

# Confucius Institutes and the Globalization of China's Soft Power

*Contributions by R.S. Zaharna, Jennifer Hubbert, and Falk Hartig*

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CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF  
CHINA'S SOFT POWER

by R.S. Zaharna, Jennifer Hubbert, and Falk Hartig

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## Preface

China's Confucius Institute program turns ten years old this November. Since its inception in 2004, the program, funded by the Chinese government and with the mission of promoting Chinese language and culture globally, has grown rapidly around the world. It now has a network of 1,086 affiliates (440 institutes and 646 classrooms) in 120 countries. Among similar cultural organizations, only the Alliance Française has more than 1,000 classrooms or institutions, and only the Alliance Française and the British Council are in more than 100 countries. But the Francophone organization was established more than 120 years ago, and the British Council is 80 years old. Clearly, China has embarked on an ambitious and aggressive initiative to spread its cultural centers around the globe.

There are multiple driving forces behind this remarkable growth, including institutional incentives and resources provided by Hanban (the Beijing-based Office of the Chinese Language Council International), a growing interest in China and the resulting need for Chinese language instruction, and its affiliate-based organizational model.

The Confucius Institute has received its share of criticism in host countries, as well as within China. For instance, some critics contend that the institutes reflect the Chinese government's agenda and that their operation on university campuses interferes with academic freedom. Others find the teaching materials and pedagogy less than adequate. Domestic criticism has ranged from accusing the government of misplacing educational resources for overseas institutions rather than allocating them to poor school districts in China, to questioning the use of "Confucius" as the official name of the entity, as it doesn't teach anything related to Confucian philosophy.

Such commentary aside, there has been little conceptually-grounded, academic analysis of the Confucius Institute phenomenon. The handful of articles that have appeared in academic journals provide a general survey of the organization and its global expansion



in the context of China's "soft power" pursuit. Indeed, the Confucius Institute offers an illustrative case of the opportunities and challenges facing cultural diplomacy organizations in contemporary times.

This issue of the *CPD Perspectives in Public Diplomacy* provides three analyses of this timely and important topic. R.S. Zaharna views the Confucius Institutes as a "network-based cultural diplomacy project" that underscores the growing importance of relational processes. Her analysis examines the Confucius Institutes' network structure, network synergy, and network strategy. Taking an anthropological approach, Jennifer Hubbert focuses on a Confucius Institute-sponsored tour of China for American high school students. Through "thick description," she explores the intended production of Chinese soft power through the two mechanisms of "witnessing the modern" and "embodied performance of tradition" as demonstrated during the tour, and how these were experienced by student participants. Finally, Falk Hartig examines the Confucius Institute project in Africa through the wider framework of China's development aid. Through a case study of South Africa, he explores whether the Confucius Institutes might play a more prominent role in Africa than elsewhere.

These three papers contribute to a discerning discussion of the Confucius Institutes' phenomenal growth. They also serve as invitations for further studies and debates. Special thanks to Lauren Madow and Bryony Inge for their able editorial assistance.

Jian Wang

## **China's Confucius Institutes: Understanding the Relational Structure & Relational Dynamics of Network Collaboration**

by R.S. Zaharna

On the surface, the Confucius Institutes initiative launched by the People's Republic of China seems similar to the cultural diplomacy of other countries. China appears to be promoting the Chinese language and culture in an effort to increase its soft power in the international arena. Joseph Nye viewed the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies of a nation as an important soft power resource that a nation can wield to enhance its appeal or attraction.<sup>1</sup> While many countries share the goal of promoting their language and culture, China's Confucius Institutes (CI) are enjoying a remarkable growth rate. Following a pilot program in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in June 2004, the first Confucius Institute opened in Seoul, South Korea in November 2004. By late 2005, there were 32 more CI in 23 countries. In 2006, a new Confucius Institute was established every four days on average.<sup>2</sup> In early 2007, there were 128 CI worldwide. Two years later, in 2009, the number had doubled to 256 institutes in 81 countries. At the end of 2013, there were 440 CI in 115 countries and regions in the world.

This dramatic rise of Confucius Institutes has garnered much attention from public diplomacy scholars and policy makers alike. Their works have highlighted the soft power disconnect between perceptions of China's political ideals and politics and the stellar growth of the CI initiative.<sup>3</sup> Only a decade old, Confucius Institutes appear poised to surpass or have surpassed long-established institutes of prominent powers with extensive resources, including those of France, Germany, and Britain. In terms of cultural appeal, some have been perplexed at how China has outpaced Japan despite the wide appeal of Japanese manga, anime, karaoke, and sushi.<sup>4</sup> Culturally, China is quite distinct from the non-Asian societies where CI have flourished. The Western liberal democracies (United States and Europe) have the highest concentrations of Institutes.<sup>5</sup> Also, Chinese is not an easy language to learn, nor is it as prevalent as perhaps Spanish is. The challenges CI faced in terms of gaining

access, recognition, and surpassing established institutes are formidable.

While the raw numbers are impressive, focusing on the numbers as a competitive indicator of cultural diplomacy's effectiveness may obscure the valuable lessons and insights that other countries can glean from China's CI initiative.<sup>6</sup> The very name of the project is revealing. Naming the institutes after the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) was originally intended to symbolize the longevity of the Chinese culture, as well as the longevity envisioned for the initiative. Confucius also captures the essence of Chinese culture, as it is permeated with Confucian values.<sup>7</sup> At the core of Confucian ethics are proper human relations; humans are viewed primarily as relational beings.<sup>8</sup> As this study illustrates, the Chinese philosopher and the Institutes share most deeply this emphasis on cultivating and maintaining relationships.

Relational structures and relational dynamics are the pivotal features of the Confucius Institutes. Unlike most cultural institutes that are stand-alone, independent entities in a host country, CI are partnered with a Chinese university, and both are linked to the CI headquarters in Beijing. This in effect creates a multi-dimensional, multi-layered global network structure. The relational structure is only part of the picture. Equally important are the relational dynamics. The CI initiative's many online and offline activities are not just culturally themed, they also contain powerful elements of internal and external relationship-building that lead to collaboration. Understanding the relational dynamics is key to understanding the growth, sustainability, and collaborative benefits of the CI.

This paper examines the CI initiative as a process model of a network collaborative approach to cultural diplomacy. The paper looks at relational structure and relational dynamics through the lens of the "soft power differential" and network communication approach. The first section expands the idea of the soft power differential in public diplomacy to cultural diplomacy. The second section provides a strategic overview of the CI initiative

and then analyzes it based on the three dimensions of a network communication approach: network structure, network synergy, and network strategy. The final section concludes with insights and lessons that other countries could draw from the Chinese cultural and relational approach to diplomacy.

### **Soft Power Differential through Culture as a Process**

As Jian Wang wrote in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication*, “Understanding how China pursues global communication is critical for assessing its growing ‘soft power.’”<sup>9</sup> To underscore that observation, understanding China’s unique communication approach is pivotal to what appears to be a “soft power differential” and the phenomenal growth of China’s CI initiative. In 2007, I suggested the term “soft power differential” to capture the idea that soft power is inherently a communication-based activity and that different communication strategies can produce different soft power outcomes, or a soft power differential.<sup>10</sup> The analysis of U.S. public diplomacy and NGOs revealed distinct differences in their communication approaches. Post-9/11, U.S. public diplomacy appeared to be trying to *wield* soft power using a mass communication approach. This was an inherently information-based approach dedicated to the design and delivery of a static message to a specific target audience. Because the audience was essentially passive, the sponsor was responsible for supplying and sustaining the initiative.

In contrast to the static, resource-intensive approach of *wielding* soft power, NGOs appeared to *create* soft power through a network communication approach. The network communication approach actively incorporated the audience into a relational structure and relational dynamic to extend the reach and sustainability of the communication. The advantage of this approach was that it appeared to create a dynamic that allowed the initiative to grow and sustain itself. The network communication approach was based on three inter-related dimensions: network structure that facilitates relational connections and information exchange; network synergy created

from internal and external relationship-building and the incorporation of diversity; and network strategy that enables members to co-create a master narrative and shared identity.

While the core of network communication approach is the network structure, the communication and relational dynamics are critical. The relational dynamics are necessary in transforming the *target audience* into *stakeholders* through internal and external relational activities. Stakeholder perspective is reinforced through co-created narratives (as opposed to static messages) and shared identity (as opposed to sponsor-centered identity). Stakeholders tend to assume shared ownership of the initiative and engage in collaborative problem-solving and knowledge generation that help sustain and further expand the relational structure. Ali Fisher identified ownership as one of the key elements of collaborative public diplomacy.<sup>11</sup> Often “network” initiatives have the structure, but not the relational dynamic, to sustain the initiative. Evidence of a successful network communication approach is that an initiative has found a synergy that enables organic growth, sustainability, and knowledge creation.

