

Cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics: The case of Confucius Institutes in Australia

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Abstract

Since 2004, China has set up more than 400 Confucius Institutes and 500 Confucius Classrooms in 108 countries to promote Chinese language and culture. Despite these impressive numbers, these institutions are still surprisingly understudied. This article uses Confucius Institutes in Australia as a case study to deepen the understanding of China's new cultural diplomacy tool. The article describes Confucius Institutes as a form of strategic stakeholder engagement and argues that this collaborative tool of cultural diplomacy depends heavily on the commitment of its local stakeholders.

Keywords: Confucius Institute, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, soft power, propaganda.

Introduction

'The Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world' said (outgoing) Chinese President Hu Jintao (2003) in an address to the Federal Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia in October 2003. Hu further stated that the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) is 'all the more eager to draw on the useful achievements of all civilisations' and that his country stands 'ready to step up cultural exchanges with the rest of the world in a joint promotion of cultural prosperity' (Hu 2003). This intensification of China's cultural exchanges with the world is the subject of this article. More precisely, the present article deals with Confucius Institutes (CIs), the cultural institutes set up by the Chinese government to promote Chinese language and cultural knowledge around the world.

From 2004 to late 2012, China has set up more than 400 CIs (and 500 Confucius Classrooms)¹ in 108 countries, but, despite this impressive number, scholarship dealing with these institutions is still lacking. The few works that approach CIs illustrate at least two weaknesses: first, there is confusion about the theoretical framework to analyse these cultural institutions; second, there is a lack of knowledge about the structure and activities of CIs. This article uses CIs in Australia as a case study to bridge these gaps.

To begin with, the first part of the article describes the connection between public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy and outlines two rival paradigms to analyse different communicative approaches of public diplomacy, namely the hierarchical and the network-based approaches (Hocking 2005). The article then introduces the concept of 'strategic stakeholder engagement' proposed by Rhonda

Zaharna (Zaharna 2010a, 2011a). The second part adapts this concept and applies it to the analysis of CIs, which can be understood as a ‘highly networked [cultural] diplomacy initiative’ (Zaharna 2010b, p. 208). The analysis focuses on the structural organisation and actual activities of CIs, which provide the most interesting aspects in relation to stakeholder engagement. The article argues that CIs as collaborative tools of cultural diplomacy heavily depend on the engagement and commitment of local stakeholders.

Notes on methods and sources

The main method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with managers and/or directors of CIs in Australia. At the time of writing this paper, there were 11 CIs in Australia and two more in the planning stage.² Out of these 11 plus two institutes, I interviewed managers/directors from seven established institutes and one person from one of the two universities currently establishing a CI.³ The interviews, conducted via telephone or face-to-face in March, May, and October 2011, lasted between 20 and 180 minutes and concerned topics related to the individual institutes as well as CIs in more general terms, and confidentiality was ensured to all participants. Furthermore, I attended the 6th Confucius Institute Conference in Beijing in December 2011 and conducted interviews with Chinese officials in charge of CIs and attended several panel discussions. In addition to the interviews, I analysed official and internal CI documents and consulted Chinese and non-Chinese literature.

How countries present themselves to the world: public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy

In 2002, the Chinese government started to think about setting up institutions to promote Chinese language teaching overseas (Nie 2008, p. 35; Li, R. 2008, p. 53). Two years later, the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), under the authority of the Chinese Ministry of Education, began to establish Confucius Institutes around the world to ‘promote the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and for different exchanges and co-operations, such as in educational and cultural fields, with the world’ (Confucius Institute Online, no date).⁴

Ever since the first CI was established in Seoul in late 2004⁵ there have been obscurities concerning the question of what these institutes do and what they actually are. Some see them as an instrument of Chinese public diplomacy (d’Hooghe 2007; Rawnsley 2009), cultural diplomacy (Anholt 2010; Cull 2008a; Wang & Lu 2008; Hartig 2012) or more broadly as part of China’s ‘soft power’ strategy (Gil 2009; Paradise 2009; Yang, R. 2010; Churchman 2011).⁶ Others—both academics and journalists—describe CIs as propaganda tools (Brady 2008; The Canadian Press 2007; Steffenhagen 2008; Hoare-Vance 2009), or compare them with ‘cultural crusades’ (Young 2009, p. 8). Leaving the propaganda debate aside, this article focuses on China’s smart approach to include international partners in its cultural diplomacy initiative, by applying Zaharna’s strategic stakeholder engagement concept of public diplomacy.

Although public diplomacy ‘is one of the most salient political communication issues in the 21st century’ (Snow & Taylor 2009, p. ix), it lacks a shared and

generally accepted definition (Gilboa 2008). Put simply, public diplomacy can be defined as ‘a country’s engagement and communication with foreign publics’ (Wang 2011, p. 3) and thereby as an instrument to activate a country’s soft power (Nye 2004; Melissen 2005). According to Cull (2008b, p. 33), the practice of public diplomacy can be divided into five elements—namely, ‘listing, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting’. Cultural diplomacy can be defined 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’ (ibid.).

