, Buhmann, 2016). This conceptual framework enables us to understand what effects a CI has on a stakeholder's behaviour/attitude and through which channels this behaviour can be influenced. Second, we argue that the way China is explained to the world but also the objectives followed by other competitors on the global stage are as relevant as China's own "assets and liabilities" in profiling its image (d'Hooghe, 2005, 2007, 2013, Zhang, 2015, Ross, 2013). Third, we underline that a strong leadership exerted by China in world affairs remains largely undesirable among the American and European publics (GMF *et al.*, 2014). The overall opinion on China remains negative, in spite of the positive views in some regions of the world (Gallup, 2016, BBC, 2014).

These three research objectives are interrelated. We start our investigation with the general framework of a country image from the theoretical perspective, continue with the particular case of China and its image and exemplify the way China is really perceived in different regions and countries of the world. Our argumentation is deeply anchored in the International Relations and Public Diplomacy theories and is largely based on the literature review and relevant case studies. Our analysis is structured around three major sections, followed by the main conclusions of our research.

## 2. Literature review

States, non-state actors and organizations are in search of competitive advantages "in terms of attention and visibility" and also comprehension and acceptance. Their ultimate goal is "to gain and preserve a favourable image" (Dolea, 2016, p. 276).

A **country image** can be defined as *the perception of a country among its foreign publics* (the "other" of the international relations theory) (Buhmann, 2016, p. 39). It can also be understood as the aggregate *descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country* (Martin, Eroglu, 1993, p. 193). The second definition refers to the cognitive process, while the first one may include besides the cognitive element an affective dimension.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on findings of: Oehler-Şincai, I. M. (coordinator) (2017). *Romania, at the junction between the Chinese initiatives BRI and 16+1*, Institute for World Economy, Romanian Academy, November.

The country image is the mirror of the **country identity** (the “self” from the dichotomy “self-other” in the ubiquitous international relations theory), which *is conceptualized as the domestic self-perception among a country’s domestic public* (Buhmann, 2016, p. 39). In practice, the country image is not always the same as the country identity, as demonstrated by the Chinese case study.

These concepts are essential both in theory and practice, as they make the difference between attitudes, varying from tolerance, recognition, appreciation, esteem, as opposed to intolerance, disapproval, antagonism and hostility. Attitudes influence “the success of a country’s business, trade, tourism and diplomatic relations because it affects the behaviour of central stakeholders abroad” (Buhmann, Ingenhoff, 2015, p. 62).

A country’s political influence worldwide depends not only on assets such as resources, economic performance, military capacity, leadership and quality of government but also on its image and how attractive the country is for consumers, investors, tourists, professors, experts and students. All these different perceptions combined generate the country image.

**Attributes** such as *labour market, education system, standard of living, social security, environment protection, business environment, quality of institutions, technological progress, foreign policy, military capacity, tourist attractions, history, culture, values and norms, society as a whole, quality of goods and services produced in that country*, all these or a part of them represent elements analyzed, deliberately or not, by the public in order to acquire an overall opinion towards a country. It is noteworthy to mention that for each segment of the large public there are different **communication channels** influencing the attitudes of that public towards a given country (e.g. *mass media, reports, official statements, studies, academic research, Public Diplomacy, friends, acquaintances and colleagues, own experience forged through the direct contact with: goods and services of that country, people, institutions, culture etc.*).

At present, in the field of International Relations, “country images are studied mostly with regard to the concept of Public Diplomacy, i.e. the strategic communication of a nation-state aimed at enhancing the country’s reputation among foreign publics” (Buhmann, 2016, p. 33).

William James McGuire, a pioneer in the “art of persuasion and how to resist it” (Pearce, 2008) developed almost 50 years ago the Yale attitude change approach (McGuire, 1968). His model of the persuasion process includes six steps: Presentation; Attention; Comprehension; Yielding (or Acceptance); Retention and Behaviour. In this schema, not only the consecutive steps are important, but also the quality and consistency of the messages and how prepared is the public to accept the messages and disperse them. The target groups can be evaluated from the standpoints of: level of training, education, culture, intelligence, leisure, financial resources, environment and networks.