The reason the network communication approach produced the soft power differential was because it had several advantages over the Cold War-era mass communication approach in a global communication era. In times marked by connectivity, interactivity, and cultural diversity, communication dynamics were switching from message content to message exchange, control to coordination, products to process.<sup>12</sup> Those who mastered relationship-building and networking strategies would gain the communication edge. It is possible to apply observations of the soft power differential of the network communication approach found in public diplomacy to cultural diplomacy. Focusing on the soft power differential in cultural diplomacy shifts attention away from culture as a static soft power resource to the communication strategy of how that culture is being communicated.

Traditional approaches to cultural diplomacy echo Nye's discussion on trying to wield culture as a soft power resource. In this view, culture, like messages, is a static attribute produced and disseminated by an individual country. From a communication vantage point, culture appears to be a product. This product can be promoted, as in the efforts of various cultural and language institutes. As a product, culture can be exchanged, as in cultural exchanges, cultural visits, and themed cultural years. It can also be a vehicle for relationship-building, such as through two-way dialogues. Countries can be extremely creative in how they wield culture as a soft power resource, especially in how they engage publics through participatory activities and exhibits. They can also create elaborate relational networks for promoting and transmitting culture and cultural products. Despite the innovation in relational dynamics and relational structures, because the two are separate and not integrated, they do not create the synergy needed to sustain the initiative. Wielding culture as a soft power resource requires the sustained effort and outlay of other resources of the sponsor in order to grow the initiative.

Recent scholarship in cultural diplomacy is expanding the view of culture from a product to a process.<sup>13</sup> Stephen Green raised the importance of process, including the use of networks and digital communication.<sup>14</sup> However, the mechanism for how to transition from product to process is not entirely clear. Given today's technology, it is relatively easy to create a cultural network on paper or in cyberspace. However, because human networks are not inanimate grids, but living organisms, it is critical to look inside the network initiative at the relational structure and relational dynamics. Both are critical to the network initiative's potential to thrive and grow and create a soft power differential. China's CI initiative provides insights into how to integrate relational structure with relational dynamics. The next section provides a strategic overview of the CI initiative, and is followed by a closer examination of the CI initiative in terms of the three dimensions of a network communication approach.

### Confucius Institute: Strategic Overview

The Confucius Institute is headquartered in Beijing and sponsored by China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, or Hanban (an abbreviation of *han yu ban gong shi*). According to the CI English language website, the initiative is "aimed at promoting friendly relationships with other countries and enhancing the understanding of the Chinese language and culture among world [sic]."<sup>15</sup> It also works to support Chinese teachers working abroad at the learning facilities and provides training for these teachers in China in a non-degree program of Applied Chinese Education. In addition to training teachers, and spreading Chinese culture and language, the Confucius Institutes also help promote Chinese festivals in their various international locations.

The institutes and their Chinese partners are linked with the CI headquarters in Beijing.<sup>16</sup> In 2006, the headquarters began hosting its annual Confucius Institute Conference for current and prospective institutes. In 2009, Confucius Institute Online – a hub that provides detailed information on the CI initiative – was created. The site, originally in Chinese and English, has expanded to more than 45 language options. The original website ([www.confuciusinstitute.net](http://www.confuciusinstitute.net)) was highly interactive, containing Chinese podcast lessons and a resource pool, as well as cultural features. A second generation site ([www.chinese.cn](http://www.chinese.cn)) incorporated social media and turned the site into an online forum for finding and connecting with others. It provided lists of Confucius Institutes around the world by region and country, and specific academic institutions on an interactive Google map.

While the CI on the surface appear similar to other cultural institutes, in order to gain greater insight into how the CI initiative has been able to grow we can explore the initiative using the three inter-related dimensions of a network communication approach: network structure, network synergy, and network strategy.

## **Network Structure**

What immediately distinguishes the CI initiative are the relational links spread across several levels. The first official Confucius Institute that opened in Seoul, South Korea in 2004 highlighted the relations at the national level between China and South Korea. Other Confucius Institutes have been partnered with Chinese institutions. The partnering represents a relational model that is distinct from other cultural institutes. Rather than being independent facilities, CI were established as a partnership between a host educational institution and a prominent Chinese university. Early CI were established in prestigious host institutions, which may have provided an aspirational value for other host institutions. The London School of Economics was one of the first to host the Confucius Institute in Britain. Its partner was the equally prominent Tsinghua University in Beijing. The majority of the CI hosts in the United States are at land grant or state universities. This relationship between state universities and Chinese universities symbolically extends relations between a particular state and China. The state universities may also facilitate more natural relational extension to Confucius Classrooms in local public schools.

The host institution partnerships with Chinese universities provide important platforms for direct interpersonal communication and sustained, long-term relationship-building. The host-partner discussions are followed by official visits during the signing or the opening of an institute, which are then followed by the promise of student and faculty exchanges as well as research collaboration. The partnering and cooperation efforts and activities represent a bonding feature for sustained engagement. Such partnerships, which in effect incorporate the CI into the society of the host country, represent a higher level of coordination and commitment than independent cultural institutes that are linked only to the headquarters in the home country. The partnerships are also particularly valuable for personalizing the relational connection in a cultural network as vast and growing as the CI initiative.



Linking all Confucius Institutes and their Chinese partners back to the Hanban headquarters in Beijing effectively makes it the hub or center of the global CI network. In this respect, the CI is a highly centralized network. But, from the outset, this centralization appeared to be another strategic relational advantage for managing and growing the CI network. Provan and his colleagues underscored the connection between network governance and effectiveness:

Unlike dyadic relationships [partners], which are managed by the organizations themselves, and unlike serendipitous networks, which have no formal governance structures at all, the activities of whole, goal-directed networks must generally be managed and governed if they are to be effective.<sup>17</sup>

Krebs and Holley highlighted the important role of the “network weaver,” who creates links with other members and thus expands the network.<sup>18</sup> Hanban functions not just as the central hub, but also as the network weaver. As scholars have noted, having a central entity that can maintain the stability and foster the growth and diversity of the network can be essential for the long-term viability of the network. Provan and Milward showed how centralization facilitates integration and coordination in a network.<sup>19</sup> Such integration and coordination may be particularly important when network members come from different backgrounds or possess different skills and attributes. Mayo and Pastor highlighted the link between centralization and network diversity in enhancing network performance and social cohesion. Greater centralization may help reduce uncertainty for members and manage conflicts by assigning bridging and facilitator roles for specific members.<sup>20</sup>

Not only is the CI network centralized, it is also dense. Within network analysis, density refers to the proportion of actors connected to each other.<sup>21</sup> The greater the number of connections among members in a network, the greater the network density. The density and strength of the network comes with the multi-dimensional and multi-layered interweaving of China's CI initiative. The creation of the Confucius Institute Online (CI Online) by Hanban with the ability of linking for all CI hosts and Chinese partners creates

a secondary main hub for the CI network and allows for weaving the network electronically. We can see the dense inter-weaving of relations in several layers. The first layer (CI hub) is the Hanban or CI headquarters in Beijing as the central hub for the CI initiative. All CI institutes at host universities around the world, the Chinese partners of the host universities, and the CI Online portal are all linked to Hanban. A second layer (CI host-Chinese partner) is the pairing between the CI host universities and partner Chinese universities, linking both to Hanban. This interweaving of relations transforms the network from a single unidirectional hub to a multidirectional network. A third layer (CI-CI) is the linking of the CI host institute with other CI hosts in the region.<sup>22</sup> A fourth layer (Chinese partner – CI+CI+CI) is the linking of a prominent Chinese university with multiple foreign CI hosts. A fifth layer. (CI + Chinese partner + CI+CI, etc.) is the linking of the CI hosts of a Chinese partner to other CI hosts. Each layer adds an element of robustness to the network and ultimately to the vitality of the initiative.

To simply list the number of institutes, as reports on China's soft power often do, does not convey the interwoven and intricate layers of relations in the CI initiative. The root of the soft power is not in the *listing* of institutes, but in the *linking* of institutes. A comprehensive network mapping would require inputting the data for the Confucius Institutes worldwide, connecting them to their partner Chinese universities, Hanban, and the CI Online. Another layer not mentioned here consists of the Confucius Classrooms that are often linked to the local or regional CI. Yet, as extensive as the relational links are, linking the institutes to form a network structure represents only a first step in a network communication approach. The second critical step in a network communication approach focuses on relational dynamics. The sponsor must generate sufficient interaction among the members in the network to ignite a relational dynamic in which the members take ownership for maintaining and growing the network.