The Chinese discourse around public and cultural diplomacy is characterised by a similar lack of clarity and there is no clear distinction between public diplomacy (*gonggong waijiao*) and cultural diplomacy (*wenhua waijiao*). Public diplomacy is mainly seen as a diplomatic activity organised and conducted by a state government and directed at the public in foreign countries (Yang, C. 2010, p. 186) in order to realise that state government’s national interests and to create a favourable international environment (Liu, B. no date). According to Zhang (2009, p. 13), this should be done by enhancing friendship with other nations through international cultural exchange and communication. For Zhao Qizheng, former director of the Information Office of the Chinese State Council, the task of China’s public diplomacy is to introduce China to the world and help foreigners to understand the real China (Zhao 2009, 2011). While some Chinese scholars understand cultural diplomacy as a part of public diplomacy, others see it the other way around and argue that public diplomacy emerged from cultural diplomacy. Either way, culture and cultural exchange are seen as an important part of a country’s foreign policy (Yang, C. 2010) and public or cultural diplomacy is the instrument to conduct this exchange and to make use of culture as an effective tool in the struggle of power and interest among nations, as it can be used to attract people of other countries (Li, Z. 2005).

This article takes the view that cultural diplomacy is a part of public diplomacy and therefore the different communicative approaches of public diplomacy can also be applied to cultural diplomacy.

How to communicate: diplomacy as a one-way street or two-way street

Hocking (2005, p. 35) identifies “two worlds” of public diplomacy’ with two rival paradigms: the hierarchical and the network-based approach. The hierarchical stresses the centrality of intergovernmental relations and top-down aligned bureaucratic systems resting on a realist model of public diplomacy as propaganda (Kemming 2009, p. 70). The network model provides a ‘fundamentally different picture of how diplomacy works in the twenty-first century’ and emphasises non-hierarchical cooperation and multidirectional flows of information (Hocking 2005, p. 37). Concerned with the communicative action, Zaharna similarly differentiates between a mass communication approach to public diplomacy and a network communication approach. Referring to Laswell’s classic model of communication, she describes the mass communication approach as a strategy that ‘relies on carefully crafted *messages*

disseminated via *mass media vehicles* to a *target audience* with the goal of *changing attitudes or behavior*' (Zaharna 2010b, p. 94, emphasis in original). The dynamics of this approach, centring on information production and dissemination in a one-way flow, differ drastically from 'a network communication approach which focuses on information exchange' (ibid., p. 97).

In contrast to the mass communication approach, which *begins* with a pre-determined message, the network paradigm *ends* with the message or story. Rather than trying to design a message independent of the intended audience and then use the mass media as a communication channel to cross the cultural barrier, networks *first* establish the structure and dynamics for effective communication channels, *then* members collaborate to craft the message. Because the message or story is co-created across cultures, it is not tied to any one culture. Rather than acting as a barrier or impediment, culture is incorporated into network dynamics and becomes a rich source of team-coalition synergy. With the addition of network synergy, a local story can evolve into a global master narrative, carrying with it the soft power that attracts and persuades across national and cultural borders. (ibid., p. 111, emphasis in original)

Traditionally, most nation-states have employed public diplomacy that involved one-way communication, following the simple sender–message–receiver model. As Zaharna (2011b, p. 6) points out, while this model is still 'omnipresent' there are moves away from linear approaches, reflected in a call for a *new public diplomacy*. The idea of a new public diplomacy was put forward by Jan Melissen, according to whom 'new public diplomacy moves away from [...] peddling information to foreigners and keeping the foreign press at bay, towards engaging with foreign audiences' (Melissen 2005, p. 22).

One of the most promising ways to engage with foreign audiences is to involve local stakeholders who know the respective local audience much better than cultural diplomats sent from abroad. Conducting public or cultural diplomacy with the help of local stakeholders not only provides advantages in order to craft projects and programs, but it is also helpful in terms of engagement with the local community. In the case of CIs, the engagement of local stakeholders makes it easier to secure external funding from local businesses. In this regard, Cowan and Arsenault (2008) argue that both monologue and dialogue are essential for public diplomacy but that collaboration as a third layer may be a more effective technique in certain instances. Monologue should be considered when a nation 'wants the people of the world to understand where it stands [and to do this] there may be no better vehicle than a governmental address of a document' (ibid., p. 13). In connection with this, China's occasionally published white papers or leader's speeches about foreign policy concepts such as Peaceful Rise or Harmonious World can be considered as a monologic component of public diplomacy. Monologue is critical for providing facts and information, but it has a limited ability to change perceptions. Therefore dialogue is important, first as a symbolic gesture and second 'as a mechanism for overcoming stereotypes and forging relationships across social

boundaries' (ibid., p. 20). Even more effective in engaging foreign publics, however, is cross-national collaboration.

