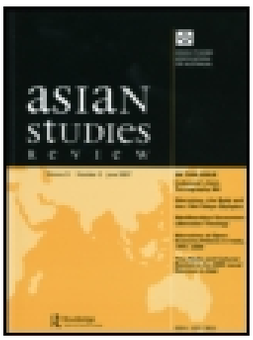

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So Similar, So Different, So Chinese: Analytical Comparisons of the Confucius Institute with its Western Counterparts

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ABSTRACT

This article adopts the lens of a global "cultural terrain of struggle" in unfolding analytical comparisons of the Confucius Institute with its Western counterparts in three layers: their purposes, operating models and provisions. It explains why the Confucius Institute has similar goals to its Western counterparts but is perceived differently from them, and what gives the Institute its unique Chinese features. The hidden barriers are revealed by employing the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, cultural hegemony and the knowledge–power nexus. The difference in operating models is surely a major factor that distinguishes the Confucius Institute from its Western counterparts, but it is an oversimplification to only focus on the visible difference in *locations* without challenging the roles of Orientalism and cultural hegemony, at the heart of which lie hidden differences in power *positions* in this uneven terrain. In discussing some closures of Confucius Institutes, the article also reveals that the Chinese government's role as both a sponsor and censor is another critical difference and a major factor that attracts scepticism.

KEYWORDS

Cultural hegemony; power; Orientalism; cultural diplomacy; Confucius Institute; soft power; terrain of struggle

Introduction

Confucius Institutes (CIs) are non-profit public institutions that aim to "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, 2019b). Managed and funded by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, commonly referred to by its Chinese abbreviation, Hanban, the first CI was opened in November 2004 in Seoul, South Korea. The latest statistics indicate that by December 2018, there were 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 Confucius Classrooms opened in 146 countries and regions around the world (Hanban, 2019a). Both its impressive speed of expansion and the global coverage have gained the CI the reputation of the "flagship" of China's cultural diplomacy, which is defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture, with the intention of *fostering mutual understanding*" (Cummings, 2009, p. 1, emphasis added).

As a relatively new concept, however, cultural diplomacy tends to be mixed with the umbrella term of public diplomacy, which refers to the "active, planned use of cultural,

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educational and informational programming *to create a desired result that is directly related to a government's foreign policy objectives*" (McClellan, 2004, emphasis added). According to Ham, public diplomacy is aimed at "*influencing a foreign government through influencing its citizens*" (2005, p. 57, emphasis added), or even "*to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented*" according to Paul Sharp (cited in Melissen, 2005, p. 11, emphasis added). A clear difference in purpose can be seen from the above definitions, but the Chinese attempt at using the CI as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy is often interpreted as a tool for public diplomacy. This mismatch between its own intentions and the perceived goals seems to be unique to the CI compared with its Western counterparts. In fact, the CI does not try to hide its intention to copy the successes of its "forerunners", as is made clear on its official website:

> Benefiting from the UK, France, Germany and Spain's experience in promoting their national languages, China began its own exploration through establishing non-profit public institutions with an aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries in 2004: these were given the name of Confucius Institute (Hanban, 2019a).

This is a ready acknowledgment that the CI tries to follow in the footsteps of the UK's British Council, France's Alliance Française, Germany's Goethe Institute and Spain's Cervantes Institute. Although the CI is neither comparable in history and scope with the Alliance Française, which has operated for more than 130 years and has more than 800 establishments (Alliance Française, 2019), nor comparable in scale and impact with the British Council, which administers 3 million IELTS tests every year whose results are accepted by more than 10,000 organisations globally (British Council, 2019c), comparisons are frequently made between the CI and these organisations in both the media and academic literature. This article, however, tries to show how a different picture can be revealed by adopting the lens of a global "cultural terrain of struggle" and the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, cultural hegemony and the knowledge–power nexus to engage in analytical comparisons. It also goes a step further in revealing the "differences in similarities" and "similarities in differences", as well as the reasons behind them. The article presents the comparisons in three layers of *why, how* and *what*: the purposes, operating models and activities of these organisations.