## **Network Synergy: Processes of Relationship-Building**

Network synergy is the second dimension that is generated through a network communication approach. Network synergy consists of three inter-related relational processes: internal relationship-building; external coalition-building; and incorporating diversity. China's CI initiative appears active across all three relational processes.

### **Internal Bonding and Team-Building**

Internal relationship-building has implications for overall network productivity, coherence, and sustainability. There are two prominent types of internal relationship-building: bonding and team-building. Bonding is important for maintaining network membership and sustaining the vitality of the overall network. Oftentimes the problem in developing a network is not getting members to join, but keeping them connected to the network. Much of the literature assumes shared or mutual interests as a prerequisite for relationship-building. However, this assumption may be rooted in Western concepts of individualism and based on the transactional view of relationships. Asian research reveals a relational dynamic that begins with bonding tactics and then proceeds to the cultivation of shared interests.<sup>23</sup>

A second type of internal relational process focuses on transforming a group of individuals into a team. Whereas a group relies on the combined contributions of separate individual members working independently, a unified team draws upon a synergistic exchange among the members to multiply their combined impact.<sup>24</sup> When network members work together as a team, they create a self-perpetuating type of energy, or synergy, that grows exponentially. Task-oriented activities help create a sense of achievement. Social-oriented activities help create a sense of community. Positive interpersonal experiences also can serve to validate and strengthen individual personal commitment to a team effort.

Internal relationship-building is a prominent feature in China's CI initiative and is reflected in the strategic pairing of "teaching activities" (or task cohesion) with "cultural activities" (or social cohesion) mandated for all institutes.<sup>25</sup> It is the combination of these two activities that may work together to foster team-building. An Institute's teaching activities provide the initial bonding process through task cohesion: students face an explicit and shared challenge of trying to learn a new and difficult language. Cultural activities allow individuals to engage with others regardless of their language proficiency, and are in essence opportunities for building a sense of belonging and identification among the students. Participating in dragon boat racing, Chinese New Year festivities, or online competitive challenges provide emotional rewards for pursuing language study (maintaining bonds, measuring achievements) and help build team spirit as well as a sense of community. The importance of emotions, especially in relationship-building, cannot be overlooked. Not surprisingly, Cynthia Schneider included the element of fun in her list of best practices in cultural diplomacy.<sup>26</sup>

### **External Relationship-Building**

While internal relationship-building helps transform individual network members into a team, external relationship-building helps boosts the network's reach, resources, impact, and legitimacy. The process of external relationship-building can occur through "network bridge." A network bridge serves as a conduit for information and resources and can facilitate external relationship-building on behalf of the network. External relationship-building can also be through specifically designed events that facilitate interaction across boundaries.<sup>27</sup>

Hanban actively encourages and facilitates external relationship-building. Each institute is encouraged to build relations with their local community through sponsored cultural activities. Globally, Hanban helps CIs link with each other through the CI online portal. Initially, it appeared that Hanban established the CI Online to serve as a resource hub, a static website for other Institutes to find and

access instruction materials.<sup>28</sup> With the development of Web 2.0, and then the rapid proliferation of social media, CI Online has further evolved to incorporate social network platforms and has become a pivotal component of external bridging among institutes in the digital sphere. Hanban also facilitates offline relationship-building through the annual CI Conference in Beijing. The CI Conference gives delegates the opportunity to meet like-minded others, share experiences, and exchange ideas. A critical relational feature of the CI Conference is interpersonal, face-to-face engagement. Research suggests interpersonal communication plays a valuable role in strengthening and sustaining online communication.<sup>29</sup> Offline, interpersonal communication helps personalize the communication experience and transform the anonymity of online experience into a meaningful, personal relation. From a relational perspective, the CI Conference serves as a valuable mechanism for relational internal bonding as well as external bridging.

### **Incorporating Diversity**

A third relational process and critical source of synergy—which emerges as a result of internal and external relationship-building—is the incorporation and use of diversity. Diversity serves as one of the hallmarks of dynamic and creative networks that is able to combine existing resources in new ways. However, incorporating diversity and reaping its rewards can be challenging. Research reveals that cultural and ethnic diversity are the biggest sources of friction in collaborative teams. Friction while working with others may be expected, due to differing perspectives, values, or work styles. Yet these differing perspectives, as Scott Page noted, is key to creative problem-solving.<sup>30</sup> Cognitive diversity, or different ways of thinking, can help a team frame and interpret a problem from alternative vantage points. As Krebs and Holley explain, “To get transformative ideas you often have to go outside of your group.”<sup>31</sup> Differing problem-solving perspectives and strategies can enable a team to generate innovative solutions. Working with others who share a similar goal, but who bring a different perspective, is at the heart of effective collaboration.

Network synergy is one of the most notable features of China's CI initiative. The internal relationship-building dynamics of team synergy *within* a particular Confucius Institute, combined with the external coalition-building *among* CI in the online and offline forums, are what helps generate synergy in the CI network.<sup>32</sup> Indications of network synergy are apparent in the rapid growth and expansion of the initiative. The synergy derived from diversity allows a global network to capitalize on the innovative contributions created by applying various cultural perspectives to problem-solving. In the case of the CI network, the synergistic result would be innovative programs for teaching Chinese language and spreading Chinese culture.

### **Network Strategy: Co-creating Master Narratives & Identity**

The third dimension of the network communication approach rests on a network strategy that is able to co-create master narratives and identity. Both narrative and identity are critical for attracting and retaining members. They are, in effect, a type of glue that holds the network together. An important premise for both is that they are not predetermined independently by the sponsor, but co-created jointly by the network members.

Network strategy focuses on how information is used and circulated among network members. Information value is viewed through a dynamic relational lens, which privileges message exchange, rather than a static attribute or message content. Because information gains value through its circulation, the most circulated information can become the most credible. The value of circulated information in a network strategy helps to distinguish a static message from a dynamic narrative. Unlike media-driven initiatives in which the sponsor alone creates and tries to control the message, a network strategy views messaging as a creative, participatory process from which the narrative emerges through interaction and affinity. No one source independently crafts or controls the narrative. The sequence of development is important. Rather than beginning the process by designing a message independent of an audience,

network communication focuses first on creating the structure and relational dynamics for effective communication among network members, and *then* members collaborate to co-create the narrative. More important than creating a “winning story” (message content) is building strong relationships (message exchange). By focusing first on message exchange, and then co-creating message content, global network initiatives are able to retain currency and relevance as messages cross national and cultural borders.

This co-creational process of generating narratives is also important for developing a shared identity among network members. Identity serves the dual purposes of giving a sense of belonging and purpose for existing members as well as acting as a recruitment vehicle for new or potential members. There appear to be three types of narratives important for maintaining network unity.<sup>33</sup> Task-based narratives stem from the mission or goal of a network. Social-based narratives stress the appeal of belonging or being in association with like-minded others. Identity-based narratives specifically highlight and reinforce a sense of being (rather than belonging or doing) or personal traits with which people identify, such as gender, ethnicity, or religion. The Confucius Institutes’ focus on promoting language and culture may appear solely as task-based narrative. However, the CI emphasis on cultural activities represents an important social-based narrative, inviting individuals to participate emotionally in and join a group. For students with Chinese or Asian heritage, the CI may resonate with a strong identity narrative.

Reading through the various reports of the host CI around the world, one can see the vast range of teaching and cultural activities that enables members to cultivate resonance with task, social, and identity narratives.<sup>34</sup> In CI reports from Thailand, the narrative and identity echoes with cultural themes of bliss and happiness. In Nepalese CIs, learning Chinese was associated with tourism promotion. In Australia, learning Chinese has a strong business orientation. Several of the institutes are sponsored by business associations, and teaching includes private instruction, special courses and cross-cultural training for companies.