Collaboration as a form of public diplomacy refers to initiatives in which participants from different nations participate in a project together. These projects can be short term with a clear endpoint, such as putting on a play or writing a piece of music; or larger in scale and long term such as side-by-side participation in natural disaster reconstruction efforts. (ibid., p. 21)

While this form of public diplomacy sometimes can be the most important form, it is not without weaknesses since many collaborations 'fail because a stakeholder feels disenfranchised, conflict derails the process, and/or parties either disagree or change their minds about the project goals' (ibid., p. 24).

Defined as 'initiatives that feature cross-national participation in a joint venture or project with a clearly defined goal' (ibid., p. 10), these collaborations can also be understood in the context of what Zaharna calls 'strategic stakeholder engagement' (Zaharna 2010a, p. 201).

Strategic stakeholder engagement happens at different levels across information, relational and networking initiatives (ibid., p. 209). Networking initiatives 'entail the most sophisticated and most challenging level of stakeholder engagement' (ibid., p. 219). The relative sophistication as well as the challenge, as Zaharna explains, 'stems from the basic premise that the clearest sign of a successful networking initiative is when the stakeholders take over responsibility for engagement from the sponsor' (ibid.). The sponsor, in this context, 'provides the initial platform for stakeholders to engage, assists in the initial weaving of the network, and then yields control so that the network can grow and flourish' (ibid.). Three components are essential for this approach—namely, network structure, network synergy and network strategy. The structure is about facilitating message exchange and information flow, synergy is about building relationships and incorporating diversity, and the network strategy concerns the co-creation of credibility, mastering narratives, and identities by using—rather than simply disseminating—information (Zaharna 2010b, pp. 97–107).⁷

Prime examples for cultural-education networks are cultural institutions. As Zaharna (2011a, p. 15) points out, 'the overwhelming majority of these institutes are stand-alone facilities'. China's CIs, however,

... are unique in that they not only partner with host institutions, but are interwoven in a way that resembles a non-policy networking schema. As such, the entire initiative, as well as the individual institutes, has strong stakeholder engagement features. (ibid.; also see Zaharna 2010a, p. 220)

The most important aspect according to Zaharna

... is the interlocking network working strategy that underlies the initiative's conception and design. Unlike other cultural institutes that are independently planted in a foreign country, the Confucius Institutes are grafted into the local cultural setting through their partnerships with prominent indigenous educational institutions. (Zaharna 2010a, p. 220)

In terms of stakeholder engagement, as Zaharna points out, 'such partnerships represent a higher level of coordination and commitment [by the local stakeholders] than independent cultural institutes and provide important platforms [for] direct interpersonal communication and exchange' (ibid.). This collaborative mode also represents 'a bonding feature for sustained stakeholder engagement' (ibid.). Furthermore, CIs are not only linked with Chinese academic institutions; all the CIs are linked to the Beijing headquarters. This headquarters, as Zaharna explains, 'becomes a network hub, which in turn serves as an indirect link for all other Confucius Institutes around the world to connect with each other' (ibid.). Since 2006, Hanban has held the annual Confucius Institute Conference for current and prospective Institutes. The conference, as Zaharna correctly points out 'not only gives delegates the opportunity to meet like-minded others, share experiences, and exchange ideas, it represents the addition of direct interpersonal communication to global stakeholder engagement process' (ibid., p. 221).

The second part of this article uses the case of CIs in Australia to test some of the outlined theoretical considerations. It will mainly focus on the three components put forward by Zaharna, namely network structure, network synergy and network strategy.

Confucius Institutes—facts and figures

CIs are 'non-profit educational organizations promoting the teaching of Chinese and Chinese language outside China, training language instructors and strengthening cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries' (Tang 2010). Other functions include 'to give the world a "correct" understanding of China' (*The Economist* 2011) and to develop 'positive opinions of China within a global setting' (Siow 2011, p. 1). CIs are, understandably, highly praised by the Chinese leadership. For Li Changchun, Politburo member in charge of propaganda (until November 2012), CIs are 'a huge element of China's great plan of international propaganda' (quoted in Xinhua 2007). According to Liu Yandong, Member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party Central Committee, Chinese State Councillor and Chair of the Council of Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, they are 'an important brand of international Chinese language education and a platform for educational and cultural exchanges' (quoted in Xinhua 2009), and for China's Minister of Education, Yuan Guiren, these institutions are simply 'the beautiful result of friendship between the Chinese people and people from the rest of the world' (quoted in China News Net 2011).

Chinese academics, however, are more realistic and pragmatic when it comes to CIs and their role and purpose. While some see CIs as trailblazers for the Chinese economy (Li, R. 2008; Duan 2008), others argue CIs are not a passive response to Western cultural domination but much more 'a pro-active expansion [...] to change China's image' (Chen & Zheng 2007, p. 74). Others agree, stating that the

establishment of CIs is not just about the internationalisation of education, but, furthermore, CIs are a special representation of China's soft power which is an important contribution to enforce the good image of China (Liu, W. 2007, p. 51).

