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The Vehicle and Driver of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Global Vision Vs. Localised Practice

Xin Liu ¹

China's cultural diplomacy is mostly understood as an endeavour to build and project soft power, which draws on three sources of 'culture, political values and foreign policy' according to Nye. This paper focuses on the debates about the vehicle and agents of China's cultural diplomacy. It starts with a theoretical discussion of the competing views in the Chinese context, and develops an argument that the vehicle of China's cultural diplomacy tries to project soft power on two wheels of culture and political values, to serve the purpose of reshaping China's image away from being the 'cultural other' and 'ideological other' respectively. However, the state-led approach to driving this vehicle is generating some side effects with its sponsorship, censorship and presence in the driver's seat. Then the paper analyses the inherent tensions existing in practice both between the two sources of building soft power and between the two means of doing so, attraction and persuasion, with empirical evidence through a comparative case study of the Confucius Institutes in the US and South Korea. The finding shows that China's attempt at reshaping its image as an Eastern cultural contestant is often disrupted by its authoritarian political values, and the state-led persuasion is often reducing China's cultural attraction. Following this, the paper finishes with some recommendations regarding evolving the cultural diplomacy approach from a vertical one that is government-centred to a horizontal one that is network-based with multiple agents, and localising its practice by engaging the target audiences as stakeholders.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, cultural other, ideological other, soft power, Confucius Institute

Introduction

The end of the Cold War started new debates about the remaking of the world order. Many scholars (Huntington, 1998; Ding, 2008) contended that cultural factors had now emerged as the major force in international relations, often superseding diplomatic norms and realpolitik. The concept of 'public diplomacy' was proposed by Edmund Gullion to refer to all aspects that fall outside of traditional diplomacy, with an aim of influencing citizens of other countries to bring about a

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positive attitude towards a particular country (Melissen, 2005). Ham's (2001, p.4) summary offered a more discerning insight to this contrast: 'traditional diplomacy is focusing on problems whereas public diplomacy on values'.

As a subset of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy refers to 'the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs, and other aspect of culture, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding' (Cummings, 2009, p. 1). Academic interest in the study of China's cultural diplomacy has only recently developed into a substantial body of literature. It is mostly understood, both in the academic community and the government sphere, as an endeavour to build and project soft power, which is 'the ability to get what one wants by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment' (Nye, 2012), by drawing on three sources: 'culture, political values and foreign policy' (Nye, 2004, p.11). Since cultural diplomacy represents aspects that fall outside the remit of traditional foreign policy, this paper will focus on examining how the first two aspects function as the two wheels of the vehicle: one wheel of 'culture' serves the purpose of reshaping China's image away from being the 'cultural other', and the other wheel of 'political values' aims to change the perception of China as the 'ideological other'.

Following the theoretical discussions, this paper will analyse the tensions generated between the two wheels in practice that is aggravated by the state-led approach to driving this vehicle. Empirical evidence through a comparative case study of the Confucius Institutes (CI) in the US and South Korea will then be drawn on to elaborate the tensions and the implications for the practice of China's cultural diplomacy.

The Vehicle of Cultural Diplomacy: A Theoretical Discussion of The Two Wheels

Before we unfold the discussion of the two sources of soft power, namely culture and political values, we need to understand the two images of 'otherness' China has been suffering from. Firstly, the dichotomy of East and West as cultural entities was dissected by Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism, in which the Orient was rendered as the 'inferior other' in order for the Occident to define its own superior identity; in a way, an Orientalist perception of the world is 'the West and the Rest', with 'the West' at the centre and 'the Rest' as the inferior (Hall, 1992, p. 185). In history, although China had mostly been held as a civilised Confucian utopia until the 18th century, it came to be seen as a rotten Oriental empire towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, which had its cultural identity subjected to 'otherness'. Secondly, this historical legacy was carried into modern times, when China's authoritarian regime evolved its image from being the 'cultural other' to the 'ideological other'. Despite the shifting of the dynamic hub of the world economy, as long as China maintains that the values of its political system are fundamentally different from the leading Western countries, China is still considered as 'the other' ideologically.

Given these contexts, there are currently two positions in China contending against each other regarding the vehicle of China's cultural diplomacy. One asserts that 'culture' should indisputably be the core of cultural diplomacy, and China is rich in its cultural heritage. One of the leading

scholars is Hu Wentao (2008), who divides cultural resources into three sets: political culture, spiritual culture and popular culture. Hu believes that as the current political culture in China is vastly different to the Western one which still dominates the international community, it would be more of an uphill struggle on this front; therefore, a wise choice is to focus China's cultural diplomacy on the other two aspects: spiritual and popular culture. This position can be considered the 'cultural wheel' of the vehicle, aiming to serve the purpose of reshaping China's image away from being the 'cultural other'.

However, a dilemma is revealed when Young (2008) points out two interrelated issues that concern China's spiritual and popular cultures: first, whether and how far to break with the past, or to reaffirm and stand by its traditions and values; second, how much to borrow from overseas. Both issues involve nationalism, which is both a 'style of politics' and a 'form of culture' (Smith, 1991, pp. 91–92), underling the dialectical tension between a political nationalism that emphasises a revolutionary break with the past, and a cultural nationalism that constantly refers to China's past. When China presents itself as a modern power on the international stage today, this dilemma is reflected in the conflict-ridden 'official version' of Chinese national culture that the government is attempting to promote: it embodies inherently contradictory elements such as Confucianism, Maoism, socialism, capitalism, modernism and globalism (Liu and Lin, 2003).