One of the signs of true network synergy and network strategy evident in the CI initiative is the collaborative efforts that result in value-added knowledge creation. Several CI reports contain information on teaching and cultural activities that suggest collaboration leading to knowledge creation. For example, from the CI at Honam University of Korea: "This course book has been compiled on the basis of the examination of various Chinese teaching materials and the combination of different comments on the various teaching materials by netizens."<sup>35</sup> Another Korean university (Chungnam National University) held a conference on "Exchanging Experience" between Confucius Institutes in Korea and Japan. Similarly, the Michigan State University CI website highlights several of its innovations in teaching: "[MSU] was the first to offer online Mandarin courses for high school students. It was the first to design and offer community college level courses in the virtual environment Second Life. It was also the first to release a Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) for teaching language and culture."<sup>36</sup>

While China's CI initiative enjoys credibility with narrative and identity advantages in Chinese language instruction, negative perceptions of China's political system can adversely affect the network strategy, particularly in Western Europe and the United States. Whereas network structure and network synergy are primarily relationship-based, network strategy is primarily information-based. The CI initiative also straddles a fine line between promoting language and culture as a positive step and being perceived as a threat by other linguistic and cultural groups. The CI initiative must take care through network strategy not to become a victim of its own success. How effectively the CI initiative is able to mediate perceptions of an ever-expanding language and cultural program will rest on effective network strategy.

### **Insights & Lessons**

At a time of shrinking resources in public and cultural diplomacy, understanding how a network collaborative process can help create



initiatives that sustain themselves, and draw upon member resources and synergy to expand their reach and effectiveness, will become increasingly important. In this regard, China's CI initiative offers several insights and lessons.

First, the CI initiative offers a concrete model of how to build a network-based cultural diplomacy project. In recent years, there have been increased calls for "network public diplomacy" by scholars and policy makers. However, to date, there appears to be little understanding of the dynamics of what network-based public diplomacy initiatives entail, what they look like, or how to design and implement them. Many diplomacy initiatives stop at the structural level: they link the various facets, institutes, and partners on paper, in cyberspace, or through social media with little regard for how or why the entities are connected, what activities they do together, or how they interact.

The CI initiative highlights the importance of the underlying relational processes—internal and external relationship-building and incorporation of diversity—that create network synergy. Failure of a network initiative to cultivate these relational processes may result in the collapse of the network as a dynamic organism. Without internal bonding, the network may become a nebulous, undefined group of individuals working independently or even at cross-purposes with other network members. Without external relationship-building, the network may not be able to sustain its internal vitality or external legitimacy and recognition. Failure to incorporate diversity, represented by the challenge of change and alternate perspectives, the network becomes static, rigid, and ultimately vulnerable to breaking, decaying, or fragmenting. A sponsor may be able to sustain the network, but it will most likely require substantial investment of resources to essentially do what a dynamic network organism should be able to do on its own, that is, grow and sustain itself. With a vibrant relational dynamic, the network may excel well beyond a sponsor's initial investments and expectations.

Second, China's CI initiative helps illustrate the phenomenon of collaboration. Whereas network is a structure, collaboration is a process. In their study of the different layers of public diplomacy activities, Cowan and Arsenault found numerous examples of one-way monologues, and a growing list of dialogue initiatives, but they did not find as many collaborative initiatives.<sup>37</sup> The CI initiative illustrates some of the distinguishing features of collaboration. Collaboration goes beyond "dialogue" and "exchange" of information and cultural resources that parties may already possess to generating knowledge and insights that neither had before. Collaboration views diversity and diverse perspectives not as a barrier to overcome or manage, but as a source of insight and synergy through which to discover new uses from familiar or existing resources. Collaboration moves the level of engagement from participation in an initiative to a feeling of ownership.<sup>38</sup> Ownership often leads to long-term commitment and problem-solving, which can in turn lead to project sustainability beyond the needed infusion of sources from the original sponsor.

Third, the CI initiative may be an example of a relational perspective on soft power. Nye's concept of soft power and public diplomacy scholarship views soft power as an attribute of the entity itself. The power or attractiveness lies within the resource or culture. However, the CI initiative does not rely on the inherent appeal of the Chinese language or culture. In fact, both may be daunting. The CI's appeal and power emerge through the network communication approach that generates a relational structure and relational dynamic. This study has illustrated China's forte in relational dynamics in cultural diplomacy. Other scholars have noted a similar relational emphasis in describing China's multi-layered diplomacy in Africa<sup>39</sup> or its "mandala" approach to international relations.<sup>40</sup> Hayden, in his comparative study of soft power, spoke of China's soft power along the lines of "social power."<sup>41</sup>

Finally, China's CI initiative provides an important window onto the Chinese contribution not just to a relational perspective of cultural diplomacy, but also to a relational and cultural understanding of public diplomacy. The consensus emerging

in Western scholarship is that public diplomacy, which focuses primarily on policies with the goal of advocacy and influence, should be separate from cultural diplomacy, which is more relationship-based with a focus on mutual understanding. This distinction may not be as pronounced in a Chinese model; both culture and relations appear central to Chinese diplomacy. Writing in 2008, Yiwei Wang suggested that Chinese public diplomacy had its own characteristics that were closer to the relational model of France than the U.S. model.<sup>42</sup> Li Zhiyong places culture even more centrally, arguing that “the original form of public diplomacy in China is not international propaganda – as other scholars claim—but cultural diplomacy.”<sup>43</sup>

The reason for assumed links between culture, relations, and diplomacy may stem from China’s view of itself and its millennial experience of cultivating diplomatic relations with other powers. Public and cultural diplomacy are relatively recent diplomatic innovations, emerging as state-based activities of the contemporary Western experience. Rather than viewing itself strictly in state-based terms, Wang and other scholars have noted that China sees itself as a civilization defined by its culture.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, as noted Chinese scholar John King Fairbanks observed, “Chinese influence abroad was based on commerce and culture rather than on military power.”<sup>45</sup> In this respect, while the CI institute initiative may be new, China’s practice of spreading its language and culture is not new, but is based on the premise of learning about other cultures and civilizations and cultivating relational ties. Appreciating the importance of culture and relationships and China’s networked communication approach to building soft power components may be the most valuable insight and lesson from China’s CI initiative.

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## **Authenticating the Nation: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power**

by Jennifer Hubbert

At the heart of analytical debates on soft power remains a concern for semantic security on several levels, defining the constitution of soft power and categorizing whether certain soft power activities are a means to an end or ends in and of themselves. However, if, as political and cultural analysts, we are to take seriously global claims of soft power as an effective or even potential tool of public diplomacy, we must not only examine the transnational intentions of the particular policy formations—what “counts” as soft power and what are its image-enhancing targets—but also the specific projects in which these intentions are embedded and enacted. Thus, both methodologically and theoretically, it is key to consider not only the political visualizations of soft power but also the trans-local imaginations and alliances they render both achievable and inconceivable.

This paper considers the implications of this claim through an examination of China's rapidly expanding Confucius Institutes (CI) program, one of the nation's central mechanisms for the constitution of soft power.<sup>1</sup> CIs are Chinese government-funded international language and culture programs, modeled on European programs such as Alliance Française and the Cervantes Institutes. They are unique in that they are located within existing schools and universities, rather than as stand-alone organizations, and are directly managed by a branch of the central government. Support for the programs includes salaries for the teaching staff from China, curricular materials for students and reference materials for libraries, and cultural exchanges such as kung fu masters and song and dance troupes. CIs also fund annual conferences in China for American school administrators. This paper will analyze one of these support programs, the CI-funded “Chinese Bridge Summer Camp.” These are 17-day tours of China for high school students who are learning Chinese under the auspices of the Confucius Institutes. With an eye to the empirical, this analysis will examine how policy is “peopled”<sup>2</sup> on the receiving end of the process. How, I ask, are we to understand

the junctures and disjunctures of transnational policy-making and implementation in both structure and practice?

These tours, the CI mission statement informs us, are intended to “promote exchange between the youth of China and the United States and enhance the understanding of American high school students of Chinese language and culture, thus to stimulate their interest in Chinese learning.”<sup>3</sup> This summer bridge mission mirrors general CI bylaws, Chinese media reports, and political speeches that laud the CI program for its promotion of Chinese language and culture in the interests of international trade relations and global multiculturalism. Yet, as both CI central administration and other government officials have made clear, the CI program is also explicitly intended to create an improved global image in the face of concurrent discourses that pose China as a threat to global well-being. As National People’s Congress member Hu Youqing explained, “Promoting the use of Chinese among overseas people has gone beyond purely cultural issues...It can help build up our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country’s soft power.”<sup>4</sup> CIs are thus mechanisms to *build* soft power by creating attraction to Chinese culture, but also to *wield* soft power through encouraging targets to understand China as an object of desire.