At the end of 2009, there were 282 CIs and 272 Confucius Classrooms established in 88 countries, among which 252 CIs and 90 Classrooms already operated (Xu 2010, p. 16). At the end of 2010, a total of 322 CIs and 369 Confucius Classrooms had been put in place in 96 countries and regions (Liu, Y. 2010), and by the end of 2011, 358 CIs and 500 Confucius Classrooms had been established in 105 countries and regions (Hanban 2011). The latest reports state that until late 2012 China has established more than 400 CIs, while the number of Classrooms remained at about 500 (Qu, Zhao & Cheng 2012).

According to Liu Yandong, the total number of registered students increased by 56% over the year 2010, amounting to 360 000 (Liu, Y. 2010), and reached over 500 000 students in 2011 (Hanban 2011). The total number of teachers, part-time and full-time, has reached 4000, with a net increase of 1000 in 2010. Among them, half are from China and half from the local countries. About 3000 people have participated in the training programs organised by the Confucius Institute Headquarters. Furthermore,

... nine collections of Chinese language-teaching materials and reference books in 45 languages have been published and more than 400 000 books have been donated to Confucius Institutes. Currently, about 104 Confucius Institutes have developed and published 77 local Chinese language-teaching materials, thus greatly alleviating the pressure of textbook shortage. (Liu, Y. 2010)

All CIs are under the authority of Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language Council International. Hanban is composed of representatives from 12 ministries and commissions within the Chinese central government (Ren 2010, p. 1), while the Ministry of Education has the main responsibility. Hanban administers the institutes, is in charge of the distribution of teachers, and the development and distribution of teaching materials. It furthermore coordinates the cooperation between partner institutions in China and abroad which run CIs, and it provides funding (Hartig 2012).

Confucius Institutes as collaborative tools of China's cultural diplomacy

CIs are often mistakenly understood as the 'Chinese version of Spain's Instituto Cervantes, Germany's Goethe-Institute, the British Council and Alliance Française' (Li, H. 2008). This is not completely wrong, as all these institutes promote language and culture, but one has to be more precise to better understand the whole project. One important difference between CIs and their counterparts is the form of organisation as previously indicated by Zaharna. Starr (2009, p. 70) more precisely refers to three operation modes for CIs: wholly operated by China, with local partners as joint ventures, and 'wholly locally run offices licensed by the Beijing headquarters'. The joint venture structure can be found in Europe, Oceania and North America where most (but not all) CIs are cooperation projects mostly between Chinese universities and

local partners around the world, usually also universities. In Australia, out of the existing 11 institutes, nine are partnered with a Chinese university and two are working with a Chinese provincial education department. The two institutes in the making will also cooperate with Chinese universities (Gould 2012; Charles Darwin University 2012).

Normally the Chinese side offers teaching materials, language teachers and a share of the budget, while international partner organisations provide facilities, local staff and also contribute to the funding (see, for example, Hartig 2012). Furthermore, both sides should supply the institute with a director. While this is the initial idea put forward by Hanban, actual settings for CIs in Australia and elsewhere sometimes differ noticeably from this original idea. While all Australian host universities provide facilities and local staff, and China sends teaching materials, not all CIs actually had language teachers sent from China at the time of the interviews (I-1, I-2) and others did not have a Chinese co-director (I-2, I-4, I-8). Furthermore, Hanban financially supports CIs with an annual budget. While the budget constantly increased from US\$26 million in 2007 (Liu, H. 2008, p. 31) to US\$119 million in 2009 (Xu 2010, p. 18), this amount is still rather moderate compared, for example, with the German Goethe Institut, which received a donation of around €223.15 million (approximately US\$291 million) from the German Federal Foreign Office in 2010 (Goethe Institut 2010). This is even more true when taking into account that these US\$119 million show 'a 50-50 per cent share from both sides' (Xu 2010, p. 18), which brings the Chinese contribution to less than US\$60 million. But in 2011, assumingly for the first time, the foreign share was bigger than the Chinese ratio, as Xu Lin admitted during an interview in December 2011 (I-10).⁸

How much money each individual institute eventually receives remains somewhat vague. Xu Lin, Chief Executive of Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, reported that the average budget for each institute in 2009 was 'over 400 000 US dollars' (Xu 2010, p. 18). Some report that institutes get a 'starting budget of €850 000 [approximately US\$1.1 million] and an operational budget of €200 000 [approximately US\$260 000] per year' (Le Corre 2011). In Japan, according to one study, several institutes had annual budgets of over US\$200 000 (Ren 2010, p. 1) and CIs in Germany, for example, receive US\$100 000 on average (Hartig 2012). Not all interviewees in Australia gave concrete numbers, but the figures mentioned ranged from AU\$95 000 (approximately US\$100 000) (I-4, I-5) up to AU\$240 000 (approximately US\$250 000) (I-1). The most likely explanation for this difference is that after a defined start-up funding, the institutes normally apply for project money and some might apply for more than others. The basic rule to get money from Hanban implies that 'the expenditure is divided 50:50, one half coming from China via Hanban, the other half from the host university' (I-8). But in 2011 it was the first time that Hanban had not approved all the requested money, and resources were cut (Hartig 2011, p. 22; I-3).⁹

When considering these factors combined, it becomes obvious that CIs are not a cash cow for international partners, as the partners have to invest as well. The biggest amounts of expenditure are costs for local staff and premises provided by

the local partner institution. These costs are comparatively high in countries like Australia and therefore various institutes have external sponsors, some provide a certain amount of start-up funding while others provide donated items or venues for events. One interviewee assumes that the institute gets about 'AU\$250 000 over the year in in-kind support from corporations' (I-4).

