

The Image of a Competitive Country Among Russian and Chinese Students

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the similarities and differences in the image of a competitive country among students from Russia and China. Semi-projective techniques were used for this purpose. The semantic differential technique has allowed detecting some of the mental differences in views on the competitive country. The results of the study showed that the Chinese image of a competitive country was more harmonious and holistic. Russian students revealed a contradiction between the images of a competitive and good country. According to students of both groups, the main factors that can improve the competitiveness of the country are financial well-being, national health and social stability.

1. Introduction

Constantly growing interest to the problem of competition and competitiveness in various areas of humanitarian knowledge is natural. It is determined by the increasing openness of national economies and economic operators' need for occupying their own place in the international system of division of labor.

For the first time, the question of national competitiveness in a globalizing economy was raised at the state level in the United States. As a result, the Competition Commission under the President of USA was created in 1985. Later in 2001, the European Union member countries adopted the so-called Lisbon Declaration, in which creation of the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world in the EU was declared as one of the main goals. This new type of economy should be focused on achieving sustainable economic growth, providing employment and creating the sense of nationhood and national unity.

Since 2004, the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) has been calculated. It is a major study of economic competitiveness and following ranking of countries. As of 2016-2017 Switzerland, Singapore and the USA were at the top of ranking as three most competitive countries. China was in the 28th place and was in the lead among developing economies, Russia filled the 43rd place [1].

It should be noted, that at least two trends characterize modern studies of competitiveness in the economy and in economic policy: attention to the non-financial factors of competitiveness (knowledge, information) and highlighting humanitarian component of competitiveness (human capital, efficiency of economic communication, trust, justice) [2]. Because of these conditions, the

demand for psychological knowledge rises. According to Zhuravlev and Ushakov [3], psychology can claim to be one of the strategically leading sciences, which development is necessary for an individual competitiveness as well as a country's competitiveness.

On the background of economic wars for resources, trading, etc, the role of informational influence to consciousness increase, which leads to the deformation of political information, through which the image of nations and countries is formed. The distortion of the image of the country, in turn, negatively affects the competitiveness of states and citizens.

Nowadays in science it should be stated a constructive tendency for competition-cooperation rather than competition-competition. F. Fukuyama considers the concept of social capital at the meta level of relations between countries and nations [4]. Michael Porter also highlights the importance of historical and cultural aspects in economics, because basic skills, main values, norms of behavior, needs and preferences are formed in the process of historical development. Then all of them create a basis for relative demands [5].

The People's Republic of China, aware of the need to cooperate with its neighbors in order to improve its competitiveness, is involved in a large number of cooperation projects in various fields. In 2013, China proposed the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, the main idea of which is the Chinese version of globalization as an alternative to Western globalization. Within this initiative, two projects were created - the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The main goal of the initiative is to take to a new level a cooperation of Asian, European and African countries. This Chinese projects also noted the need of improvement of the competitiveness of the country.

Within the international cooperation projects, youth associations and organizations are created. They are mainly considered as a candidate pool. That is why it is extremely important to investigate what perceptions and attitudes are formed among young citizens.

Since there is a bi-directional relationship between real competitiveness and perceptions about it (people's ideas and beliefs determine their motivation, and motivation increases the country's competitiveness [6]), it is essential to explore the representations and ideas of citizens, especially young people, about competitive country and competitiveness.

The objective of this research was to identify the general and the particular in the images of a competitive country among Russian and Chinese students.

2. Method

2.1 Instruments

At this search stage of the research, semi-projective methods have become the main methods, videlicet:

A self-developed symbol-association ranking method with the stimuli concept of the “competitive country” and a modified semantic differential (MSD) were used. The choice of semi-projective methods was due to the following advantages: first, the relative ease of translation into another language and, secondly, the chance to reduce the level of social desirability which is common for Chinese. Semi-projective methods make analysis deeper [7] by re-creating image of phenomenon in common consciousness, which is characterized by conscious and unconscious elements and intertwining of rational and emotional contexts.

The substantial basis of the ranking methodology of the country's competitiveness factors [8] were formed by the so-called “invisible capitals” [9] and, above all, the characteristics of the country's human capital (see: Table 1).

The semantic differential was used in the classic version with three scales of G. Osgud (assessment, activity, strength) and an additional scale “benefit-risk”. There were 32 descriptors at all.

Additionally, the method of unstructured interviews was used with the main question: “Which characteristics should a competitive country have?” This part aided of more objective interpretation of the data.

2.2 Participants

The research involved 115 students aged 18 to 35 years. 93 students took part in a test study with semi-projective methods: 51 Russian students from St. Petersburg and Moscow (67% of female and 33% of male) and 42 students from Shanghai and Beijing (45% of female and 55% of male). Chinese students participated in a research within the summer school at Fudan University.

3. Results and Discussion

A comparative analysis of ranking data of factors, which can improve the competitiveness of their country, showed both general trends and specific features in groups of Russian and Chinese students.