The recent literature (Buhmann, Ingenhoff, 2015, Buhmann, 2016) identifies four complex dimensions of the CI, namely **functional, normative, aesthetic and emotional**. This is coined as the 4D model of a country image which is based on concepts from three distinct theories: reputation management (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2007), national identity theory (Smith, 1987), and attitude theory (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).

From the multitude of channels used by global actors to forge/sustain/change a country image, at present the Public Diplomacy (PD) is the most relevant in terms of persuasion potential.

In the literature of the post-Cold War era, PD is defined as a cumulus of components starting from the core elements: listening; advocacy; cultural diplomacy; international exchanges; international broadcasting; and continuing with nation branding; diaspora relations; foreign aid; international relations; business diplomacy (Cowan and Cull, 2008, Cull, 2009, Gilboa, 2012).

Gilboa (2012) defines PD as *one of the most multidisciplinary areas in modern scholarship and a communication process states, non-states actors and organizations employ in order to influence the policies of a foreign government by influencing its citizens*. In his opinion, PD enables the presentation of *a nation’s ideas, ideals, institutions, culture, national goals and policies*. He underlines that in the 2000s, it has been coined the term of New Public Diplomacy (NPD),<sup>2</sup> synonym with PD 2.0 or digital diplomacy according to d’Hooghe,

---

<sup>2</sup> NPD is a component of *smart power*. This hybrid form of power is an American “product” designed in 2006 for the special purpose of improving US’ image in the world. Smart power is the “skilful combination of hard and soft power” and has five critical areas of action (CSIS, 2007): (1) alliances, partnerships and institutions; (2) global development; (3) new public diplomacy; (4) economic integration; (5) technology and innovation.

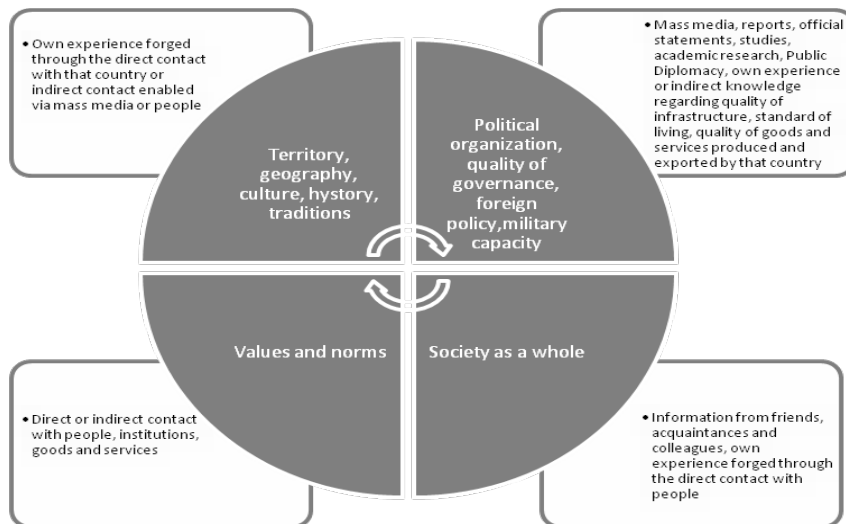
2015), in order to differentiate this concept from those of the Cold War era and to adjust its mechanisms to the Information Age.

Even if the literature on the topic of country image is still dominated by marketing studies (from the standpoints of: country of origin, tourist destination image, national brand and national branding), the attractiveness of the research topic structured around the country image from the perspective of PD (or NPD) has sharply increased since 2000s.