Purposes

If we look at the British Council, Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institute and Cervantes Institute, it is not hard to see that all of these countries engaged in cultural diplomacy are trying to achieve a similar goal – namely, to improve their international status and the position of their cultures in the global multicultural spectrum through the promotion of their languages. For example, at the founding of the British Council in 1934, the Prince of Wales clarified that:

> We are aiming at something more profound than just a smattering of our tongue. Our object is to assist the largest number possible to appreciate fully the glories of our literature, our contribution to the arts and sciences, and our pre-eminent contribution

> to the political practice. This can best be achieved by promoting the study of our language abroad (cited in Pennycook, 2013, p. 147).

Similarly, the Goethe Institute, Alliance Française and Cervantes Institute have all suggested that learning the language is only a means to the end of appreciating cultural diversity. China with its CI is no exception here:

> Confucius Institutes devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multiculturalism, and to constructing a harmonious world (Hanban, 2019b).

However, a delicate difference in wording is worth noting, in that the British Council says: "Our work in English aims to bring high quality language materials to every learner and teacher who wants them" (British Council, 2019b). The word "want" actually reveals its superior position in the cultural terrain: "demand" could be driven by practical needs, while "want" is driven by voluntary desires. Other non-English-speaking countries such as France, Germany and Spain all refer to the goals as "(to) promote" their languages and "spread" the culture, but the CI Constitution (quoted above) carefully refers to offering the service to "satisfy demands" and "enhance understanding". These deliberations reveal at least two differences in the purposes of these organisations:

(1) To "satisfy demands": instead of actively "promoting" its language or "spreading" its culture, the CI puts itself in the position of "responding" to the "sharp increase in the world's demands for Chinese learning" brought about by the "rapid growth" of China's economy and exchanges with the world (Hanban, 2019a).
(2) To "enhance understanding": this indicates that there is insufficient understanding of the Chinese language and culture at present, or even some distorted understandings, as argued by the then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang (2011) and scholars such as Zhu (2012), setting a different priority for the CI in comparison to its Western counterparts.

These differences show a mixture of "pride and prejudice": in the domestic context, there is a dose of national "pride" when China gains strength again; for almost the very first time in its modern history, a sense of cultural pride ascends. The "rapid growth" of the economy and the "sharp increase" in the demand for learning Chinese not only justifies what the CI is trying to do, but signifies the growing influence of China, which is articulated and communicated through the new leadership vision of the "China Dream of national rejuvenation" to domestic audiences. When today's rising China needs a symbol to fill the ideological void and unify the nation, Confucianism brings state nationalism, popular nationalism and cultural nationalism together. From the Chinese perspective, choosing Confucius as the namesake signifies the revival of traditional Chinese culture. While constructing domestic legitimacy, it is a proud task to be

called on to "satisfy the demands" for learning Chinese language and understanding Chinese culture.

In the international context, however, there is a need to counter the existing "prejudice" or misconceptions that discursively define China outside its borders. To "enhance understanding" is therefore the other task set for the CI with the hope of also constructing global legitimacy. As one scholar noted, "the founding of the CI is, by and large, an image management project . . . to promote the greatness of Chinese culture while counterattacking public opinion that maintains the China threat" (Guo, 2008). The idea of building a "harmonious world" is essentially a Confucian concept that is now written into the mission statement of Hanban, to remind the world that China is not so much "rising" as reasserting its status while reinforcing the peaceful nature of its resurgence. However, using Confucius as the brand image may not be a sound approach to counter prejudice in a world where "national identity is marketed for political spin" (Louie, 2011, p. 99). Confucius is more than just a cultural icon of wisdom and learning, and Confucian values do not just lie at the core of traditional Chinese culture: they were also given an ideological function in maintaining political order. Besides, the translation of *Rujia sixiang* (儒家思想) as "Confucianism" established a narrow link between Confucius himself and the complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical, ethical and quasi-religious thought and value systems that were developed over thousands of years after him. Meanwhile, the complexity of Confucianism has often been the victim of journalistic simplification, in that the multifaceted image of Confucianism is often only shown to represent authoritarian and hierarchical rule. So, in a way, the name itself is like a label that implies being the "cultural other" and "ideological other" in the eyes of those who still see China with prejudice. The inherent constraint that puts many of the Confucian ideas in conflict with modernity tends to be challenged by some Western scholars, for example, Louie (2011, p. 100), who argued that:

> Domestically, the advocacy of Confucianism will in practice lead to the promotion of very conservative and inconsistent values. Internationally, if such values are to be paraded as the best of "Chinese" essences, China's contribution to world culture will be a confused and regressive one.