In these summer tours, the CIs rely upon two policy mechanisms to both establish soft power and redeem its efficacy. One I call “witnessing the modern” and the other the “embodied performance of tradition.” On the one hand, students are provided with a multitude of experiences that allow them to “witness” the tangible results of nation-building—of China’s fast-track modernization—thus locating China as a developed nation among peers.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, students are asked to experience soft power through hands-on involvement, performing traditional culture in a variety of ways that include stage presentations and practicing classic art forms. This is an intended “politics of affect” through which students are meant to demonstrate a desire for things China through “mimetic cultural performance.”<sup>6</sup> One thus witnesses the modern and practices the traditional as a comprehensive package designed to link the two

forms of experience as ineluctably entangled in a causal relationship and to interpellate the students as both “appreciating” and “desiring” subjects, with China as the object of aspiration. Ultimately, I argue that China’s attempts to build and promote soft power in these programs have both intended and contradictory effects, frequently rendering the object “China” problematic, while leaving “Chinese” as a an entity of desire. To enhance its nation-building process, China clearly covets the desire of the global community. However, as we will see below, CI soft power efforts may leave Chinese culture intact as an intended soft power attraction, but only when divorced from the broader intended object of desire—China—itself.

I was a chaperone for one of the Summer Bridge tours in 2013. What follows is an extended description of that excursion to provide the context for an assessment of the intended production of soft power. The journey to China went relatively smoothly. We gathered, 26 high school students and three chaperones at the airport at noon, sporting matching t-shirts that advertised our CI benefactor. After clearing security with minimal difficulty we boarded an airplane bound for Beijing. One girl fainted on the plane, while several others drowned themselves in the limitless supply of caffeinated beverages. A layover in Tokyo offered the opportunity for a gleeful cluster of students to avail themselves of “local” culture in the form of a Japanese McDonalds. The others gathered around the chaperones in the boarding area, chatting about what to expect when we finally landed on Chinese soil. Questions about bathroom options dominated the conversation. “Will we be able to shower every day?” one of the students asked, and I was not surprised by the groans elicited by one of my fellow chaperones informing the students that yes indeed, there would be many squat toilets. She added, “Well, you are going there partially for the experience too.”

We finally arrived at our destination, a boarding school on the outskirts of Beijing, well after midnight. A massive statue of Confucius, rendered in marble, greeted us at the entrance. While students were shuffled off to bed, we chaperones were ushered down a cavernous hallway decorated on one side with a mural of

China's cultural glories superimposed with images of its aerospace industry and a bullet train. After gathering in a large conference room, a representative from Hanban, the governmental organization that runs the Confucius Institute program, welcomed us to Beijing and introduced us to China. "The Great Wall is a famous symbol," she informed us, "but now Beijing is a successful and modern city. It successfully held the Olympics...I'm so glad you find Chinese culture so amazing." Her speech, like the mural on the wall, exemplified what I have come to label in a different context China's "exceptionalist narrative of modernity."<sup>77</sup> This narrative links contemporary and future progress to past glory in a linear model that weds historical, "traditional" practices and belief systems to contemporary economic growth and technological advancement in a manner that positions China as an innovative leader of the global community.



Mural at boarding school. Photo by J. Hubbert

After two days in Beijing, students in the summer program were farmed out to various cities in China. On our group's first day outside of the capital, we boarded a bus for a long ride to the outskirts of town. The university had built an immense new campus in the suburbs, its

expansive spaces dotted with impressive-looking edifices sheathed in gray and brown marble. We were toured through the new library, a spectacular, multi-storied gray stone building, replete with both floor-to-ceiling stacks of books and journals and the latest in computer technology. Plastic covered much of the interior. Besides the tour group, no one else was in the library and our footfalls reverberated through the long, high-ceilinged corridors. The campus itself was similar—eerily depleted of the humans and bicycles that populate most Chinese campuses. Thoughts of Potemkin villages crossed my mind and students began to grouse, wondering about the point of the excursion and questioning the need to remain next to the guides. “It’s all so controlled,” one of them grumbled.

Our excursions the next day were to a textile museum and an airplane factory. Our route there took us down vast, newly-constructed thoroughfares and past a Lamborghini dealership. Aside from a small army of landscapers working the green spaces by the sidewalks, there were few people or cars in the area. We spent an hour and a half in the air-conditioned textile museum, during which time we learned that China was already weaving fabric during the Neolithic period and that by the 1930s, China had garnered a large share of the global textile market by employing sophisticated processing techniques that had surpassed those of Japan and England. The tour guide then explained however, that the Japanese invaded and assumed control over two-thirds of the textile factories and later the Guomindang appropriated all the textile factories as they fled to Taiwan. Her explanation of China’s history mirrored the popular “century of humiliation” narrative that locates the onset of China’s modernity in episodes of humiliation and tragedy rather than in moments of triumph.<sup>8</sup>

As we exited the museum, two of the students asked me why the tour guide “seems to leave out stuff and make it always seem like they [the Chinese] are the good guys.” I looked around to see most of the other students chatting in pairs away from the displays or playing on the various electronic devices they had brought from home. After we left the museum, we drove for a few miles and then

pulled into a deserted parking lot. Lunch was consumed on the bus after employees from McDonalds climbed aboard carrying cardboard boxes full of cold Big Macs and French fries and lukewarm sodas. As we ate, the student sitting next to me complained, "I didn't come to China to eat McDonalds; I came to China to eat Chinese food," his desperate dash to the Tokyo McDonalds clearly forgotten.

Next we headed to the airplane assembly factory, a joint venture with a western aviation company. Before we entered, our guides gathered us in front of a massive corporate sign and unfurled a 20-foot banner that branded us as members of the CI summer bridge program. The official photographer simultaneously documented our presence alongside China's accomplishments in the field of aviation. The constant presence of the photographer and the CI banner, and the subsequent evening airing of the photos and videos on local TV stations, allowed domestic citizens to do their own "witnessing," beholding foreigners appreciating China under the tutelage and beneficence of the CI program.

As we returned to the hotel, I was pelted with questions about why, when students were expecting to study Chinese and learn about China, we spent a long day visiting a textile history museum and an airplane assembly factory. We were only three days into our 17-day excursion and the incessant group photography, the long bus rides, and the didacticism were already wearing on student nerves. "My mom tricked me into coming here," one student moaned to me. The CI program's categories and opportunities for witnessing had produced "zones of boredom and unreadability," as Anna Tsing notes in a different context.<sup>9</sup> Powerful and even charismatic evidentiary moments of categorization and validation from the perspective of CI attempts to construct appreciation for China, such as airplane factories and textile museums, were not read by students as identification but as betrayal and imprisonment. Another student informed me, "It feels like jail." Efforts to construct common identification through mobilizing China as belonging to the category of the universal failed to resonate with American students, who were seeking particularity rather than recognition. Yet as we will see below, even when the CI

offered particularity, through the embodied performance of tradition, there remained a level of incommensurability between the CI model of particularity and that desired and/or expected by the students. The frames of reference through which the different actors attempted to create value remained mutually illegible.

The CIs' second mechanism to construct soft power, the embodied performance of tradition, also failed to resonate with the students, for the form of particularity it involved highlighted the paradoxical notions of authenticity that the various actors brought to the setting. On most days, following several hours of Chinese instruction, students were gathered into a common area for lectures on traditional arts and crafts that they later practiced themselves. The topics included examples of what Geremie Barmé<sup>10</sup> felicitously calls "History Channel-friendly" Chinese culture: globally available symbols of recognition that locate value in an essentialized and exoticized but depoliticized and palatable past.

Such activities are staple practices for CIs around the world, and students who had been studying Chinese had "performed" China this way many times before. One afternoon on opera mask-painting day, alongside eye-rolling and nap-taking, students took poetic license and several of the resulting masks more closely resembled characters from *Planet of the Apes* and *Batman* rather than standard Chinese opera characters. Nonetheless, the activity was featured during our send-off ceremony in a video the host CI produced, entitled "Achievements of the Summer Camp." Although many of the students were phenotypically Chinese, including adoptees from China or children of immigrant parents, this video featured close-ups almost entirely of Caucasian and/or African-American students. The racial connotations evident in this video emerged in multiple contexts through the CI program, locating a "target" policy audience largely in the white body.<sup>11</sup> Yet, while being "removed" from the picture, in this case literally, the Chinese-American students by and large rejected the "brother" and "sister" appellations they were subject to while being called upon to purchase products in public markets or in the expectation that they felt some sort of "natural" affinity for



China.<sup>12</sup> Their responses to the program reinforced instead their own structural “whiteness” as members of a middle class who, similar to their Caucasian counterparts, failed to engage with the CIs’ affective offerings that were intended to produce appreciation.