### 3. Specific determinants of China’s image worldwide

For each public (according to its expertise and experience, age category, presence of absence of direct contact with the country analyzed, pre-existent negative or positive attitude towards that country) there are specific communication channels which influence the perception process. **Figure 1** synthesizes in a matrix the main attributes of a country and several possible channels of communication. In the specific case of China, some attributes such as territory, geography, culture and traditions are associated with a positive connotation. History generates both positive and negative attitudes, depending on the standpoint of the partner country (see for instance the Sino-Japanese relations). At the same time, attributes such as economic performance/results and their impact on society, foreign policy, the quality of governance are a double-edged sword.

**Figure 1: Schematic representation of a country attributes (sections of the circle) and possible channels of communication that might influence the attitudes towards a given country**



Source: Own representation.

China possesses “liabilities” (sources of negative perceptions) and “assets” (sources of strength) (d’Hooghe, 2007, pp. 13-16) that confer individual characteristics to its image. Among the liabilities there are sensitive issues in relationship with other countries, both developed (US, EU countries, Japan, South Korea) and emerging/developing (for instance India). Either old (human rights, Tibet, Taiwan, environmental pollution, unfair competition, low-quality goods and services) or new (territorial disputes), the sensitive issues are mostly concentrated in the normative but also functional dimension of the 4D model of a country image. In antithesis, culture, history, traditions, Confucian values, tourist attractions, economic and social progress are among its strengths. Referring to the 4D model of a country image, these are mostly concentrated in the aesthetic dimension of the country image, but also the functional dimension and marginally to the normative dimension (Confucian values). However, the lack of real understanding of China may incur, due to the large geographical distances to other partners (for instance, EU countries) or the historical background (in relationship with Japan).

In order to stress China’s assets and temperate its liabilities, the Chinese PD is a predilected tool employed by its leaders. Nonetheless the efficiency of the Chinese PD in terms of CI is often diminished by other competitors’ objectives on the global arena.

Each stage of the Yale persuasion approach (Presentation; Attention; Comprehension; Acceptance; Retention and Behaviour) is taken into account by the Chinese Public Diplomacy. China ranks first in the world

for resources spent on PD as this is considered as one of the relevant channels leading to: *acceptance of its economic and political rise; recognition of its values and policies; rising government's legitimacy; consolidation of the right to speak and co-exist with the liberal international world order* (d'Hooghe, 2013).

The Chinese Public Diplomacy is meant to “explain China to the world” (Edney, 2014), by specific means (politic, economic, cultural and social channels) and with distinct goals, such as clarifying delicate or sensitive issues to the national and international publics from the Chinese standpoint. This was dubbed as “Chinese charm offensive” by Joshua Kurlantzick in 2007. However, the literature (Cao, 2011) underscores that although the “Chinese intellectuals have constructed a discursive package of a traditional value-based soft power”, *until now it has not been provided a soft power in every sense of the word, but a merely soft power potential*. This is mainly due to the fact that China's image is only a pale reflection of its real identity.

In the literature it is underscored that the efficiency of the Chinese PD in terms of CI seems unable to reach its full potential. The “China Threat” debate reignited in the United States and spread to other countries of the world, not only developed but also developing (d'Hooghe, 2005, p. 90). In reply, the “peaceful rise of China” strategy (since 2003) and “harmonious world” theory (since 2005) were meant to dissipate fears and *present China as a reliable, trustworthy and responsible partner in search of peace and prosperity not only for itself, but for its neighbours and the whole world as well*. As those strategies seemed to bear fruit, the United States adopted a series of counter-strategies. One of them, the so-called “US pivot to Asia-Pacific” since 2011, has been equivalent with countering the rise of China and counterbalancing the existent regional alliances, as well as redefining norms and rules in the Asia-Pacific (having in mind the territorial disputes between China and Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam over a series of islands in the South China Sea). Regional tensions have become more pronounced after the US intervened in the conflict by supporting multilateral dispute settlement through negotiations and, consequently, China's image deteriorated. Similarly, as part of the same strategy, United States found a good ground to alter the Sino-Indian relationship, as India has its own ambitions to become an economic and military power (Oehler-Şincai, 2016). Therefore China should find other instruments or tune the actual ones in order to improve its image regionally and globally.