Confucianism has been entrenched in Chinese political thinking for thousands of years, and survived all of the attempts at its destruction over the past century, either in the name of democracy (the New Culture Movement in 1912) or revolution (the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976). Its resurgence in popularity in recent years signals its relevance in the vertical time line of the modern world today, and also its worthy place in the horizontal dimension of space as a counterbalance to Western values. However, this was immediately seen as a challenge to Western hegemony by some scholars such as Huntington (1998, p. 93), who argued that "East Asia attributes their dramatic economic development not to their import of Western culture but rather to their adherence to their own culture. . . The revolt against the West is now legitimated by asserting the superiority of non-Western values". We can see the arbitrary equation adopted here between "cultural pride" and "value superiority", and a further speculation that the mission of the CI is to promote Confucian values, and therefore a potential revolt against Western democratic values and a justification of China's authoritarian rule.

The above analysis shows that the CI's purpose is somehow caught between "cultural pride" internally and a "value prejudice" externally, which can help further explain the next question: why, unlike its Western counterparts, the CI's intentions are often questioned, with suspicion of ideological infiltration, particularly by some academics and media in Western countries.

Why is the CI's purpose perceived differently?

This question was also asked by a *China Daily* article, but instead of providing answers, the article just elaborated on its title: "No need to fuss over Confucius Institute" (C. Liu, 2010). I argue that this question must be answered through both theoretical reflection and empirical investigation to contextualise the operation of the CI and reveal the actual configurations underlying the "power struggles" going on in the global cultural terrain. My analytical framework draws on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Foucault's theory of power relations and Said's critique of Orientalism to reveal the biggest hidden difference between the CI and its Western counterparts: it is the same competition, but not a level playing field, and they occupy completely different positions in this terrain of struggle dominated by Western cultural hegemony.

Gramsci (1971) argued that although hegemony is formed through "consent", it is constantly readjusted and re-negotiated, as there will always be a counter-hegemonic struggle. Where there is hegemony, there is resistance, and this is a two-way process: while the counter-hegemonic side will engage in "a war of position" (another Gramscian term referring to the cultural struggle of much longer duration and complexity to gain positions of influence that can develop counter-hegemony), the hegemonic side will resist any emerging forces that could challenge its position. When the CI emerged as a new force in the global cultural terrain, its rapid expansion was quickly identified by the hegemonic side as a potential threat to its dominance. In countering the perceived threat, the hegemons were able to use their power of discourse to determine their interpretation of the CI's purpose by highlighting the ideological connotations in the concept of culture to justify their resistance, and further use their power to turn their perceptions into "knowledge". Just as Orientalism is about the Occidental using its Us-centred interpretation as "knowledge" to represent the Oriental, their study of the Orient is not to achieve truthful knowledge and perception, but to define the relationship between the two, with Western power standing at its very core. Foucault (1980) has argued that knowledge impregnated with power is no longer an objective reflection of truth, but is presented and accepted as truth with power in practice. In his eyes, there are three types of struggle: against forms of domination, against forms of exploitation, and against forms of subjectivity (Foucault, 1982, p. 795). These conceptual frameworks can shed light on the "terrain of struggle" where the CI is placed: against Western cultural domination, and against the subjectivity of the modern-day reincarnation of Orientalism. China's cultural diplomacy aims to achieve a dialogue between cultural contestants: it does not seek to negate the hegemonic culture, nor to replace it with a new hegemony; its appeal of cultural pluralism and harmony means it does not view this struggle as a zero-sum game, but many Western scholars tend to believe China's rise is coming at their expense (Nye, 2005).