Network structure, network synergy and network strategy of Confucius Institutes

According to Zaharna (2010b, p. 97), the structure of a network is mainly concerned with facilitating message exchange and information flow so that the network can work effectively. If CIs around the world are understood as the network outposts, and the headquarters in Beijing as the network hub, two streams of information can be identified: first from the hub to the various outposts and back, second among the various outposts. One way for Hanban to disseminate information into the network is via various conferences around the world, held for managing staff of CIs. Hanban organises the annual world conference of all CIs in Beijing, normally held in December and attended by high-ranking Chinese officials. The 6th Confucius Institute Conference, for example, was held in December 2011 with more than 2000 delegates from 105 countries (Chen 2011, p. 2) and the highest ranking official participating was Li Changchun—No. 5 in the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and in charge of propaganda. While critics might argue international partners were just coming to Beijing to get their marching orders for the next year, a lot of practical information is distributed during numerous panels and discussions.

Hanban also organises various regional conferences. The most recent meeting for Australian CIs was the Joint Conference of Confucius Institutes in Asia and Oceania, held in June 2012. The conference was co-sponsored by Hanban and the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and saw 'more than 260 representatives from 98 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the two regions' (Xinhua 2012). In this regard, Hanban becomes very much the described network hub which serves as an indirect link for CIs around the world to connect with each other, because as one Australian director puts it: 'Even though there is a lot of Hanban in [these conferences], there is on the sideline a lot of opportunity for the directors to talk to each other' (I-5).

While these conferences are a seemingly good way to spread information—and to remind stakeholders of what the sponsor wants them to do—the flow of information from the hub to the outposts does not work that smoothly. According to one interviewee, the main reason to contact Hanban is 'to hand in our budget plan' (I-8). But this seems to be rather troublesome as another interviewee explains:

We don't ever really receive any communication about the status of our applications and the timeframe for receiving our funding. That makes trying a program, trying to stick to a budget more complicated than it needs to be. Practically speaking, this is quite a challenge. (I-5)

This is echoed by a third interviewee who says that their CI would sometimes start to develop an idea but halfway through Hanban would say they wouldn't pay for it (I-1). While communication between the centre and the periphery is rather complicated, communication and exchange between institutes is happening, but also rather loosely.

We are talking to each other, complaining about what's going on. We are having the same kinds of challenges in some way or the other. There is a little bit of networking, a little bit of knowing each other, and thinking of each other every now and again does pay evidence. It does happen, but on a fairly low-key kind of basis. (I-5)

Another interviewee explains why: 'there is no formal structure for institutes to work together and cooperate. It is happening more on a personal basis' (I-1). So one institute might invite a certain author or speaker, and through personal contacts the speaker is going to other institutes as well (I-4, I-5). A bit more coordination happens in cities with more than one institute in order to avoid competition and promote cooperation between individual institutions (I-2, I-4, I-9), but this, once again, is not proposed by Hanban but happens much more because people in charge know each other and coordinate their activities.

This brings us to the second dimension of the network communication approach, namely network synergy, which is about building relationships and incorporating diversity. According to Zaharna (2010b, p. 104), network synergy 'occurs when the individual efforts of the network members combine as a force multiplier: the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts'. As already pointed out, there are rather loose relationships between the different CIs as network members and synergies (in terms of joint activities) are rather limited, not least because of 'the geographical distance' and also because of

... the intense workload that every key person in a Confucius Institute has. I think everyone is focusing very much on surviving and just getting their own programs going. So there is not that headspace to think about what can be achieved with collaboration. (I-5)

Another relationship component is the cooperation between the Chinese and international partners who run an individual institute. First of all, it becomes obvious that several CIs are built upon already existing connections between Australian and Chinese universities (I-3, I-4, I-5) as a means to further strengthen or formalise such ties. This of course helps the stakeholder engagement, as people and institutions know each other and normally have worked together in one way or another. Then again, as already mentioned, a number of CIs do not have Chinese staff and are completely run by Australians. While some of the institutes more or less appreciate the situation, in terms of stakeholder engagement this is not the ideal setting for China as it is hard to provide guidance to local stakeholders. Institutes with Chinese staff normally appreciate the fact that the Chinese colleague(s) normally undertake communication with either the Chinese partner university or Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters (I-3, I-5).

Zaharna further suggests incorporating diversity into the network as a means to improve it. In relation to CIs, diversity can stem from a diverse choice of products or content provided. CIs address, usually but not exclusively, a mainstream public audience that normally doesn't have any special knowledge about China. Furthermore a part of the audience comprises members of the host university, both students and staff. Generally speaking, the main activities of CIs include (fee required) language courses for various levels and a wide range of cultural events such as exhibitions, screenings, business and intercultural training, as well as tea ceremonies, calligraphy classes, Tai Chi courses or courses for Chinese painting. CIs also hold various in-China programs and normally host talks and lectures given by emerging and distinguished scholars specialising in studies of China.