The second issue regarding foreign influence demonstrates a particular challenge for China's popular culture. In a 2008 survey on soft power in Asia (Whitney and Shambaugh, 2009), China's cultural soft power rating not only trailed behind the United States, but also that of Japan and South Korea; both countries have traditional cultures closely related to China's, but both have their own distinct popular cultures represented abroad by such phenomena as manga and anime in Japan, and dramas and pop music in South Korea. However, China has no such readily accessible point of convergence between its popular culture and the rest of the world (Ren, 2010). This may help explain why China's current focus is on promoting the traditional aspects of Chinese culture, because they represent the 'Chineseness', whereas its contemporary popular culture is etched with all sorts of foreign influence that do not fit in the 'socialist culture' defined by the 2011 Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (cited in Hughes, 2014, p. 55). In other words, both the spiritual and popular cultural dimensions also face the contradiction of having the imperative to be promoted as a world culture and the requirement of a more specific political nationalism, with the two often in tension. Young's conclusion (2008, p. 15) that 'China is somehow trapped in itself' depicts the dilemma faced by the cultural position.

The contending position emphasizing 'political values' is championed by Zhang Zhizhou (2012), a senior researcher at the Centre for Public Diplomacy Studies, who also demarcates culture into three sets: tangible culture, spiritual culture and ideational culture or values. He further argues that although the three sets comprise the richness of a nation's cultural image, only values are directly relevant to the nation's soft power. No matter how magnificent a country's material and spiritual culture may appear, its contribution to building soft power would be limited in the absence of value identification. Zhang's (2012, p. 193) conclusion that 'in a way, cultural diplomacy is value diplomacy' was confirmed in the Annual Report of China's Public diplomacy 2011 – 2012, which

defined the goal of China's public diplomacy as to 'improve China's international image, safeguard national interest and the independence of values'.

Another prominent scholar for this position is Professor Yan Xuetong from the Tsinghua University. He argues that 'the central point of soft power is not cultural strength, but political strength' (Yan, 2007, p. 5), believing that good governance and China's political norms of non-Western origin should be the main source of 'attraction and persuasion' of Chinese soft power. This position has taken a clear counter-hegemonic stance against the domination of Western values, thus representing the other wheel serving the purpose of countering China's image as the 'ideological other'. They believe cultural diplomacy should aim at redefining the international significance of Chinese values, whereas the current focus is on China's tangible heritage and spiritual culture, thus less satisfactory in generating soft power.

We can see both groups accuse each other of being the reason for the less than satisfactory effects of China's cultural diplomacy efforts so far; and a more intriguing observation is that they both claim to be the mainstream view embraced by the government, based on the same reference to Hu Jintao's 2007 speech at the 17th National Congress (Hu, 2007, n.p.). The 'culture' advocates quote Hu on 'enhancing the country's cultural soft power' by 'creating a thriving cultural market and enhancing the industry's international competitiveness', while the 'political value' advocates quote him calling for 'building up the system of socialist core values and making socialist ideology more attractive and cohesive'. I believe the tug-of-war between the two as representing the mainstream view very much depends on where to draw the line between 'political culture' and 'political value'; about the latter there is yet another layer of debate, which will be unfolded in the following section.

Political Values: Universalism Vs. Relativism

The above discussions regarding the two wheels of China's cultural diplomacy lead on to another key question lurking at the crux of the debate: are the 'political values' specified in Nye's concept of soft power universal, or, like the first element of culture, does their appeal actually come from distinctiveness? The Chinese answers are inclined to base their arguments on relativism, frequently stressing the relative nature of culture and ideology, to the extent of some scholars even arguing for 'Chinese Exceptionalism' (Zhang, 2011), which can be argued to be a way of China 'othering' itself in relation to the West, whereas their Western counterparts tend to believe that political values attract due to universal attributes that can transcend one's own country and appeal to others, culminating in Fukuyama's claim for the 'End of History' (1989). When this claim proves to be premature and China's economic success prompted Western scholars to coin the notion of 'Beijing Consensus' as a challenge to 'Washington Consensus' (Ramo, 2004), the Chinese government has not been keen on promoting the new consensus, partly because China does not believe in universalism, nor have the tradition of missionary culture like the US who believe in their values and want to sell them to the rest of the world (Nye, 2005).