On the other hand, however, some Chinese rhetoric about the CI being state-sponsored feeds speculation about its purpose. For example, the CI was claimed to be the "brightest brand for China's soft power" in a 2007 Xinhua report, and the CCP Central Committee published a key resolution on promoting the development of "socialist culture" in 2011, in which the CI was described (along with the Xinhua News Agency and CCTV) as part of the drive to "create new methods of *xuanchuan* to strengthen our international right to speak, respond to foreign concerns, improve international society's understanding of our basic national conditions, to display our country's image of civilisation, openness and progress" (cited in Hughes, 2014, p. 55). These comments were seized upon by critics such as Mosher (2012) to claim that the seemingly benign purpose of the CI leaves out a number of purposes both salient and sinister – namely, "sanitising China's image abroad, enhancing its soft power globally, and creating a new generation of China watchers who are well-disposed towards the Communist dictatorship". When such loaded interpretations of the CI's intention are combined with the CI's government connection, many scholars worry that if there were to be a CI presence on their campus, it would threaten their academic freedom and independence. But the political dimension in cultural diplomacy is not a unique "Chinese characteristic". As Belanger (1999, p. 678) argued, "cultural diplomacy has never been apolitical, even if in general, and quite naturally, it claims to be so". Taylor (1997, p. 80) puts it more bluntly: "cultural diplomacy is very much a political activity designed to serve national interests in an ostensibly cultural guise". Again, the hegemonic side controls power to leave their own activities under the cultural guise, and only unveils the political intention for the CI as if it is a special attribute: what "we" do is called cultural diplomacy, what "they" do is political inroads.

For example, when the American Association of University Professors' report on Partnerships with Foreign Governments (2014) compared the CI with its Western counterparts, these Western institutions were also described as being "clearly connected to imperial pasts, ongoing geopolitical agendas, and the objectives of soft power". Since these institutions share the same political values, their mission is considered harmless, but the CI is believed to "threaten the independence and integrity of academic institutions in host countries". Also, the "imperial past" was only mentioned as a passing comment, ignoring that this past entailed 500 years of colonialism and capitalism that created today's Western-centred world in terms of culture, economy and politics. It is a past replete with the lingering influence of Orientalism and Western cultural hegemony that still shapes today's global cultural terrain, and puts the West in a superior position in pursuing geopolitical agendas and the objectives of soft power. This type of critique dismisses the fundamental difference in power *position* between the CI and its Western counterparts as an understatement, while overstating the CI's *location* as the critical difference that overrides the similarity in their purposes. Most criticisms of the CI focus on the fact that it operates within established universities, institutions and schools around the world, providing funding, teachers and educational materials. Despite Hanban's repeated clarification that the CI's mission is language teaching rather than values-promotion as specified in its Constitution, by-laws and partnership contracts, this model has raised concerns over finances, academic freedom, legal and ethical issues, as well as ideological concerns about improper influence over teaching and

research (Chey, 2008; Golden, 2011; Guttenplan, 2012; Hubbert, 2014; Hughes, 2014; Sahlins, 2015). The next section takes a close look at the differences at this level.

Operating Models

The establishment of a CI follows a formal and regular procedure. Although there are two other types – those entirely run by Hanban and those entirely run by the host country under licence from Hanban – a third type, which entails a partnership between a Chinese home university, an overseas host university and Hanban, is by far the most common, owing to the advantage of sharing establishment and operating costs and the prestige derived from association with host universities (Starr, 2009).

The procedure begins with an application proposal from a foreign organisation (usually a university). The proposal must demonstrate, firstly, a strong demand for Chinese language instruction in the university and local community; and secondly, the willingness of the applicant to contribute (both fiscally and physically) to the establishment and the growth of the CI (Starr, 2009). This has often been used by Hanban as the strongest counter-argument to accusations that China is launching a cultural invasion: the CI is requested by host universities, not imposed upon them. Once the application is approved, both institutions receive financial benefits: every Chinese home university receives 200,000 RMB (about US$30,000) from Hanban as the supporting matching funds for each CI that it sets up, and the overseas host university also receives generous funding from Hanban, including start-up funds of between US$100,000 and $US150,000 and an average annual operational fund of US$50,000 (Xu, 2011).

Although the host university is nominally requested to match funding, this is generally provided in kind, such as campus facilities and office space, as well as administrative and accounting services. There is little in the way of out-of-pocket expenses. As a result, some question whether the CI can represent a soft-power strategy, as this model may not rely on coercion, but does rely on payments, which "may be attractive for financially stretched educational authorities facing a growing demand for Chinese language instruction" (Hughes, 2014, p. 69). Although meeting such "growing demand" is the CI's remit, the controversies arise on two levels: the way it meets the demand, and the perceived purpose of projecting soft power, which goes beyond meeting that demand.

For example, the CI's model has raised scepticism and concerns that there are strings attached. The "'strings' associated with accepting money may be fairly loose" (Paradise, 2009, p. 662), but there are still worries that those who pay the piper may call the tune. The common list of censored topics includes the "three Ts" (Tibet, Taiwan and Tiananmen), human rights, China's military build-up, and factional fights inside the Chinese leadership (Chey, 2008; Golden, 2011; Mosher, 2012; Sahlins, 2015). In other words, it is the government's role as sponsor and censor that lies at the core of such worries.