Here the forms of practice intended to produce admiration and thus soft power backfired in multiple registers, removing the phenotypically Asian students as valid objects of a politics of affect. At the same time, effectiveness was limited through defining authenticity as “Culture with a capital C,” in the form of the wearied traditional art project that failed to produce admiration and appreciation. In contrast, students were hoping for “culture with an anthropological lower case c,” that conflicting moment of particularity through which, as is described below, students constructed value, but not in the form the CI program intended and/or desired.

Evening activities helped illuminate some of the disparate assumptions and objectives of the China tour. Highly-scripted daytimes often ended with students, tired and frustrated, wandering around the hotel hallways in search of experiences that seemed less derivative and indistinct. Our hotel was located in a newly emerging area of town, affording little in the way of entertainment and commerce. An outdoor night market at the end of the road selling street food offered one of the few local diversions other than an adjacent convenience store. I found myself the frequent leader of unscripted nighttime excursions to the market, a place understood by students as authentic “China.” On one level, the market excursions provided students with an opportunity to experience what they perceived to be a form of Chinese authenticity in which snacking on unidentified creatures roasted on a stick stood in for the “real.” Such experiences provided value and desire, but not of the sort intended by CI efforts to turn culture into soft power. Value here was indicated by a margin of difference that could not be overcome by the host university’s endeavors to render students comfortable and compatible through providing them with the familiar. This “familiar” included not only the ultra-modern university campus and

avant-garde architecture of the Beijing capital, but also cold French fries at breakfast and warm milk at dinner, attempts at modernity that were recognized by students, as Homi Bhabha argues in his studies of postcolonial mimicry, as “not quite.”<sup>13</sup> Where the affective labor of culture consumption, theoretically immanent through the practice of traditional arts, failed to resonate with student constructions of authenticity, it worked through consumption of the forbidden, the off-plan, the exotic unknown. Yet the value was not in the object of consumption itself, typically proclaimed “gross” by most of those who consumed it, but in the *act* of consumption, locating value in the body of the literal eater of the other.<sup>14</sup> Here the students performed for each other and for the recipients of their Instagrams back home, mugging grimaces for the camera after ingesting deep fried silkworm, or smirking with octopus legs protruding awkwardly from the corners of their mouths. When the students were required by the CI program to compose essays at the end of their stay, those who wrote about the night market were quickly instructed to amend their descriptions—to remove the night market adventures and highlight instead Hanban-sanctioned activities that communicated an authorized exemplarity of China as peaceful and first world, not as a land of bizarre indigestibles.

I conclude this schematic overview with a few brief comments on the global production of soft power. This CI-sponsored tour I have analyzed above brought long-term policy targets into an “identity journey”<sup>15</sup> that exhibited a China devoid of its contentious place in global political exchanges, one that defined the nation through an exceptionalist narrative of commensurability and difference. Its claims of similarity were crafted to create an imagined community beyond representations of difference that were so essentialist and innocuous as to lie outside claims of value production in the contemporary world order.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, in attempts to build soft power, intention fails to guarantee affirmative reception, for this particular structuring of desire failed to resonate with policy targets’ own locally-embedded expectations for identity construction through prefigured notions of authenticity and value.

Yet at the same time, it remains important to heed wider, transnational structures of power beyond the immediate realm. I am reminded here of anthropologist Thomas Looser's discussion of New York University's establishment of a "global university" in Abu Dhabi where instruction is in English and the only foreign languages offered are Arabic and Chinese.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, before students leave China, after the Summer Bridge scheduled programs are completed, they fill out an exit survey that includes, among many others, the questions "Do you intend to further your study in China?" and "If not, do you plan to learn Chinese in the future?" Interestingly, many of the students answered the first question in the negative and the second in the positive, not intending on studying Chinese within China in the future but continuing to learn the language. As I have explored elsewhere, this "desire" for Chinese may be understood as less a function of the CI program itself than a result of global economic forces in which Chinese offers a potential mechanism for empowerment in the domestic U.S. context.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the "Chineseness" of the Chinese language is less relevant for its link to "China" than it is for its ability to differentiate students who find themselves confronting a recession-prone society in which successful futures are increasingly privatized within rapid shifts of late capitalism that quickly make certain kinds of knowledge obsolete as a source of future success.<sup>19</sup> Thus, students often study Chinese as a "magic bullet" to enhance the chance of gaining admission to Stanford or a job at Nike, rather than having a predilection for the language or its national host. Within this context, Chinese emerges as the latest do-it-yourself project<sup>20</sup> to manage an unknown and worrisome future. Language and nation become unmoored here, clearly beyond the intentions of soft power policy, but perhaps in its ultimate interest.

## Endnotes

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## **The Globalization of Chinese Soft Power: Confucius Institutes in South Africa**

by Falk Hartig

Confucius Institutes (CIs) are currently the most prominent—and probably most controversial—tool of China's cultural diplomacy. Their goal is to teach Chinese language and introduce Chinese culture, thereby increasing mutual awareness and understanding between China and the rest of the world. They are also intended to shape China's image globally.

Since the first CI was established in late 2004 in Seoul, there has been an enormous, even precipitous,<sup>1</sup> growth in their number. By May, 2014 Hanban had established 446 Confucius Institutes and 665 Confucius Classrooms worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Considering that for example, Germany's Goethe Institute has 158 institutes in 93 countries, these are impressive numbers which call for critical analysis of these new actors in cultural diplomacy. By examining Confucius Institutes in South Africa, this paper aims to explore China's cultural diplomacy efforts in emerging countries. Its objective is also to increase understanding of the opportunities and challenges that cultural diplomacy institutions face in contemporary times.

This analysis begins with a brief conceptual discussion to clarify cultural diplomacy and related concepts. It then introduces Confucius Institutes and outlines their specific role in Africa before turning to the case of South Africa.

### **Conceptual Framework: Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Foreign Aid**

In order to contextualize the operations of Confucius Institutes in South Africa, it is important to first establish a preliminary theoretical framework. The discourse on cultural diplomacy is a "semantic muddle"<sup>3</sup> characterized by confusion about what cultural diplomacy actually is and how it relates to other concepts. Following



Cull, Mark, and others, I understand cultural diplomacy as a part of public diplomacy that is concerned with the use of both cultural artifacts and cultural activities. Cull describes cultural diplomacy as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad.”<sup>4</sup> One of the most prominent instruments states have at hand in this regard is the presence of cultural institutes abroad, such as the British Council, Goethe Institute, and Confucius Institutes.

As a component of the broader concept of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy can be understood as a means through which soft power is wielded. Soft power itself is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”<sup>5</sup> The absence of a shared definition<sup>6</sup> leads to a certain conceptual ambiguity and critical engagement with Nye’s concept. Li Mingjiang, for example, argues that “the key to whether a certain power source becomes soft or hard is *how* a state (or any other actor) *uses* its power”<sup>7</sup> (emphasis in original). Li argues in favor of a “‘soft use of power’ approach.”<sup>8</sup> He rejects Nye’s resource-based definition and sees a behavior-based definition as more suitable. Li argues that “soft power lies in the soft use of power to increase a state’s attraction, persuasiveness, and appeal.”<sup>9</sup> To people affected by the enormous tsunami in 2004, the foreign naval forces which came to their rescue were a source of soft, not hard, power. This discussion points to the question of soft power resources or soft power instruments. According to Nye, soft power “arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas, and policies”<sup>10</sup> and his early assessment of soft power excluded “elements like investment and trade and formal diplomacy and aid.”<sup>11</sup>

Carol Lancaster, a former U.S. foreign aid official, defines foreign aid as “a voluntary transfer of public resources, from a government to another independent government, to an NGO, or to an international organization [...] with at least a 25 percent grant element, one goal of which is to better the human condition in the country receiving the aid.”<sup>12</sup> According to Lancaster, humanitarianism and altruism

are at least partly an objective for giving aid, but it may have other functions as well: as a gesture of diplomatic approval, to strengthen a military ally, to reward a government for behavior desired by the donor, to extend the donor's cultural influence, to provide infrastructure needed by the donor for resource extraction from the recipient country, or to gain other kinds of commercial access.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that development aid is a source of soft power is particularly interesting in the context of China. Ingrid d'Hooghe notes that development aid, although limited, is one source of China's soft power,<sup>14</sup> while according to Kurlantzick, China "enunciates a broader idea of soft power than did Nye. For the Chinese, soft power means anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment [...]."<sup>15</sup>