If we look at the actual definition of cultural diplomacy, we will see relativism is more applicable to its purpose of ‘fostering mutual understanding’. I argue that the Chinese philosophical concept of Yin and Yang can be applied here to transcend the binary divisions of ‘Us’ vs. ‘Other’: to think of Eastern and Western culture as Yin and Yang that inspire each other, contain a drop of each other, complement each other and depend on each other to form a whole. This idea, which aims at nurturing compatibility and harmony, is considered to be one of the major reasons why Chinese civilisation stands as the oldest continuous civilisation on earth today, owing to its ability to embrace and incorporate different cultural and belief systems throughout its long history: from the introduction of Buddhism to China during the Han Dynasty, to Christianity and Islam during the Tang Dynasty, Chinese civilisation survived and thrived through all these cultural encounters. Even in terms of modern day ideology, Deng Xiaoping has reformed Mao’s communist China into ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ by incorporating some capitalist ideas, while sticking to the Five Principles of foreign policy formulated in 1954, namely mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence. These five principles and the 1955 addition of ‘seeking common ground while reserving differences’ (qiu tong cun yi) are still the cornerstones of China’s foreign policy today. All these show that relativism is an established belief shared by the Chinese understanding of culture, political values and diplomacy.

However, the notion of soft power is built on universal appeal, the different perceptions of universalism vs. relativism may explain why China’s effort at creating a global dialogue between the Eastern and Western cultures tends to be read by the West as an attempt to export communism, almost a label for the ‘ideological other’, thus constantly met with suspicions and resistance. The above discussions reveal that within the construct of soft power, the two sources of attraction are not working in harmony in the case of China, who has abundant cultural heritage and traditions to offer on the ‘cultural wheel’, but non-universal and non-Western values to offer on the ‘political values wheel’. This makes the driver’s role, or the agent of cultural diplomacy, tremendously important and precarious, which will be the focus of the discussions in the next section.

Agent of Cultural Diplomacy – Diverging and Changing Views

Following president Hu Jintao’s speech on building cultural soft power in 2007, a number of new task forces have been assembled in China: an independent, non-governmental think tank, Charhar Institute, was founded in 2009 with public diplomacy as one of its top priorities. In 2010, a Public Diplomacy Office was established in the Chinese Foreign Ministry and in 2011, the Centre for Public Diplomacy Studies, the first one of its kind, opened at the Beijing Foreign Studies University. In 2012, the China Public Diplomacy Association was established in Beijing as a national non-profit social organisation, to strengthen the soft power of China by mobilising, coordinating and organising social resources and the public for the promotion of China’s public diplomacy in an inclusive and pioneering manner (Li, 2012).

These numerous institutions represent a joint effort of state, academia and social organisations, which appears to indicate an emerging pattern of multi-agency in implementing public diplomacy. As a specific subset of public diplomacy, does the cultural dimension require any special consideration about who should be the leading agent for cultural diplomacy: state or non-state actors? If hard power can be built through government funding, will state involvement function productively or counterproductively when it comes to soft power? The next section will examine the diverging views about the appropriate agents of cultural diplomacy both internationally and domestically.

The International Debates on Agents of Cultural Diplomacy

Mainly sprung from its varying definitions, the international debates are reflected in the three positions summarised by Gienow-Hecht (2010, p. 9). The first sees cultural diplomacy as first and foremost ‘an instrument of state policy’, lacking the participation of private individuals. In the Special Issue of the International Journal of Cultural Policy entitled ‘Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?’, cultural diplomacy is contrasted to cultural relations in that the former is ‘essentially interest-driven government practice’ while the latter is ‘ideals-driven and practiced large by non-state actors’ (Ang et al., 2015, p. 365), echoing another statement made by Arndt that cultural diplomacy can only be said to ‘take place when formal diplomats, serving national government, try to shape and channel this natural flow (of culture) to advance national interests’ (2006, P. xviii). Another clear articulation was made by McDowell (2008, p. 8) in that ‘for it to be diplomacy, it has to entail a role for the state’. It is obvious to see that this position dwells on the ‘diplomacy’ side of the concept.

Contrary to this, another position looks at cultural diplomacy as a way to act outside of politics. This is supported by Ogoura (2006), who argues that scholarship and culture should be independent of political power and, in fact, are often a means of resisting authority. Leonard et al. (2002, p. 55) make clear that if a government wants its voice to be heard or influence people’s perceptions, it should work ‘through organisations and networks that are separate from, independent of, and even culturally suspicious towards government itself’. This position has a clear focus on the ‘culture’ side of the concept: it does not address cultural diplomacy as a synonym of public diplomacy, but as a subset that has its own distinctive features.

A third group of scholars define cultural diplomacy as a hybrid term in concept that requires matching hybrid actions in practice: apart from the state, it also needs participation from and coordination between government and non-governmental institutions. This was endorsed by the definition given in the Cultural Diplomacy Dictionary (Chakraborty, 2013, p. 30): ‘Cultural diplomacy is practiced by a range of actors including national governments, public and private sector institutions, and civil society’. This corresponds well to the multi-agent view discussed earlier for public diplomacy.

If these diverging views are mostly over definitions, in practice, Seiichi (2008, p.191) has proposed the government role as a ‘network hub’: it should focus on low-visibility efforts to create a fertile environment where actors are connected to one another horizontally; ideas and culture are freely created by the private sector, as government involvement is liable to be seen as meddling intrusion by the authorities into matters of personal taste and beliefs, raising suspicions and reducing cultural attractiveness. This is exactly in line with the recommendations made by the British Council report (Holden, 2013, p. 34), that the government role is to ‘create the conditions for cultural exchange to flourish: by allowing freedom of expression and enabling artists and tourists to travel and visit ... Support cultural exchange through independent, autonomous agencies – because direct government involvement invites suspicion and ultimately, hostility’.