Chinese rationale behind the CI model

It is true that the CI did not copy its Western counterparts' model of mostly being based in city centres (although Spain's Cervantes Institute also partners with foreign universities and organisations in some cases). As a strategy of "creating alternative

institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society" (Cox, 1983, p. 165), this deliberate move is a modern-day annotation of Gramsci's term of "war of position" to counter hegemony. From China's point of view, its rationale can be found in the following three points.

First, the significance of establishing CIs in overseas universities can be revealed in the de facto existence of China as no longer the external "Other", but part of a living matrix of "Us". This is a vitally important move following the knowledge–power nexus: given that classroom discourse is "very powerful" (Said, 1993, p. 206), and implicitly either normalises or marginalises certain ideas or values, by being there and telling its own stories, and influencing students with people-to-people contacts, the CI is able to play a subtle role in enhancing mutual understanding.

This was endorsed by Hubbert's (2014, p. 348) ethnographic research findings that "the more personal contacts students had with CI teachers, the less China appeared the epitome of an authoritarian state". Also, since the majority of the educated people in the host countries do not read Chinese, their understanding of China mainly relies on second-hand information in English, which tends to be imbued with Western hegemonic perspectives and Orientalist representations. In this sense, language learning is the first step in gaining a more balanced understanding of China, which fits the identified mandates of the CI.

Second, using universities as a vanguard would give cultural diplomacy a non-official face. Universities can be driven by their own motivations to pursue exchanges and cooperation, and thus play the roles of autonomous "diplomats" to aim for win-win partnerships. As explained by Hughes (2014, p. 71):

> When universities allow the activities of CIs to appear on their websites and to use their logos, they provide them with a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of students and the public who expect such brands to guarantee a high standard of academic integrity.

Third, according to the three layers of public diplomacy suggested by Cowan and Arsenault (2008, p. 10), the CI model is actually leading the move from "monologue" to "dialogue", then further to "collaboration", defined as "initiatives that feature cross-national participation in a joint venture or project with a clearly defined goal". It is a much more effective model that can nurture mutual trust and respect, form more lasting relationships, and generate knowledge and insight that neither had before. The CI model was also used by Zaharna (2014, p. 9) to exemplify a "network collaborative approach", with "relational structures and relational dynamics" as its pivotal features. It can help "extend the reach and sustainability of the communication" by "transforming the target audience into stakeholders". This "stakeholder perspective is reinforced through co-created narratives and shared identity as well as shared ownership of the initiative" (Zaharna, 2014, p. 32).

The CI's model has not only transformed host universities into stakeholders, but also engaged with local communities and beyond. Apart from reaching out to local schools and communities for cultural events, hundreds of university presidents and vice chancellors assemble from all over the world in Beijing for Hanban's annual conference. Also in attendance are a wide spectrum of "honourable delegates", from officialdom to academia, from media to business, as well as senior advisors/consultants from various cultural organisations including the British Council, Goethe Institute and Cervantes

Institute. It has created a multilevel face-to-face engagement across sectors, amplifying the knowledge and power nexus. Therefore, both theory and practice seem to suggest that this model is a smart strategy in the "war of position".

However, when placed in this terrain of struggle, through the tinted glasses of ideology, this model is again perceived differently by the other side: its potential constraints, both endogenous and exogenous, come to the fore during interactions with the hegemonic side. By endogenous constraints, I mean factors from within the CI structure, while the exogenous constraints are caused by factors outside the structure. The next section looks at these two sets of constraints.

Endogenous constraints of the CI's operating model

Compared to Alliance Française's identity as "the first cultural NGO in the world" "led by volunteers" (Alliance Française, 2019), the CI does not claim to be independent from the government. In fact, the CI has a double identity, as pointed out by Kahn-Ackermann (2014), the first Director of the Goethe Institute in Beijing and currently advisor to Hanban. The CI headquarters (Hanban) is a Chinese government organisation, while the CI exists as a local organisation overseas as part of a host university. This double identity corresponds to both the first and third forms of cultural diplomacy prescribed by the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy (cited in Pan, 2013, p. 24):

(1) state-sponsored cultural diplomacy, which is often used by governments for distinct political purposes;
(2) independent or semi-independent cultural diplomacy institutions, such as the British Council and the Goethe Institute, which take an informative and exchange-based approach to the promotion of national culture; and
(3) potential cultural diplomacy channelled by academic institutions or individual artists, academics or professionals involved in academic exchanges and cooperation.