### **China's Foreign Aid to Africa**

With China's rise, trade and political links between Africa and China have been escalating at an astonishing rate.<sup>16</sup> Sino-African relations are an increasingly significant feature of world politics as China's hunger for energy resources grows. Many African countries seek a partner that, unlike the West, does not worry about democracy and transparency, or impose political conditions on economic relations.<sup>17</sup> China's economic and political reach is redefining Africa's traditional ties with the international community. One of the most pressing questions is whether China's engagement in Africa will be as a development partner, economic competitor, or new hegemony.<sup>18</sup>

In 2011, China released its first White Paper on Foreign Aid, outlining why and how China supports other countries through aid programs: "Through foreign aid, China has consolidated friendly relations and economic and trade cooperation with other developing countries, promoted South-South cooperation, and contributed to the common development of mankind." One of the basic features of China's foreign aid policy, of particular relevance to the study of

Confucius Institutes, is that of helping “recipient countries build up their self-development capacity [and] laying a solid foundation for their economic and social development.”<sup>19</sup>

Chinese foreign aid is delivered in eight forms: complete projects, goods and materials, technical cooperation, human resource development cooperation, medical teams sent abroad, emergency humanitarian aid, volunteer programs in foreign countries, and debt relief. Of particular interest here is the volunteer program for which China “selects volunteers and sends them to other developing countries to serve the local people in education, medical and health care and some other social sectors. The volunteers China now sends mainly include young volunteers and Chinese-language teachers.”<sup>20</sup>

In 2003, China started to dispatch volunteer Chinese-language teachers. By the end of 2009, it had dispatched 7,590 Chinese-language teachers to over 70 countries.

As the focus on volunteer language teachers suggests, education plays an important role in China’s overall foreign aid strategy.<sup>21</sup> Most aid for education is spent on building schools, providing teaching equipment and materials, dispatching teachers, training teachers and interns from other developing countries, and offering government scholarships to students from other developing countries to study in China. Education aid dates back to the 1950s and 1960s when China started to dispatch language teachers to other developing countries. In recent years, as the White Paper notes, the People’s Republic of China has strengthened its aid for education in other developing countries,

...helping them build nearly 100 rural primary schools, increasing government scholarships and the number of teachers who come to receive training in China, dispatching more Chinese teachers abroad to help build up the weak academic disciplines, and enhancing cooperation with other developing countries in vocational, technical education and distance education.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of 2009, China had helped other developing countries build more than 130 schools, and funded 70,627 students from 119 developing countries to study in China. In 2009 alone, it extended scholarships to 11,185 foreign students to study in China. Furthermore, China has dispatched nearly 10,000 Chinese teachers to other developing countries, and trained more than 10,000 principals and teachers in those countries.<sup>23</sup>

All of these efforts can be understood as part of China's public diplomacy strategy. Some scholars even argue that "Africa is perhaps the most important testing ground for the promotion of Chinese soft power."<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup>

There cannot be any doubt that "China is now a powerful force in Africa, and the Chinese are not going away."<sup>26</sup> While Western observers are concerned with the question of whether China will create new modes of dependencies through its aid projects, Chinese scholars argue that China's aid to Africa is based on the principles of sustainability and "mutual benefit rather than charity."<sup>27</sup> In her study of China's aid and economic cooperation with Africa, Deborah Bräutigam concludes that "China's rise in Africa is cause for some concern, but it need not evoke the level of fear and alarm raised by some who have condemned China's aid and engagement as destabilizing, bad for governance, and unlikely to help Africa to end poverty."<sup>28</sup> Bräutigam argues that many of the fears about Chinese aid and engagement "are misinformed, the alarm out of proportion," especially because "China's aid is *not* huge." In fact, the traditional donors give far more aid to Africa and China's export credits are much larger than its aid, but not as large as commonly believed<sup>29</sup> (emphasis in original).

According to a more recent study, China's official aid to Africa reached \$75 billion between 2000 and 2011, with the establishment of 1,673 Chinese-backed or financed projects in 50 African countries.<sup>30</sup> Observers conclude that China's financial commitments "are significantly larger than previous estimates of the country's development finance, though still less than the estimated \$90bn

the U.S. committed over that period.”<sup>31</sup> Another study on China’s Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities (FAGIA) notes that between “2001 and 2011, 49 countries in Africa received approximately \$175 billion dollars in pledged assistance, making it the second largest regional recipient of aid behind Latin America with \$186 billion.”<sup>32</sup> The reason for the striking difference of \$100 billion U.S. is that both studies use different categories, because in general it is not clear what counts as Chinese aid.<sup>33</sup> This lack of clarity is related to the fact that the Chinese government “releases very little information on its foreign aid activities, which remain state secrets.”<sup>34</sup>

Independently, while some observers argue that “the bottom line is China’s thirst for natural resources, others argue Beijing’s development projects on the continent—from infrastructure to debt relief to providing medical support—are also part of a public diplomacy strategy to build up goodwill and international support for the future.”<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Strange et al note that from 2000 to 2011 there were 103 official development assistance projects in education for which China spent U.S. \$71 million.<sup>36</sup> Chinese education and training programs target students from across the continent. These projects “are all about diplomacy, about soft power ... like the Alliance Française and the British Council ... all about presenting China as an important global player. All the big countries do this”<sup>37</sup> Wolf et al directly mention Confucius Institutes in this context although they state that Confucius Institutes’ connections with FAGIA “are somewhat tenuous”<sup>38</sup> Wolf et al note that:

CIIs also assist China’s domestic efforts to finance and expand education of undergraduate students and graduate students from foreign countries. Although CI funding levels are not publicized, they are negligible compared to the scale of FAGIA. Nevertheless, they share with FAGIA the aim of enhancing China’s appeal, attractiveness, and influence in the global arena—hence, its “soft power.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Confucius Institutes and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)**

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is the official forum between the People's Republic of China and states in Africa. Established in October 2000, it is the first multilateral, consultative mechanism between China and Africa and is a platform for dialogue as well as a mechanism for cooperation.<sup>40</sup> According to Chinese scholars, unlike “the many ‘clubs’ around the world that allegedly provide assistance for development in Africa, FOCAC does not attempt to exhibit its work like a showcase for acts of benevolence. Rather it is a low key, concrete, stable and yet very important platform to build relations between China and African countries.”<sup>41</sup>

So far there have been five summits, with the most recent meeting held in July, 2012 in Beijing. Previous summits were held in October, 2000 in Beijing, December, 2003 in Addis Ababa, November, 2006 in Beijing, and November, 2009 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. The Confucius Institutes are directly mentioned in at least three documents from the summits, reflecting their important position in China's strategy.

The latest document, entitled “The Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2013–2015),” points out that the “two sides will continue to promote the establishment and development of the Confucius Institute and Confucius Classrooms in Africa. China will extend active support in terms of teaching staff, personnel training and teaching materials and equipment.”<sup>42</sup> This direct reference is one of the very few cases where CIs are officially mentioned in a foreign policy context, and evidence that CIs are part of China's broader foreign relations policy.

The potential importance of Confucius Institutes in the context of China's foreign aid to African higher education becomes more obvious when one considers the absence of Chinese Studies in Africa. While numerous European and North American higher

education institutions have a long history of studying Sinology, or in more contemporary terms: China Studies, so far there is only one Mandarin program with resident teachers with a national curriculum on the African continent at Stellenbosch University.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, there is currently only one research center dedicated to the research of contemporary China, the Center for Chinese Studies, also at Stellenbosch University. The lack of either tradition or infrastructure to engage with China on an academic level in Africa suggests that Confucius Institutes could play a more prominent role on the African continent, and could be more influential there than in other parts of the world. To address these questions, the second part of the paper takes a closer look at CIs' activities in South Africa, currently the country with the most CIs, in four locations: Stellenbosch University, Rhodes University, the University of Cape Town, and Durban University of Technology (which, during the course of my field research in late 2013, was still in the making).

### **Confucius Institutes in South Africa**

The People's Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa established diplomatic relations on January 1, 1998. Since then, bilateral relations between the two countries have continued to develop. Over the last decade, China has become South Africa's biggest trading partner, with increasing amounts of foreign direct investments.<sup>44</sup> According to the study of Strange et al, South Africa was the tenth largest recipient of China's aid between 2000 and 2011, receiving U.S. \$2.3 billion.<sup>45</sup>

In celebration of the 15th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Chinese ambassador to South Africa noted that "China and South Africa have been supporting each other in common development in the past 15 years. We are good friends, good brothers, and good partners. Currently, the international landscape, as well as both our two countries, is undergoing profound changes. This brings major opportunities to the development of our bilateral relationship."<sup>46</sup> He also pointed out that emerging economies represented by the 'BRICS' are coordinating to address challenges

together. By enhancing their solidarity, they remain the engine for global economic development. In this regard, the China-South Africa relationship has become one of the best examples of cooperation between developing countries.<sup>47</sup> Considering this along with the earlier statements by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, as well as China's rhetoric on foreign aid, what role might the CI play in strengthening this cooperation?