This will now be contrasted with the diverging views in China, and how they are reflected in normative practice in the next section.

The Domestic Debates on Agents of Cultural Diplomacy

Probably it comes as no surprise that only the government-led and multi-agent views are well represented in China. Both domestic and foreign scholars researching China’s cultural diplomacy, such as Hartig (2012), Barr (2015), Zhou and Luk (2016), have observed the government-centred approach as its main feature. Li (2005, p. 24) clearly defines cultural diplomacy as ‘the diplomatic activities through cultural means to serve a political or strategic end undertaken by a sovereign state’. His clear stress on the role played by government is based on his fundamental understanding that cultural diplomacy is, after all, diplomacy, which is of course carried out by the government. Other scholars, such as Bian (2009), even argue that because of this, it is only natural for cultural diplomacy to take on a strong political colour in its implementation. All the milestone events that marked the fledgling of China’s cultural diplomacy since 2004 when culture was made the third pillar in China’s diplomacy next to politics and economics (People.com) were clearly state-led: from the opening up of the CIs across the globe since 2004 to the debut of the ‘Year of Chinese Culture’ series in France, Italy, Russia, and Australia; from launching overseas 24-hour cable news channels (CCTV News, CNC) and newspapers (China Daily Asia Weekly and European Weekly) in 2010, to staging the Chinese image advertisement in New York’s Time Square in 2011.

The British Council reported that the appetite to invest in cultural diplomacy is especially high in newly emerging nations such as China, whose government is deploying heightened cultural diplomacy activities to raise its international profile and standing, as befitting its rising global economic power, citing the CI as ‘the most spectacular example’ (Holden, 2013, p.26). When there were comments about CIs being exported faster than China’s high speed trains, Madame Liu Yandong, Chairperson of the Council of the CI Headquarters, simply adopted ‘soul high speed train’ as a laudatory nickname in her speech for the CI’s ten-year anniversary. However, this analogy was actually used by Shambaugh (2013) in criticising China’s unsophisticated approach to building soft power: by investing money and expecting to see development. Of course, soft power cannot be built like this; it may even hinder soft power. Actually, Nye specifically named

China as ‘making the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power’ (2013: n.p.). Most criticisms the CIs have received are due to concerns about government sponsorship and the ‘strings attached’ to the generous government funding (Chey, 2008; Golden, 2011; Sahlins, 2015).

Guttenplan’s comment (2012, n.p.) that the Chinese government wants to change the perception of China by ‘combating negative propaganda with positive propaganda’ revealed the crux of the problem: there is no such thing as ‘positive propaganda’; it will only meet with a negative reception if it is identified as ‘propaganda’. Explicit propaganda has always been integral to the post-1949 Chinese state with a dedicated Propaganda Department of the CPC Committee taking firm control of all forms of media to further its ideological objectives. It was only after 2009 that the English translation was changed to Publicity Department, and the old term of ‘external propaganda’ was gradually replaced by ‘public diplomacy’, but some scholars, such as Edney (2012) and Sun (2015), note that the term ‘external propaganda’ is still in use in Chinese policy writings, and the propaganda system still shapes the way the Chinese party-state approaches soft power. When Liu Yunshan’s speech was quoted as evidence: ‘make sure that all cultural battlegrounds, cultural products, and cultural activities reflect and conform to the socialist core values and requirement’ (Sahlins, 2015: 6), he was still referred to as the Propaganda Minister. Dr Kuhn (2012, n.p.) has used the expression of ‘instant killer for credibility’ to refer to explicit propaganda, as when the information communicated is 100% good and positive, the credibility rate with American audiences is zero.

Recognising this, there is also a representation of the mixed-agent views in China. Hu (2008, p. 32) has clearly stated that:

Cultural diplomacy is diplomacy carried out by government or non-governmental organisations to serve the end of promoting mutual understanding and mutual trust between nations and peoples, constructing and elevating a country’s international prestige and soft power, through the means of educational and cultural exchanges, exchanges of people, arts and performances, and trade of cultural products, etc.

He also points out that it is imperative to curb the government’s role, while more non-state actors should be drawn in, especially because most Western countries have an innate and deeply-rooted aversion to any government-manipulated culture. This will only aggravate the deep-running misunderstandings and misconceptions already existing between China and the Western countries. Hu’s view has received increasing support in recent years. An important endorsement came from Zhao and Zhang (2010), who made it clear that public diplomacy can be performed by any state departments, by society or even by individuals. This was confirmed in the Annual Report of China’s Public Diplomacy 2011–2012, which represents a different stance to the mainstream view at least in the academic circle. Zhao Qizheng, editor-in-chief for Public Diplomacy Quarterly,

spells out the different actors' roles in that (2012: Preface): 'the government is the leading party. Non-governmental organizations, social organizations and social elites constitute the backbone forces, and the general public is the foundation'. In today's global environment, the role played by the general public is becoming increasingly crucial as 'people-to-people cultural contacts set the tone and sometimes the agenda for traditional state-to-state diplomacy' (Holden, 2013, p. 3). For China in particular, there has been unprecedented growth in the two-way people-to-people interactions across the border: through travel, study abroad, migration and the internet.