Several CIs are trying to develop a distinctive feature or approach, especially in cities like Brisbane, Melbourne or Sydney, with more than one institute. The institute at the University of Queensland, for example, wants 'to complement existing Confucius Institutes, focusing in particular on China's contribution to science, engineering and technology' (Lane 2009), while the CI at Queensland University of Technology in the same city concentrates on training local language teachers (Yang, R. 2010, p. 241). One main task for people in charge of a CI therefore is to think about 'how to position the CI on the market' (I-2). Almost all interviewees confirmed the necessity for CIs to have their own features. For example, some focus more on the local community and introduce Chinese language and teaching to the interested public (I-5, I-8), while others only work with students and staff at the host university (I-1). Another aspect worth noting here is the point of language teaching, which makes the Australian case somewhat different from other countries as it seems language teaching is not so much the main focus for some Australian CIs. One finds the classic case where the local CI is teaching Chinese to university students (I-2) but others 'don't run a full Chinese program here. We don't teach much Chinese at all' (I-5). Another director says: 'We don't run programs per se. [The institute] much more supports the faculty to promote Chinese teaching' (I-1). Yet another aspect affects the work of CIs, especially in the big cities like Sydney or Melbourne where there is a large local Chinese community.

Trying to teach Chinese in [our city] doesn't make too much sense. Just take a look in the weekend newspapers; there are countless pages with classified ads for teaching Chinese. In such an environment, I can't stand here and just declare that I am also teaching Chinese. No one would care so one has to find other topics. (I-3)

It is true, that schedules differ from institute to institute, but generally all institutes offer more or less the same content (CIHQ 2007; 2008; 2009; 2011) 'with a local flavour' (Yang, R. 2010, p. 240). So there is a tendency to incorporate diversity into the programs of CIs, but this is rather limited and also not very much promoted by Hanban but comes more from stakeholders themselves.

The question of the content is related to Zaharna's third dimension, network strategy—the usage of information to co-create credibility, master narratives and

identity. The quantity and quality of credible information that an actor is able to gather and supply is directly related to its value and legitimacy (Zaharna 2010b, pp. 107–8). If we understand ‘information’ as any information about China that is supplied by CIs in order to present a friendly and open-minded China, then the question of credibility becomes a pressing issue.

Looking at the content provided by CIs, the crucial point concerns limitations subtly imposed upon the institutes. According to the Constitution and By-Laws of Confucius Institutes: CIs ‘shall not involve or participate in any activities that are not consistent with the missions of Confucius Institutes’ (Hanban.org, no date). Furthermore, CIs

... shall abide by the laws and regulations of the countries in which they are located, respect local cultural and educational traditions and social customs, and they shall not contravene concerning the laws and regulations of China (ibid.).

The mingling of local cultural traditions and laws and regulations of China hints that there can be conflicts of interest, which have to be handled by CI staff. All interviewees assured that so far there was no interference from the Chinese side and no attempts to push topics in a certain direction. As one of them put it: ‘So far, there was not a single case that someone came and said anything about what we did’ (I-3), and another one agreed saying ‘the Chinese don’t dictate to us what we should or cannot do’ (I-4). A statement that is repeated throughout the institutes in Australia is that ‘there are no restrictions regarding our daily work. Not at all’ (I-4). Hoare-Vance (2009, p. 94) quotes a very similar statement from one director: ‘To be fair to the CI headquarters, they are not telling us how to teach Chinese but only making all kinds of resources available to us’. Another director reports that she has no problems whatsoever working with a language teacher from Taiwan (I-4).

But there are limitations for CIs. For example foreign partners are required to adhere to the ‘one China policy’ (Hoare-Vance 2009, p. 86).¹⁰ Furthermore, there are topics such as Taiwan, Tibet and the Dalai Lama or Falun Gong which are not dealt with as they are regarded sensitive for official China. People in charge of CIs are fully aware of the problem. As one interviewee puts it:

There are no restrictions, but obviously if I would pay the Dalai Lama to come to Australia with Hanban money they would not be happy. You don’t have to be a genius to know that. (I-4)

Another one argues the same way: ‘If there are Falun Gong people on campus [...] I probably wouldn’t invite them for tea in my office and have a photograph taken’ (I-1). Another interviewee takes the same view and admits that ‘a large event that is pro Falun Gong’ wouldn’t work (I-5). The general understanding throughout the CIs is very much like this: ‘We take a pragmatic approach to all of this [and if you had contact with China before] you know where your boundaries are’ (I-1). But Hanban appears not to really trust its international partners. According to Weigl at the Third Confucius Institutes Conference in 2008, there were ‘no direct content-related precepts’ but it came up ‘that the following topics are not very welcomed: Tibet, Falun Gong and Taiwan’ (Weigl 2009, p. 36). One manager speculated on ‘whether we could

even talk about Lu Xun as he is in conflict with Confucianism, and Confucianism is now the new set of values' (I-1). One dialogue partner simply said: 'I don't care two figs about politics and my only interest is that the Institute works' (I-6).