These two irreconcilable identities could produce a clash of missions (Hughes, 2014, p. 57):

> There is a big difference between organising a conference with a Chinese university or working with academic colleagues from China on the one hand, and allowing an institution that has the mission of promoting the values and interests of the CCP to have a long-term base on campus and to share in the prestige of the university by having a page on its website and use of its logo, on the other.

The most sensational way to describe this double identity is as a "Trojan horse" (Mosher, 2012). The Hanban Director, Xu Lin, directly refuted this accusation, saying that "CIs are definitely not Trojan Horses, since we are holding no weapons in our hands" (cited in Qu, Zhao, & Cheng, 2012), but according to Mosher (2012), this difference is so vital that it invalidates the whole comparison of the CI to its Western counterparts.

Another endogenous constraint of the CI model was raised by Kahn-Ackermann (2014), who commented that the headquarters of the Goethe Institute guides and supervises its worldwide networks to maintain standards; they train and develop their

own staff and some Institute Directors are given lifetime appointments. The CI, meanwhile, does not have "its own people" on site: both the Chinese Director and teachers are seconded on a short-term basis and some do not even speak the language of the host country. Being engaged in a cross-cultural collaboration can be a daunting challenge. It sounds wonderful when both sides are in harmony, but in reality, all kinds of misunderstandings, disagreements and even conflicts can arise. The CI staff are not trained adequately to conduct intercultural communications, let alone to become experts in this field, which requires knowledge, skills and experience.

This defect in quality assurance was also recognised by Hanban itself. Chen & Yu (2016) identified a shortfall of five million Chinese language teachers worldwide in 2014. Many home institutions do not have sufficient expertise in teaching Chinese as a second language, while others struggle to keep a constant supply of full-time professional teachers for overseas posting. Career interruptions, family separations and disruptions to children's education are the three major "sacrifices" teachers have to make, especially in countries that are not considered as attractive destinations. In an attempt to keep up with the CI's rapid proliferation in the past decade, postgraduate students and high school teachers have been recruited as volunteers. The high turnover rate of CI tutors (most of whom are employed on two-year contracts) also makes it harder to maintain standards and continuity of teaching, or to expect long-term commitment from the teachers.

The other potential problem with this model is that its sustainability can be reliant on the host university: recent closures have all shown that a CI's life can come to an end if it loses the support of the host university. Even a change of staff can have a direct bearing on a CI's fate. For example, the decision to close the CI at Stockholm University was initially announced in 2008 due to concerns about its undue influence, but the termination was not executed due to the strong support and influence from its then-Director, Torbjörn Lodén, until his retirement in 2014 (Fiskesjö, 2015).

This analysis illustrates that some of the CI's merits can also have adverse side effects, just as some of its advantages can be perceived as disadvantages by the other side. These can be understood as *endogenous* constraints that are a result of factors from within the CI structure; the next section looks at *exogenous* constraints caused by factors outside the structure.

Exogenous constraints of the CI's operating model

Although operating as the Cultural and Educational Section of the British Embassy, the British Council is a "stand-alone organisation" according to its chief executive Martin Davidson, who believes that the real question has to be one of independence, and that the CI is "not comparable" due to the self-censorship that comes with the government funding: "I doubt they have to say, 'we'll only give you this money if you never criticise China'" (cited in Guttenplan, 2012).

How can the British Council, which also gets its funding from the government and is even based in an embassy, accuse the CI of lacking independence when it is based on a university campus? A distinction must be made here between government connection and affiliation. Hanban does not just get money from the government: it is under the leadership of the government, while the British Council defines its role as focusing on

"developing people-to-people links and complementing government-to-people and government-to-government contact" (British Council, 2019a). Its role is to "complement" government contact, not to "implement" government aims, which may represent the "degree of separation" that sets the two apart.