This paper argues that the multi-agent view not only accords with the international trend, but more importantly, it fits better with China's distinctive features at two levels. First is China's unbalanced image. According to the national brand hexagon developed by Anholt to measure global perceptions of countries, Brand China is pictured as the figure 1 below. It is clear to see that China showed a strong ranking for 'culture and heritage', and the 'people' dimension is where it got the second highest score, while its governance ranking is at the bottom.



Figure 1 Brand China (Berkovitz et al. 2007, p. 170)

This links to the second level of China's distinctive feature. As Goodman (2004) points out, it has been the norm for Chinese governments to equate the Chinese state with the government and even specific political parties. When a national culture is promoted through state organs led by the ruling party, it becomes government behaviour, and if the target country holds negative perception towards the Chinese governance, then government-led cultural diplomacy would have a very limited role to play, if not counterproductive. There is a contradiction existing between the cultural goals of the Chinese government and its political system's ability to deliver those goals: the CCP

wants to see China acknowledged as a cultural superpower; at the same time, the CCP's role in the determination of cultural production makes this extremely unlikely, due to the divergence in perception between China as a polity and China as a civilisation. It seems the dose of government defining, planning, funding and leading the cultural diplomacy is causing the side effect of reducing China's cultural appeal. This assumption will be explored by empirical evidence provided in the following section.

In sum, there are changing dynamics in China from the mainstream view of seeing cultural diplomacy as a government-led endeavour to wider acceptance of the multi-agent view. China is also learning from its successes and lessons in the actual implementation of cultural diplomacy on various fronts. For example, the success of the CIs that have rolled out at an incredible speed to 146 countries by the end of 2017 has been accompanied by very mixed receptions, and much criticism is about its top-down operation model as state-led enterprises, thus triggering many controversies about their being used as propaganda tools. In contrast, the most eminent agents of American cultural diplomacy come not from the government but civil society: everything from Hollywood to Harvard. Shambaugh (2013, p. 209) articulates well the difference in that soft power is 'largely about the capacity of a society to attract others, rather than a government to persuade others'. When attraction and persuasion were defined by Nye as the two means of building soft power, he never discussed its implications in practice; it thus raises the question: will a state-led persuasion campaign, especially for an authoritarian state like China, increase or decrease the attractiveness of a country's culture and political values? Will the two sources of soft power – culture and political values – enhance or complicate each other's attractiveness? The next section will try to answer these questions by providing some empirical evidence collected from a comparative case study of the CIs.

A Comparative Case Study: The Confucius Institutes

As the most watched flagship project of China's cultural diplomacy, the CI has already been referred to a few times in the discussions above. The exploratory case study will be carried out by comparing challenges faced by CIs in the US and those in South Korea by providing multiple sources of evidence including documents, archival records and interviews made during site visits to the two CIs in South Korea in 2014. The data collected will be analysed for cross-case synthesis to help shed lights on the two questions raised above.

A typical CI is born out of a triangular partnership: Hanban, home institution and host institution. Hanban, also known as the CI Headquarters, is registered as a non-profit organization (NPO) with corporate status, but it is the Chinese government that covers all of the expenses for its work of expanding CI activities overseas, as they are considered to serve the national strategy of building cultural soft power. According to its official website, Hanban actually comprises representatives

from 12 state ministries and commissions². Its top management are all high-ranking government officials: the Chairperson of the Council, Madame Liu Yandong, is also China's Vice-Premier; and the Hanban Director, Madame Xu Lin, is also a State Counsellor. Therefore, regardless of its de jure status, it would be no overstatement to describe it as an organisation under effective government control and strongly reflecting government views. This often incurs speculations of CIs as having a hidden agenda beyond their stated objectives, or posing 'a threat to academic freedom and shared governance because of the way they involve the Chinese government in colleges' affairs' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 648).

A typical CI's team is composed of a 'foreign Director' appointed by the host institution, an office administrator (or two) paid by the host institution, a Chinese Co-Director, and a number of tutors sent by the Chinese home institution and paid by Hanban. In the operation of the CI, Hanban provides funding and controls the budget, it convenes the annual assembly, examines the CI reports, and organises training for both Chinese directors and tutors from the home institutions before their departure, and also pays for directors from the host institutions to fly to China for the annual conference and training programmes. From each of these remits, Hanban can exercise authoritative control: they decide on whether to approve the budget or not; who needs to be trained on what and by whom; and censor news releases on their official website.

The CI's mission statement³ shows an intentional focus on Chinese language and culture as it defines its own role as the 'cultural wheel' of the vehicle. It thus tries to evade discussions of political values in its teaching and cultural exchange activities. However, even though culture and political values are defined by Nye as two separate sources of soft power, it is not possible to draw clear lines between the two in reality, because the two 'Otherness' of China (culturally and ideologically) have developed into a complex whole over time, making the separation a one-sided wishful thinking on the part of the Chinese government. This can be observed at the CI classroom level as described by Hubbert in her empirical research:

Inside the classroom, the CI teachers reinforced an idea of a China defined by its cultural glories and modernization feats, not its political practices. Whenever politically laden topics emerged from classroom discussions, I observed that the teachers quickly refocused students on language acquisition and cultural activities. (Hubbert, 2014, p. 330)

² They are: the General Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, the State Press and Publications Administration, the State Council Information Office, the State Language Committee, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, and the State Development and Reform Commission.