This, however, might lead to the problem of self-censorship. As one interviewee acknowledges, although there are no restrictions, there could be 'a tendency towards self-censorship and nobody, me included, is totally resistant in this regard' (I-8). This remains a touchy issue and there can't be any final judgement about the self-censorship aspect, but it can be argued that staff members of CIs or members of CI councils—most of whom are recognised scholars in their given field—wouldn't risk their reputation engaging in active propaganda for the People's Republic of China. As one interviewee puts it: 'I am a professor here at an Australian university—why should I do propaganda for the Chinese side?' (I-2).

But it is also obvious that they wouldn't risk losing the money coming from Hanban by covering active anti-Chinese topics. Hoare-Vance refers to an interview with one director of a CI who noted:

In world CI meetings, some European universities have shared the experience of conflict between their CI and their Chinese Department. The latter can be critical of China, and they wonder what perception will be created if their department/university criticizes China in an academic forum, and at the same time host the CI. (Interviewee quoted in Hoare-Vance 2009, pp. 91–2).

Similar concerns were raised by Jocelyn Chey, a former Australian diplomat posted three times in China and Hong Kong. In a speech given in November 2007 (and published in 2008) Chey warned against the 'real nature' of CI (Chey 2008, p. 32). According to Chey, CIs are

... welcomed by many academics in the Chinese Studies field as a way to save their disciplines from being axed and as a way to strengthen their teaching by bringing in language teachers from China. These considerations apparently outweigh concerns about potential loss of academic freedom through the expanding focus of the CIs and ever-closer association with the [Communist Party of China]. (ibid., p. 44).

There cannot be any doubt, that '[u]niversities must vigilantly guard their autonomy and academic freedom' (ibid., p. 33). But so far there is no recognisable evidence that 'the Confucius Institute program is now moving into a new phase of involvement in academic teaching and research' (ibid.).

In respect to academic teaching and research, it seems very much that CIs currently don't do any proper academic teaching or research, mainly due to human resources and budget limitations. But (and this concerns very much Chey's demand for academic freedom), when Hanban really pursues its goal to promote the 'New Sinology and China Studies Research Scheme' as outlined in the 'Recommendations on Confucius Institute Development and Planning (Draft)' (Hanban 2011, p. 5), this would be a very critical development indeed. There seems to be a considerable difference between, on the one hand, introducing

Chinese culture and language abroad through strategic stakeholder engagement, and, on the other, sponsoring 'academics with a strong background in Sinology and China Studies from all over the world to conduct research on traditional and contemporary China [and thus] to shape a new generation of sinologists' (ibid.).

Conclusion: limits of collaboration and stakeholder engagement

To sum up, the Chinese approach to engage local stakeholders and expertise is strategically very smart: by utilising the current global demand for and fascination with Chinese language and culture, the Chinese government has found interested and willing international partners to co-finance the teaching of Chinese language and the introduction of Chinese culture. In this regard, international partners partly fund China's cultural diplomacy and thereby the presentation of China's global image. As Xu Lin puts it, this collaborative model guarantees that CIs are instruments that help the Chinese government to obtain huge effects with the least amount of money (cited in Liu, H. 2008, p. 33). But CIs also face practical problems that point to the limitations of this approach. One of the biggest is the lack of qualified personnel. On the one hand, there is, pure and simple, a lack of teachers, especially for small languages (for example in Eastern Europe) or languages not so familiar to Chinese, as Xu Lin in Beijing admitted (I-10). On the other hand, for Chinese partner institutions it is the increasing difficulty 'to get experienced teachers of Chinese to leave their families to go abroad on a low salary' (Yang, R. 2010, p. 242).¹¹ And while the problem of too few teachers was mentioned in the interviews with Australian CIs, some interviewees hinted that they were not unlucky not to have a Chinese co-director (I-2, I-8) as it provides them with more space and independence. From the Chinese point of view, and in regard to the strategic stakeholder engagement approach, however, the lack of qualified personnel able and willing to go abroad limits the efficiency of the project. Against this background, the engagement and commitment of local stakeholders seems even more crucial for China, as it very much depends on local staff how CIs operate.

This collaborative tool of cultural diplomacy, which mostly works through strategic stakeholder engagement, presents both advantages and disadvantages for both sides involved in this project. The advantages for the international partners are obviously the increase in capabilities to teach Chinese language and to introduce (parts of the) Chinese culture to a local audience. Furthermore CIs might be helpful to establish or strengthen contacts with China. The disadvantages are also quite obvious. International partners see themselves confronted with the accusation to be a mere propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party. Even if this is not the case, international partners are not able to approach and realise all the topics they possibly would do in another setting. This limitation becomes even more of an issue as the general public interested in China normally knows through the media about all the sensitive issues that CIs normally do not approach. Whether those media reports about China in general and such sensitive issues are correct or not is a different story. It is a matter of fact though that there is a potential gap between topics the general public is interested in and topics presented by CIs.