#### **4. How is China perceived worldwide?**

At present there are no multi-year surveys regarding China's image in most significant countries of the world. Among the existent analyses the most relevant are those made by: Gallup (2016), Pew Research Centre (2016), GMF *et al.* (2014) and BBC (2014). The scrutiny of the mentioned works reveals the following conclusions.

In spite of the endeavours to “present”, “explain” and “promote” China abroad, a strong leadership exerted by China in world affairs remains largely undesirable among some publics, especially American and European. In 2014, the “Transatlantic Trends” study highlighted that only 38% of the US and 28% of the EU respondents<sup>3</sup> described strong Chinese leadership as desirable (GMF *et al.*, 2014). The overall opinion on China remains negative, in spite of the positive views in some regions of the world (Gallup, 2016, BBC, 2014). China is most favourable perceived in African and Latin American countries. In Asia, opinions are divided: China's perception varies from highly positive in Pakistan; comfortably positive in Indonesia; negative in India (due also to the relationship with Pakistan) and South Korea; extremely negative in Japan. In the US and EU dominate the negative perceptions on China.

In a study on EU member states attitudes towards China, Fox and Godement (2009, p. 6) included Romania in the large group of *Accommodating Mercantilists*.<sup>4</sup> The main common characteristic of the countries in that group was related to the assumption that *good political relations with China will lead to commercial benefit and economic considerations must dominate the relationship with China*. This group is opposed to the Assertive Industrialists (Czech Republic, Germany and Poland), “ready to pressure China with sector-specific demands” and impose a particular conduct on both political and economic issues. It is also different from the Ideological Free-Traders (Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom) and European Followers (Austria, the Baltic States, Belgium, Ireland and Luxembourg) which do not consider the relationship with China as central to their foreign policy. It is worth mentioning that Germany is the EU country with the most unfavourable rating of China (BBC, 2014). However this does not prevent it to have a strong economic

---

<sup>3</sup> From ten countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

relationship with China, which underlines that *the economic rationale of international relations is stronger than that induced by a partner country's image*.

Until now, there are no studies focused on Romania's perception on China. One recent study (Oehler-Şincai, 2017) presents a Romanian view on China's image in Central and Eastern Europe. Even if China intensified its efforts to cooperate more intensely with those countries and offered new frameworks such as *Belt and Road* initiative (BRI) and the *16+1* platform<sup>5</sup>, its image in most EU countries of the region remained unfavourable. Interviews with sinologists, journalists and ministerial experts undertaken by the author during July-August 2016 in Bucharest<sup>6</sup> revealed the following results. China's image appeared as rather unfavourable. Moreover, China was considered as *not visible enough* in Romania. Even initiatives such as *BRI* and *16+1* are not clearly understood by the public at large.

Why is China negatively perceived in major economies and even in countries of Central and Eastern Europe? There is a wide range of explanations for this status quo. *First*, Chinese large scale initiatives are often associated with propaganda, reducing considerably the message credibility. It should be underscored that in Central and Eastern European countries, the region's communist past continues to be a barrier in the relationship with China. In most countries of this region, including Romania, the national interest is strongly related to the opportunities offered by the European Union funds and market and the North Atlantic Security Treaty. Political leaders as well as the public at large consider that the opportunities offered by China are incomparably lower than those already provided by other European developed partners and the United States. *Second*, in the foreign mass media, China's assets are often minimized, while its liabilities are emphasized, which creates a disproportion between the assets and liabilities in favour of the latter. *Third*, activities of Confucius Institutes and China Radio International seem that are not able to reach a large audience, despite the costs attached. Learning Chinese language is a long term process and without continuity and hard work, no progress is possible. *Fourth*, the sensitive issues in bilateral relations are not only politicized, but also intensely brought into the international mass media. *Fifth*, although China has already strong brands (own or acquired through mergers and acquisitions), most of them are not widely known, accepted and appreciated as Chinese ones in Occident. These are only several reasons why China is not enough understood and even misunderstood.