³ 'Develop and facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language overseas and promote educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other international communities' (Hanban website).

Hanban's explanation is that political discussion is not the CI's remit, and CI teachers do not necessarily have the expertise or knowledge to handle such discussions. This approach seems fine pedagogically in a language class, but as Hartig (2015) argues, it is complicated by the fact that it is precisely those sensitive topics that are probably most familiar to the CI target audiences, as they regularly appear in the media. This is recognised as censorship and hampers the credibility of CIs. What is even worse is, as Hubbert's (2014) research concludes, that because China is routinely imagined as politically repressive, the purposefully apolitical nature of its pedagogical materials and classroom practices sometimes works counterproductively, as this 'political absence' is interpreted as 'authoritarian presence', thus 'reinforcing perceptions of a repressive Chinese government apparatus'. All of her interviewees recognised that Hanban's 'attempts to depoliticise the classroom had this paradoxical effect' (Hubbert, 2014, p. 339). This evidence supports Hu's (2008) view and the author's argument earlier regarding the counterproductivity of government-led approach.

The paradoxical effect was also shown by Lueck et al.'s research finding (2014, p. 344) that despite the CI's self-proclaimed role focusing only on Chinese language and culture, the narrative of the CI reports in the New York Times defined it as 'a tool that was being used by the Chinese government to favourably influence American perceptions of China's domestic policies and international actions. Contributions of the Confucius Institute to Americans' knowledge of China's language and culture went largely unreported.' Actually, many criticisms of the CI are not about what the CIs did, but about what the Chinese government did not allow them to do, resulting in a least desirable outcome: the negative perception based on what did not happen could wipe out the positive effects of what did happen.

Another example is Pennsylvania State University, which shut down its CI in 2014. According to a written statement posted by its Dean on their university website, 'over the past five years, we worked collegially with our partners at the Dalian University of Technology. However, several of our goals are not consistent with those of the Hanban' (Redden, 2014), they are clearly putting the blame on Hanban while stressing their good relationship with the home institution. When asked to elaborate on the specific ways in which their goals differ, the former CI Director said via email:

I will say that in my experience as CI director one of the major frustrations with the relationship was that we consistently had more ambitious ideas for the ways CI funding could be used – mainly to support research not only in the humanities or on Chinese culture, but also on science, politics, the environment, and a variety of other topics – that the Hanban regularly rejected as too far outside the official CI remit (which they would tell us was mainly 'cultural')... Had they been flexible, it would have helped Confucius Institute succeed here. (cited in Jacobs and Yu, 2014).

These examples show the inseparability of the two sources of culture and political values in practice, as they create the operating contexts for each other. Nye (2004, p. 89) has commented that China's influence through global dissemination of cultural programmes was yet to be realised, primarily because the country's 'domestic policies and values set limits on the development of its resources'. The latest proof of this came when the UK also decided to host an investigation into the role and influence of the CIs in April 2018. Professor Hughes at the London School of Economics believes that this is because the CI is 'being politicised': 'some of this is driven by China's trade practices and some of it is driven by increasing concerns over how Xi Jinping is behaving, clamping down on domestic dissent and using China's economic resources to expand its geopolitical influence' (cited in Bothwell, 2018, p. 6). If we link this to the national brand hexagon cited earlier, we can see a nation's image hinges on the overall, or the sum across the six areas of national competence. Culture is only one section within a larger repository of images that constitute the world's perceptions of China, unless 'governance' and 'export' practice also improves, the cultural dimension alone has a limited role to play in transforming China's national image, nor can it stay immune from the impacts of other dimensions, just as the cultural resources alone cannot build soft power without the attractiveness of a country's political values and foreign policy.

If the above evidence suggests that the two wheels seem to complicate each other in some western countries, on the other side of the globe, political values do not seem to be a barrier to the CI's mission of culture promotion. In July 2014, I visited two CIs in South Korea and interviewed a total of four directors and four Chinese teachers working there. All the Chinese teachers interviewed answered the question of 'how do you handle sensitive questions?' in a very relaxed manner: 'Korean students are generally very reserved and quiet', commented one interviewee, which was echoed by another interviewee working at a different CI: 'Korean students are very polite, they genuinely care about the feelings of the teacher, if they think the question would upset a Chinese person, or make the teacher uncomfortable, they would not ask.' A third interviewee explained:

Generally, Korean students do not like to talk about politics, when sensitive topics arise, they would say, 'let's not discuss politics' and change topics to something that interests them, mostly about where to go for travelling and eating, topics that would not hurt people's feelings. So politics is off the table.

Rather than intentionally avoiding discussions of politics, cultural traits are an important reason for this, according to Jin (2013, p. 239):

Owing to the far-reaching historical influence of Confucian thought in South Korea, and the homogeneous nature of Confucian culture in Korean society, the fact that the CI was identified as a tool of enhancing Chinese soft power did not lead to more criticisms or opposition to it; instead, the reactions are more focused on the revelations this may have for South Korea.