Table 1: Results of ranking the country's competitiveness factors (rank and descriptive statistics).

Factors of country competitiveness	Russia			China		
	rank	M	σ	rank	M	σ
Influence expansion	8	7,74	3,77	12	11,02	2,82
National health	4	6,11	3,88	5	4,64	2,62
Education of the nation	2	5,51	3,36	4	4,12	2,42
Stability in society	3	5,86	3,48	1/2	3,31	2,69
Fine diplomacy	9/10	7,77	3,28	6	5,81	2,31
Strong army	11	8,22	3,84	1/2	3,31	2,36
The reputation of the country	6	6,71	3,74	9	9,1	2,7
Sports victory	13	11,01	3,49	14	12,98	1,64
Effectiveness of the law	5	6,55	3,86	11	9,98	2,04
Technology innovations	9/10	7,77	3,42	10	9,17	2,23
Financial well-being	1	4,55	3,4	3	3,9	2,37
Intergenerational continuity	14	11,02	3,14	13	11,9	2,16
Strategy for development	7	7,22	3,48	7	7,76	2,75
Spiritual upbringing	12	8,88	4,27	8	8,24	3,09

The results of the ranking (table 1) show that the significance of such factors as “strong army” and “stability in society” statistically higher among the students from China. These factors were located in the first place, followed by a factor “financial well-being”. It should be noted that the Chinese in the process of ranking demonstrated a great unanimity and clearly highlighted priorities.

The triad of priorities (“army-stability-economy”) for improving the competitiveness of a country and especially the priority “army” in the first place may surprise because of lack of coincidence with the concept of “peaceful rise” of China, which was officially announced in 2003. The doctrine of “peaceful rise” was rather quickly transferred from political rhetoric to a theoretical course (for

further elaboration for the propaganda goals, as an alternative to the concept of “Chinese threat” launched by Japan and continued by the USA). Nowadays ideas of this doctrina can still be observed in positioning of China on the world political arena. However, it is worth to note that at the same time, China conducts a colossal modernization of the army and develops new weapons technologies. Chinese scientists specializing in quantum technologies and artificial intelligence are highly involved in military research (more than 95% of researchers involved in Chinese military development have academic degrees).

The factor “army” also reflects the importance of authority for the Chinese. Famous Russian Sinologist N.A. Speshnev defined it this way: “...the so-called orientation to the past prevails among the Chinese. Hence, the traditional respect for authority especially for higher officials exists” [10]. The author does not share the harsh criticism of the introverted personality of the Chinese and their respect for the authorities and, in particular, the military authorities as a quality that may hamper the creativity.

The factor of competitiveness “stability”, which divided the first place with the factor “strong army”, reflects the eastern worldview - at least, as we usually interpret it. Stability is combined with the principle of “the golden mean”, which is one of the most important Confucian theses. It means to achieve a compromise, to maintain the traditional way of thinking, to submit to the same standards and requirements as well as not to go to extremes, - all these points are important features of Chinese thinking, which create the base for understanding competitiveness in Chinese way. Indeed, in this case competitiveness is not a sharp breakthrough, but an orderly development.

The third priority “financial well-being” was the choice both Chinese and Russian students. However, it should also be noted that the concept of “financial well-being” in China differs from the West's one. In Chinese, the rule of equality and the social mechanism for achieving wealth are essential parts of the mentality. There are social norms, which are necessary for every individual. They include two options, the first of which is directly related to supporting the financial situation, the need to give presents (in the broadest sense of the word) and accept them, to maintain contact with others. The second type of social relations is a demonstration of sympathy and help.

If one person renders a service to another, the second person must soon respond with an adequate measure. In China balance is important for many areas, including the area of finance.

As the correlation analysis has shown, all three factors of competitiveness among the Chinese are interrelated and reflect not only their direct meaning (military strength, money and stability), but also certain behavioral stereotypes, which are necessary for the creation of a competitive society and country. These factors can be considered not only as a reflection of the state policy in the matter of competitiveness, which bases on the national mentality, but also as a social demand.

Russian respondents put “financial well-being” in the first place in the list of factors of the competitiveness, followed by “education of the nation” and “stability of society”. Considering the results in the context of a social demand, it can be said that the issue of financial instability is more actual for Russian youth than for Chinese one. This factor was statistically more significant for Russians. The “stability” factor took the third position - Russian respondents also value stability highly but still not to the extent that the Chinese youth. Finally, the “education of the nation” is the factor that the Chinese have moved into fourth place, and for Russians it is number 2 of the most important factors.

It should be noted that Russia and China have certain differences in understanding factor education, which was recognized as significant for the country's competitiveness by both groups. In China, education gives young people a “ticket to life,” the prospect of working well enough not only to support themselves, but also to help the family (all participants in the study were born under the policy of “one family - one child”). Thus, in China, competition for the possibility of education begins from elementary school.