## 5. Conclusions

Generally, a country image is determined by the following categories of factors: (1) its specific "assets and liabilities"; (2) how the country *explains itself to the world*; (3) how other players of the global stage *explain that country to the world*, according to their specific objectives; (4) the capacity and will of the public to understand that country, as well as the access to objective information.

Our research emphasized that China's image is multi-dimensional and associated with tangible and intangible assets. There are differences between the image communicated by the national authorities and that perceived by target groups and consequently between China's image and its identity. The way "China is explained to the world" is as relevant as its "assets and liabilities" themselves in outlining China's image. Besides, the public with a stronger knowledge of China from objective sources (including direct experience in that country) tends to have a positive perception on China.

Taking into account the **4D model** and each of the four complex dimensions of the CI, namely *functional, normative, aesthetic and emotional*, our investigation focused on China unveiled several relevant findings. Sensitive issues and sources of negative perceptions are mostly concentrated in the normative dimension (specific beliefs regarding the integrity of a country, its norms and values) and functional one (specific beliefs regarding the competences and competitiveness of a country, its political and economic effectiveness and performance, technological progress, social desirability). Such negative connotations are often highlighted by partners (especially developed ones, belonging to the classical triad United States-European Union-Japan but also emerging/developing countries like India). Nevertheless, China is in possession of many **communication channels** influencing the attitudes of foreign publics: mass media, reports, official statements, studies, academic research, Public Diplomacy, direct bridges made of people with a rich and positive experience forged through the direct contact with Chinese goods and services people, institutions, culture etc. These demonstrate that China possesses also incontestable assets that counterbalance its negative

---

<sup>5</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, plus China.

<sup>6</sup> The respondents had to give an opinion on how they consider the Romanian public and authorities perceived China. In most cases, the own opinion of experts with strong knowledge and direct experience of China was positive.

perception among its foreign publics. According to the 4D model, these are concentrated in the aesthetic dimension of the country image (beauty in terms of cultural and scenic place), but also the functional dimension (economic and social progress) and the normative dimension (Confucian values). These are often distorted by communication channels in partner countries, which are not always objective and generate a negative perception among its publics. Moreover, the geographical distance hinders the real contact and understanding of real China.

Even if at present there are no multi-year surveys regarding China's image in most significant countries of the world, our analysis suggests that each group of partner countries should be addressed individually by China. One example in this regard is given by the group of 16 countries of Central and Eastern Europe that form together with China the platform 16+1. The communist past of these European countries is not an advantage for China, but rather a barrier. This obstacle can be surpassed by mutual understanding, which forges trust, a prerequisite for cooperation and mutual benefit.