In addition, the influence of China on the neighbouring countries is often linked to trade and business opportunities, generating a bigger demand for learning its language. In Xu Lin's own words, 'the launch of this program is in response to the Chinese language craze, especially in neighbouring countries' (French, 2006, 2). One of the directors interviewed even commented that:

There is really not much need for the CI to 'promote' Chinese language and culture here, in fact, there is such a high demand and inner drive to master the language that more and more Koreans are voluntarily learning the language in the hope to use it as a tool to tap into opportunities offered by this next door neighbour. As for culture, some of the traditional Chinese cultural practices were kept better in South Korea than in China.

These primary data seem to suggest that CIs in South Korea do not face the same challenges posed by tensions or complications between the 'two wheels' as in the US, due to different relations they have with China at multiple levels, culturally, economically, historically and geographically. However, the answers to whether China's state-led approach increases or decreases its cultural attraction seem to be more consistent across the globe. When asked 'How does the CI differ from its western counterparts', 'government presence' was blurted out as an answer without hesitation by one South Korean Director:

Cervantes/Goethe Institutes are non-governmental while the CI is governmental, and often takes on a political colour. The CI should be a non-governmental organization for cultural transmission, but it serves a national strategy and the Chinese government has spent a lot of money on it every year, so they have their stand and want to show this through their visits.

Another CI Director commented on such visits:

It is good this time Xi Jinping did not visit a CI in South Korea, but the Halla CI in Jeju was unveiled by Li Changchun, giving it a strong political colour. The CI's image among the media and general public is very government-related, we were often questioned why we are serving the Chinese government.

While such questioning is causing discomfort in South Korea, it can lead to closure of some CIs in the US. For example, one of the triggering events leading to the shutdown of the Chicago University CI was the petition signed by 108 professors opposing the automatic renewal of the CI agreement after the first five years. Among the reasons presented, number one is 'the fact that Hanban is an agency of the Chinese government, whose global agenda is set by high officials of the Party-State, makes it a dubious practice to allow such an external institution to staff academic courses within the University and approve funding for its research proposals'. The fact that 'Hanban teachers are trained to ignore or divert questions on issues that are politically taboo in China, such as the status of Taiwan, Tiananmen, the pro-Democracy movement, etc.' was also mentioned (available at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/04/29/chicago-faculty-object-their-campus-confucius-institute>).

These empirical evidences collected from the US and South Korea show a contrasted operating context of the CI for any generalised conclusion to be drawn. The cross-case synthesis seems to support the answer that the government-centred approach makes the cultural program look like a state-led persuasion campaign, and reduces cultural attractiveness due to foreground government presence and the blurred boundary between state involvement and the cultural realm. While the attraction of language and culture can be retained and separated from political values in some destinations, it may be disrupted by the latter in others. The concept of cultural boundary would be useful here to explain this inconsistency: 'every cultural practice is a potential boundary marking a community. These boundaries may be either soft or hard' (Duara, 1996, p.49). This offers useful guidance on recalibrating China's cultural diplomacy strategy to different target audiences, as communities with hard boundaries tend to privilege their differences and develop an intolerance and suspicion towards each other's practices. The different receptions and perceptions of CIs' activities in the US and South Korea suggest that the global vision of China's cultural diplomacy can only be achieved through localising its practice by taking cultural boundaries into consideration.

Global Vision Vs. Localised Practice

China's cultural diplomacy aims to engage with the entire world, but the world is one big place. If China was the 'sleeping dragon', and its waking 'will shake the world' as Napoleon once predicted, needless to say, this shaking would be perceived differently in different regions of the world: some communities with hard cultural boundaries may feel more threatened, especially if they depict the dragon as an evil monster in their own cultures; while others with soft cultural boundaries, who

are more familiar with the dragon, may be more willing to learn how to live with it, or even ‘dance with it’. Therefore, this paper argues that the three crucial questions for an effective public diplomacy strategy need to be expanded: from considering what messages are sent under what circumstances, who receives them, and how are the messages interpreted (Melissen, 2005), to also considering who sends the messages and the nature of cultural boundaries with the receiving end. As the CI case study has clearly shown, these two variables also have direct bearings on how the messages are interpreted, because they are not sent to a vacuum chamber, but to a target audience who will decide whether and how they accept, internalise and act upon the messages, depending on a range of internal and external influences, such as education, family, media and travel (Rawnsley, 2013). Therefore, China’s cultural diplomacy strategy needs to be recalibrated carefully against the cultural boundaries with the recipient countries. To help reflect how the vehicle of cultural diplomacy can provide a long-lasting journey of ‘fostering mutual understanding’, this last section will look at the implications that emerge from the comparative case studies, to see what changes can be made to elevate the sophistication of cultural diplomacy in practice.

Localisation, for both the products and the process of cultural diplomacy, should be the key word for a global vision initiated by a centralised approach to work. The current approach tends to be Sino-centric and does not focus enough on the target audiences living within distinct political, social and cultural contexts. As recommended by Ang et al. (2015, p. 375), the role of audiences needs to be taken into account ‘as active meaning makers when they consume cultural diplomacy products: there is no guarantee that the way they read, interpret or understand such products will be in line with the original intentions of cultural diplomacy’. They need to be treated as stakeholders with whom to engage, not just receivers of the messages.