For Russians, education is not a privilege, but does not guarantee future professional growth and financial stability. Moreover, a large number of non-competitive universities prepare great number of non-competitive graduates. Therefore, if in China the main problem seem to be the difficulty of obtaining education, because of a large number of people for a limited number of places in schools and universities, in Russia it is more a question of the quality of education, and sometimes the ability to pay for it.

The task of the second part of the research was to find similarities and differences in the semantic space of the image of a competitive country in groups of Russian and Chinese students. The results obtained using the MSD are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of psychosemantic research with the phrase "competitive country".

Descriptors	Russia		China	
	M	σ	M	σ
1. Pleasant-unpleasant	1,43	1,11	1,38	1,1
2. Active-passive	2,47	0,67	1,4	1,27
3. Strong-weak	2,61	0,6	1,93	1,04
4. Useful-harmful	1,49	1,17	1,71	1,11
5. Positive-negative	1,22	1,25	1,69	1,31
6. Energetic-inert	2,33	0,84	2,50	0,94
7. Stubborn-compliant	1,10	1,13	-1,40	1,51
8. Profitable-losing	2,25	0,91	1,67	1,3
9. Humane-cruel	0,47	1,3	1,64	1,26
10. Brave-timid	1,94	0,9	1,93	1,04
11. Heavy-light	0,02	1,22	0,81	1,17
12. Practical-impractical	2,04	0,95	2,57	0,8
13. Preferred-rejected	1,43	1,13	1,24	1,18
14. Resolute-hesitant	1,82	0,99	1,26	1,32
15. Sharp-soft	0,63	1,42	0,36	1,03
16. Safe-dangerous	1,16	1,25	2,12	1,27
17. Life-saving-harmful	0,55	1,1	2,52	1,08
18. Advanced-backward	2,49	0,83	1,93	1,23
19. Independent-dependent	1,82	1,27	1,93	1,17
20. Serene-disturbing	-0,80	1,46	1,48	1,31
21. Real-fake	0,94	1,31	0,81	1,25
22. Fast-slow	1,51	1,17	1,74	1,25
23. Constructive-destructive	1,59	1,29	2,12	1,13
24. Profitable-unprofitable	2,39	0,82	1,95	1,05
25. Fair-unfair	1,04	1,24	1,6	1,12
26. Fussy-quiet	-0,31	1,33	0,07	0,46
27. Deep- superficial	1,08	1,26	1,67	1,09
28. Modern- unmodern	2,45	0,75	1,81	1,08
29. Good-bad	0,98	1,08	1,93	1,11
30. Obstinate-submissive	0,75	1,21	0,55	0,99

31. Promising-unpromising	2,43	0,80	2,81	0,59
32. Confident-uncertain	2,27	0,85	2,33	0,9

Note: the scale of the descriptor ratings is from -3 to +3.

Students of both groups see a competitive country as promising and confident, practical and energetic. At the same time, statistically significant differences in the image of a competitive country among Russian and Chinese students seem to be associated with the mentality and strength of the traditions of the nations. So for Russian students market and economic characteristics of competition are highlighted: active, strong, resolute, advanced, profitable, modern. For Chinese students, statistically, the values for humanitarian descriptors are higher: constructive, safe, life-saving, humane, and serene. The Eastern mentality was manifested in the point that the Chinese believe that a competitive country should be compliant, while Russians, who believe that a competitive country should be stubborn.

It is important to note the contradiction inherent in the image of a competitive country among Russians, revealed through structural analysis of data. Despite the fact that Russian students in the image of a competitive country showed more pronounced market, economic characteristics, correlations showed that the image of "good" country had got those humanitarian characteristics that are more pronounced in Chinese students. The correlation between the indicators for MSD descriptors showed that for Chinese a "good" country is a modern country (with $p \leq 0.05$), and for Russians a good country is a fair country ($r = 0.38$, $p \leq 0.01$), humane ($r = 0.31$, $p \leq 0.05$) and constructive ($r = 0.49$, $p \leq 0.01$). Thus, a competitive country is not necessarily a good country. Archetypically sensitive to moral regulators in society, Russians experience a lack of justice, a discord between forced competition and a need for principles of humanity, justice and creativity.

4. Conclusions

The research of the image of a competitive country among Russian and Chinese students shows both general and special characteristics.

The psychosemantic space of a "competitive country" and "good country" in the mind of Russian students do not match. The image of a competitive country among Russian students to a greater extent than that of Chinese students was associated with market economic characteristics, and the image of a good country is primarily reflected as fair. For the Chinese, a "good" country is associated primarily with temporary psychosemantic characteristics. It should be a promising, progressive and modern country.

According to students of both groups, the main factors that can improve the competitiveness of the country are financial well-being, national health and social stability. However, the Chinese put in the first place such a factor as a strong army, and the Russians it was at the end of the rating. Russians included education of nation and effectiveness of the law in the top of first five factors of competitiveness.

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