### References:

- [1] Ajzen, I., Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs N.J: Prentice-Hall.
- [2] BBC (2014). *Country Rating Poll*, available at: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/country-rating-poll.pdf>.
- [3] Buhmann, A. (2016). *Measuring Country Image – Theory, Method and Effects*, Springer VS.
- [4] Buhmann, A., Ingenhoff, D. (2015). "Advancing the country image construct from a public relations perspective – From model to measurement", *Journal of Communication Management*, February, pp. 62-80.
- [5] Cao, Q. (2011). *The language of soft power: Mediating socio-political meanings in the Chinese media*, *Critical Arts*, 25:1, pp. 7-24.
- [6] Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2007). *A smarter, more secure America*, CSIS Commission on Smart Power.
- [7] Cowan, G., Cull, N. J. (editors) (2008). *Special Issue: Public Diplomacy in a Changing World*, *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616.1.
- [8] Cull, N. J. (2009). *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past*, CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, Figueroa Press, Los Angeles.
- [9] Dolea, A. (2016). "The need for critical thinking in country promotion – Public diplomacy, nation branding, and public policies", in: L'Etang, J., McKie, D., Snow, N., Xifra, J. (editors), *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Public Relations*, pp. 275-288.
- [10] Eisenegger, M., Imhof, K. (2008). "The true, the good and the beautiful: Reputation management in the media society", in: Zerfaß, Ansgar; Ruler, Betteke van; Sriramesh, Krishnamurthy (eds.) *Public relations research: European and international perspectives and innovations*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 125–146.
- [11] Fox, J., Godement, F. (2009). *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, European Council on Foreign Relations, London.
- [12] Gallup (2016). *Country Ratings*, available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1624/perceptions-foreign-countries.aspx>.
- [13] German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)/Compagnia di San Paolo/Barrow Cadbury Trust/Fundación BBVA/Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2014). *Transatlantic Trends*.
- [14] Gilboa, E. (2012). "Public Diplomacy", in: George T. Kurian (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Vol. 4, pp. 1378-1380), Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- [15] d'Hooghe, I. (2015). *China's Public Diplomacy*, Brill-Nijhoff, Leiden/Boston.
- [16] d'Hooghe, I. (2013). *China's Public Diplomacy Shifts Focus: From Building Hardware to Improving Software*, China Policy Institute, Nottingham.
- [17] d'Hooghe, I. (2007). *The Rise of China's Public Diplomacy*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, July, The Hague.
- [18] d'Hooghe, I. (2005). "Public Diplomacy in the People's Republic of China", in: Melissen, J. (editor), *The New Public Diplomacy, Soft Power in International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- [19] Ingenhoff, D., Sommer, K. (2007). Spezifikation von formativen und reflektiven Konstrukten und Pfadmodellierung mittels Partial Least Squares zur Messung von Reputation, Salzburg, Austria.
- [20] Edney, K. (2012). "Soft power and the Chinese propaganda system", *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(78): 899-914.
- [21] Kurlantzick, J. (2007). *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, Yale University.
- [22] Martin, I. M., Eroglu, S. (1993). "Measuring a multi-dimensional construct: Country image", in: *Journal of Business Research*. 28 (3), pp. 191–210.
- [23] McGuire, W. J. (1968). "Personality and attitude change: An information-processing theory", in A. G. Greenwald, T. C. Brock, T.M. Ostrom (editors), *Psychological foundations of attitudes*, New York Academic Press, pp. 171-196.

- [24] Oehler-Şincai, I.M. (2017). "A Romanian View on China's Image in Central and Eastern Europe", in: Iskra Christova-Balkanska and Eduard Marinov (editors), *Bulgaria and Romania: Member Countries of the EU, Part of the Global Economy*, ISBN 978-954-9313-08-6.
- [25] Oehler-Şincai, I.M. (2016). "United States' Pivot Towards Asia-Pacific: Rationale, Goals and Implications for the Relationship with China", *Knowledge Horizons - Economics*, Faculty of Finance, Banking and Accounting, Bucharest, "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University Bucharest, vol. 8(1), March, pp. 25-31.
- [26] Pearce, J. (2008). *William J. McGuire, 82, Art of Persuasion Pioneer, Dies*, New York Times, January 14.
- [27] Pew Research Center (2016). *Opinion of China*, Global Indicators Database, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/24/survey/18/map/>.
- [28] Ross, R.S. (2013). "US Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer, pp. 20-40.
- [29] Smith, A. D. (1987). *The ethnic origins of nations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [30] Zhang, J. (2015). "China's new foreign policy under Xi Jinping: towards 'Peaceful Rise 2.0'?", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 27:1, DOI: 10.1080/14781158.2015.993958, pp. 5-19.