For example, one way to engage the host institution is to expand the head teacher scheme that Hanban already set up in 2013: they are hired locally by the host institution following their own recruitment procedures but paid by the Hanban fund. This way would allow the host university to take advantage of Hanban’s generous support for expansion of the language programme and enrichment of cultural activities, without restricting freedom of inquiry for students to investigate potentially sensitive topics, while keeping the benefits for students of having access to diverse international points of view, including those sponsored by the Hanban. The blend and cooperation between Hanban secondees and locally hired teachers would help nurture a healthy balance and create a more ‘equal partnership’ that both parties can benefit from while minimising the worries of reduced academic discourse on campus. However, the current criteria to apply for this scheme is that each CI that has been running for over two years and has a total registered number of students of over 200 can get one quota for such a position. In other words, the scheme only goes by ‘numbers’ in its global implementation. I argue that cultural boundaries deserve special considerations here: probably an enlarged quota would be beneficial for CIs in countries with relatively hard cultural boundaries with China. These positions will give the host institutions the ‘relational structures’ and ‘shared identity’ proposed by Zaharna (2014), making them feel like a stakeholder in a truly collaborative entity.

Cultural boundaries should also be considered in altering some of the sweeping offerings of CI-funded activities across the globe hitherto. For example, Hanban allocates a large number of teaching materials and textbooks to each CI (3000 volumes as specified in most of the agreements), even though it is not a Hanban mandate and only 12.5% of the institutes actually used textbooks published in China according to Xu Lin, such donations are often used as evidence of government control in some host countries. Therefore, the choice of not using Hanban-sanctioned textbooks can be used as a strong counter-argument to those accusations, and such wasteful donations can stop going to those CIs where they are left gathering dust on the shelf. (Of course, they can continue to go to other parts of the world where they are needed and actually used.) Instead, the saved funding can be offered through a bidding process whereby the host university can bid on the basis of their own expected outputs; this would be a much more effective use of the fund, by again engaging the receiver as a stakeholder and an active participant.

Another lesson that can be learnt from the case studies is that government presence should be reduced across both types of cultural boundaries, while non-state agents should be engaged to play bigger roles. This can be done by putting the two partner institutions more in the limelight for CI events, especially for academic conferences and forums. Hanban can continue with the role of ‘helping build the stage’ with funding support, but not as actors appearing on the stage as well, nor producers making decisions on the lines of the play. More trust and autonomy should be delegated to the two partner institutions, the role played by the Board of Advisors should be made more visible through media communications, as they can offer substantial counter-evidence against the accusations of CI’s infringement on academic freedom and more convincing persuasion than government defence.

Apart from reducing government presence, a more important change should be made from its top-down approach to a bottom-up one to engage more non-state agents. As recommended in the British Council report, ‘governments cannot and should not seek to control culture or cultural contact, but they can nonetheless play a constructive role by facilitating the cultural work of other actors in civil society (Holden, 2013, p. 35). For example, Hanban can create a bidding system with transparent procedures that is open to all organizations: regardless of whether it is privately or government-owned, Chinese or foreign, as long as the bidding party can come up with an initiative that serves the purpose of promoting Chinese language and culture and enhancing mutual understanding, it can win government funding to generate the desired output. The CI may continue to be the flagship project, but more initiatives should be created. As discussed earlier, the multi-agent view represents the future development of cultural diplomacy, as it can mobilise and unleash more nodes to activate a whole network. When the government is functioning just like one node in this network, the desired elevation of sophistication in cultural diplomacy can be achieved.

Conclusion

This paper presents and discusses the competing views on both the vehicle and appropriate agents of China’s cultural diplomacy. It has developed an argument that the vehicle of China’s cultural

diplomacy tries to project soft power on the two wheels of culture and political values. However, there are tensions existing in practice both between the two sources of building soft power, and the two means of attraction and persuasion as evidenced by the CI case study. China's attempts at reshaping its image as an Eastern cultural counterpart are often disrupted by its authoritarian political values, and the state-led persuasion is reducing China's cultural attractiveness with its sponsorship, censorship and presence in the foreground.

After revealing both the symptoms and the cause of challenges faced by the vehicle and driver of China's cultural diplomacy, the paper offers a therapy of expanding the three key questions in formulating an effective strategy to also considering who sends the messages and the nature of cultural boundaries with the receiving end. These two factors have direct implications for the effects of China's cultural diplomacy, whose goal is to facilitate culture flows across established boundaries to enhance mutual understanding. In this process, the approach should evolve from a vertical one that is government-centred to a horizontal one that is network-based with multiple agents to engage the local community and create more collaborations. China's current prescription of funding a mass production of vehicles like the CIs will not address the root cause. When a domestically-made vehicle, running on a state-controlled engine, drives on the road of a host country with different cultural boundaries, the most important thing is to make sure the driver adapts to the local driving practice, and instead of exporting the vehicle with the driver, it might work better to look at other more creative ways to engage the local community.

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