### Activities of CIs in South Africa

Overall, the South African CIs are doing what the Hanban mission statement notes, namely teaching Chinese language and introducing Chinese culture. Furthermore, they are engaging or are about to start other operations, such as developing local teaching materials or local teachers' training tasks which are also encouraged by Hanban. Even CI directors themselves see one of CIs' tasks as introducing another picture of China to the broader SA audience/public.

#### *Language teaching*

The main activity of South African CIs is language teaching, which is not too surprising. What is interesting, however, is the fact that all three CIs offer for-credit courses at their partner universities and courses for schools in the surrounding areas.<sup>48</sup>

The Stellenbosch CI offers for-credit courses for degree students and undergraduates, and non-credit courses for college, secondary, and primary students, as well as enthusiasts on campus and in the community, in ten satellite schools. According to the CI's most recent work report, the number of registered learners was 395 in 2011, 659 in 2012, and 812 in 2013.

In addition to promoting Chinese at high schools, in 2013 the CI at Cape Town University offered for-credit "Chinese I" and "Chinese II" courses through the School of Languages and Literatures. The total enrolment for 2013 was 127, which was described as a slight increase from 2012.



At Rhodes University in Grahamstown, Chinese Studies is hosted by the CI and is one of the major subjects at the School of Languages. Chinese Studies has become an integral part of the university academic system. According to the latest work report and my conversations with directors, in 2013 the CI offered a module of Chinese Modern and Contemporary Fiction within the School's existing "Modern Fiction" course, with a focus on Mo Yan's short stories.

### *Cultural activities*

Like their CI counterparts in other areas of the world, the South African CIs conduct a number of cultural activities, including celebrations of Chinese holidays or traditional festival activities, introducing activities like tai chi or qigong, film screenings, calligraphy, paper cutting, and traditional Chinese medicine for interested audiences. They also organized photo exhibitions, Chinese song competitions, lectures, and seminars with academics and China experts. The Stellenbosch CI organized 70 cultural activities and academic conferences during 2013. One example was a lecture by Prof. Chen Xiaoguang, Vice President of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, on "100 Years of Chinese Songs."<sup>49</sup> The CIs at Cape Town and Rhodes University held a similar number of activities, with over 1000 participants in the latter's activities. The CI also held the 2013 Annual Rhodes University China Week on the Chinese experience in South Africa and hosted the visiting Students Art Troupe from Zhejiang Normal University on their tour of Africa.

### *CIs in South Africa and sensitive issues*

People in charge of the three South African CIs I visited are very aware of the heated debates surrounding CIs: debates about improper influence, propaganda accusations, and the like, and they clearly rejected the propaganda accusation. South Africans involved in CIs noted that they have flexibility in terms of what they can do, and said they bring in their own ideas without constraint. But they also agreed that it is unlikely that certain topics would be addressed at a CI, such as a debate about Falun Gong.

Throughout my research (which included information from CI people, internal documents, press reports, and conversations with scholars not affiliated to CIs), I did not come across topics or themes that would deserve the label “propaganda,” if the word is understood in its most negative and sinister interpretation. The problem with the assumption that CIs do propaganda for the Chinese party state, is that it is, of course, possible to present a particular topic in very different ways. South African CI affiliates argue that they are independent enough and smart enough to recognize whether the CCP wants them to use propaganda. While I would agree with this argument, it is also the case that normally CIs tend to stay on the safe side by not engaging too much with “sensitive” issues.

### **Conclusion: Confucius Institutes in South Africa**

Given that Confucius Institutes are directly linked to China's broader foreign aid efforts in Africa, and that they provide African students rare access to Chinese studies, the question is whether CIs might play a more prominent role in Africa than elsewhere.

Currently, the most concrete evidence is the fact that all CIs in South Africa offer for-credit language courses. However, CIs have (so far) too many practical problems and issues to reach their potential as an element of Chinese foreign policy. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether they intend to do so.

One of the most crucial issues concerns the lack of skilled teachers who are willing to go to Africa. Conversations with dispatched Chinese staff brought to light that even South Africa—notably different to other countries on the continent in terms of its standard of living—has a rather negative image in China, which makes it difficult to find teachers. On the one hand, teachers mentioned harsh living conditions which include loneliness, low food, and security concerns. On the other hand, they noted that when they arrived, they found South Africa better than expected: the clean air was one positive aspect several Chinese teachers mentioned. Some also stated that colleagues in other countries suffer much more than they do, and

that although South Africa was not their first choice, they were rather fortunate to end up there than elsewhere on the continent.

Another practical issue concerns the teaching materials sent by Beijing. These do not always meet local needs and requirements because they do not reflect the everyday reality of local learners. As a result, one South African CI started to develop local materials. As in other parts of the world, CIs in South Africa are attempting to train locals as Chinese teachers. Here, however, they are inhibited by the fact that South Africa does not have a tradition of Sinology studies at universities and so must train locals with the skills to become Chinese teachers. Thus, as one working report notes, "It is no wonder that there is a lack of appropriate local candidates for the position of Confucius Institute core teacher."<sup>50</sup>

In addition, the development of Chinese teaching sites at high schools is constrained by local foreign language policy restrictions which prevent secondary schools from offering more hours in Chinese. As Chinese is still not considered a valid subject of university study, secondary school interest in China studies remain at the cultural level, and it is difficult to develop language courses in depth.

The question of whether CIs in Africa might play a more prominent role relates to the frequent accusation that CIs are yet another form of "invasion" and "(neo) colonialism," as some African scholars claim.<sup>51</sup> As Cissé correctly observes, when it comes to China and Africa, "from the media, and sometimes even from researchers, a lot of ink and controversial/negative opinions are developed towards Sino-African relations."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, he asks: "Why is there a tacit understanding that Africans are 'indoctrinated' by Chinese language teachers, while others are immune to this?"<sup>53</sup> He argues that "[u]ndoubtedly Africans who learn Chinese via Confucius Institutes have an intellectual freedom and critical opinions to clearly differentiate their interest in Chinese language from China's political and economic engagement in the continent."<sup>54</sup> Addressing CI critics, he asks, "tell me why Confucius institutes are

regarded as more problematic in Africa than elsewhere—or what's the fuzz about learning Chinese?" (ibid.).

In order to advance the debate about Confucius Institutes, I would like to take up his points and provide some ideas of my own based on my fieldwork in Africa and past engagement with the topic of Confucius Institutes.<sup>55</sup> Firstly, I agree that Sino-African relations are normally described and reported in an overly negative way. Second, Cissé is absolutely correct that China's economic rise and modernization is one reason why more and more people are learning Chinese.

But is there, as Cissé suggests, a tacit understanding that Africans are "indoctrinated" by Chinese language teachers, while others are immune to this? I partially disagree, as the accusations brought forth towards Confucius Institutes in Africa are apparently the same elsewhere in the world. The major difference, in my understanding, is that CIs on the African continent face a fundamentally different starting point from those elsewhere, and therefore it is correct that "on the African continent, in almost all cases, you'll only have an opportunity to learn Mandarin through Confucius institutes."<sup>56</sup>

As for Cissé's claim that "Africans who learn Chinese via Confucius Institutes have an intellectual freedom and critical opinions to clearly differentiate their interest in Chinese language from China's political and economic engagement in the continent."<sup>57</sup> Africans are, of course, not helpless or passive individuals who cannot recognize Chinese communist propaganda or react against it. But most CIs in Africa normally start from scratch, working in communities with no previous exposure to Chinese, and this provides, at least theoretically, greater opportunities for CIs in Africa than elsewhere. While there are currently too many issues preventing the development of CIs across Africa, and the scale of the overall CI project is simply too small, this does not necessarily mean that this could not change in the coming years. But ultimately this will be up to people on the ground to critically engage with proposals from Hanban. As the South African case shows, there

is no reason that local African CI staff could not critically engage with Hanban as they do in other parts of the world. Ultimately, the lack of existing tradition and infrastructure to support China-related studies in Africa makes the continent ripe for opportunities for CIs.

**Appendix:** Global distribution of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms by the end of 2013<sup>58</sup>

	Confucius Institutes	Confucius Classrooms
Europe	149	153
The Americas	144	384
Asia	93	50
Africa	37	10
Oceania	17	49

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