The advantages for the Chinese side are the cost effectiveness, the increase in prestige for its institutions due to their association with international (mostly recognised) partner institutions, and the opportunity to present its language and (parts of its) culture to a global audience. Furthermore, CIs provide a way to meet international demand for Chinese language learning opportunities and, to some extent, to set the agenda for what foreigners should learn about China.

A practical disadvantage, especially for the Chinese universities involved in this project, is the lack of directors and teachers who are willing to go abroad. Another disadvantage—even though the Chinese side wouldn't agree on this—might be the fact that CIs have to adapt to local circumstances and therefore possibly be somewhat more open and progressive than a totally Chinese run institute would be.

Last but not least, a disadvantage for China might be that CIs only have limited influence to shape China's image.¹² This is not so much the flaw of CIs, but much more grounded in the authoritarian political system CIs represent. No matter how many CIs are promoting Chinese language and culture in the best possible way, and no matter how strategic stakeholders are engaged, as long as the Chinese government is still arresting human rights lawyers, is censoring journalists and is covering up disasters and the like, all efforts by CIs to shape China's image can only hit the wall.

Interviews

I-1 Interview in Australia, 29 Apr. 2011

I-2 Interview in Australia, 4 Apr. 2011

I-3 Interview in Australia, 23 Apr. 2011

I-4 Interview in Australia, 12 May 2011

I-5 Interview in Australia, 20 Apr. 2011

I-6 Interview in Australia, 18 May 2011

I-7 Interview in Australia, 30 Nov. 2011

I-8 Interview in Australia, 2 May 2011

I-9 Interview in Beijing, 5 Mar. 2011

I-10 Interview in Beijing, 6 Dec. 2011

Notes

1. The main difference between Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms relates to the organisational structure. There is no clear-cut distinction between both models but it seems the main difference is whether the local partner is a university or any other cultural or educational entity. To simplify matters, here only the term 'Confucius Institute' (CI) is used.
2. This includes the CIs at: the University of Western Australia in Perth; the University of Melbourne; the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University); La Trobe University in Melbourne; the University of Queensland in Brisbane; Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane; the University of Adelaide; the University of Sydney; the University of New South Wales; the NSW Department of Education and Communities Confucius Institute in Sydney; the

University of Newcastle. Furthermore, two universities are currently establishing CIs, but it remains to be seen when these will begin their operation. One CI, which will become the first CI in the world to focus on tourism, should be (or will be) established at Griffith University in Brisbane and another one is in the planning stage at Charles Darwin University in Darwin.

3. For the whole project, I conducted interviews with 30 representatives from CIs in Oceania, Europe, Asia and Africa.
4. In 2007, the Confucius Institute Headquarters was officially founded in Beijing and since then the official name is Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters.
5. A 'pilot institute' was established in June 2004 in Tashkent.
6. Soft power is a concept developed by Joseph Nye to describe the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce as a means of persuasion. In Nye's words it 'is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas, and policies' (Nye 2004, p. x).
7. Zaharna develops this setting to analyse US American NGOs, which, after 9/11, applied a network communication approach compared to the mass communication approach of official US public diplomacy. She describes these NGO's as transnational advocacy networks (TAN). Although CIs cannot be put on a level with US NGOs, this setting provides some interesting points to analyse CIs.
8. Xu made these remarks during a group interview with several Chinese journalists. When one journalist wanted to clarify whether it was the first time in 2011 that the foreign share was bigger than the Chinese portion, Xu asked the journalist not to be too explicit about this, because, as she explained, when the Chinese government would realise that foreign partners pay more for CIs this would evoke the impression that China does not have to pay for the CIs anymore.
9. One note regarding the currency: the fact that Hanban transfers US dollars to its international partners also affects the budget of Confucius Institutes. Various managing directors in the Euro Zone complained that they sometimes receive substantially less money than expected due to the changing exchange rate. In Australia this was not a problem recently as the Australian dollar was stronger than the US dollar.
10. The 'one China policy' refers to the understanding of the People's Republic of China that there is only one 'China' which consists of mainland China, Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Countries seeking diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China must break official relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan.
11. The fact that Chinese partners have serious difficulties in finding teachers they can send abroad (especially to various African or Middle Eastern countries) was confirmed by a person working for a publishing house affiliated with a university in Beijing. Because the foreign language departments were running out of possible teachers, the university turned to the staff of the publisher and asked for potential teachers there (I-9).
12. The question of effectiveness is hotly debated in the academic discourse dealing with soft power and public/cultural diplomacy. But there are no ultimate and

definite tools at hand to measure the impact of something so abstract and indefinable like culture. When looking at the sheer number of CIs that was growing constantly in recent years, one might label this initiative a success. The same might apply for the growing number of people learning Chinese around the world. But whether this willingness to learn Chinese derives from a fascination for the Chinese culture and China or from rather pragmatic considerations to find a job is hard to clarify.

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