Kahn-Ackermann (2014) used the words "small difference" in describing the government connections of the CI and the Goethe Institute. They both rely on government funding and support, which is of "tremendous help but also a burden", and both institutes have to walk the same tightrope between the "political and cultural realms". However, I argue that there is a "big difference" in the "political realm" that gives the CI model its exogenous constraints. The top three factors contributing to the negative reports about the CI are: communism, propaganda and threat/danger (Li & Dai, 2011), which are all inter-related. In Germany, critics and sinologists fear that the influence of the Chinese state on the CI would put "German universities at risk of becoming mouthpieces for the Chinese Communist Party" (Ricking, 2012). Here we can see a tacit "equation" of the Chinese government and the Communist Party, which in turn is synonymous with authoritarian rule and a threat to democracy. Therefore, people who dislike the Chinese political system tend to see state involvement in the CI as "dangerous communist propaganda". In other words, being the "ideological other" is a more salient label, and this one big difference that "springs from the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system" (Hartig, 2012, p. 70) overrides the similarity in government funding.

On the other hand, the Chinese government's presence, which tends to be much more "in the limelight" compared with Western governments' backstage role, fosters such speculation. A lot of the CI's media exposure is because of high-profile official visits from state leaders. Images of visiting officials are often used in negative Western media reports about the CI. For example, in reporting on the closure of Chicago University's CI in 2014, the BBC used a picture of Xi Jinping unveiling a CI plaque in Melbourne in 2010. The *Telegraph*, meanwhile, used a picture of Liu Yandong, Vice Premier and Council Chair of the CI Headquarters, speaking at George Washington University's CI in 2013. A picture of Xi attending a function at the Stockholm CI in 2010 was also used by the *South China Morning Post* in its 2015 report on this CI's closure. A reading of the "Milestones in 2014" in the CI's *Annual Development Report* (2014, pp. 54–69) shows 17 high-profile official visits to CIs by senior Chinese leaders, including six from Xi himself. These visits seem to make the implicit connection with government more explicit. In comparison, pictures of state leaders are rarely found on the websites of the CI's Western counterparts.

If the government's presence is an overt demonstration of the CI's affiliation with government, censorship within China itself is another source of exogenous constraint, even if it is not directly about what the CI does. For example, Xi Jinping's speech in December 2014 calling for tighter ideological control in universities was followed by a ban on textbooks that promote Western values (Xinhua, 2015). This has attracted a lot of attention from the international media, including the BBC, *Guardian, Daily Mail* and Reuters; as a result, the lack of academic freedom on domestic university campuses has raised suspicion about the CI's interference in academic freedom overseas. A professor of political science at the University of Waterloo, which hosts a CI, called this the "unintended consequences of their close alignment with Beijing" (cited in Little, 2010).

The discussions so far have revealed that despite the merits of the CI model, it also comes with both exogenous and endogenous constraints that distinguish the CI from its Western counterparts. As Starr (2009) has summarised, these constraints fall into two categories: "insiders" with practical concerns and "outsiders" with ideological concerns. As a way to overcome these constraints, the CI model has another level of difference: its flexibility and non-uniformity. Compared with its Western counterparts, which mostly follow a standard operating model all over the world, prescribed by their headquarters, the CI's model has the flexibility to adapt to local conditions. The next section elaborates on the last aspect of the comparison: the provisions of the CI and its Western counterparts.

Scope of Activities

According to the 2007 version of the CI's Constitution and by-laws, Confucius Institutes provide the following services overseas: 1) provide Chinese language teaching; 2) train Chinese language instructors and provide Chinese language teaching resources; 3) hold the Chinese proficiency test (known as *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* in Chinese, or by the acronym HSK) and tests for the certification of Chinese language teachers; 4) provide information and consultative services concerning Chinese language education and China's culture, economy and society; 5) conduct research on contemporary China (Ren, 2010).

The CI, therefore, mainly focuses on language teaching, with the word "language" repeated in the top three services. Culture, meanwhile, is only mentioned as an area of consultative services (point 4). It is unclear when the change was made, but at least after 2012, the last item was changed to "5) conduct language and cultural exchange activities between China and other countries" (Hanban, 2019b), replacing the term "research" in the old version. I now compare these two aspects of provision in conducting cultural activities and research with the CI's Western counterparts.

Cultural activities: The "what" and "how"

Despite the centralised input from Hanban and the globalised outreach of the CI, no standard "recipe" can be found for CIs across the world. Each CI has its own focus in activities, which is allowed if not encouraged by Hanban, and is determined by the specific conditions at the home and host institutions. Sometimes, they even provide services other than those shown in the Constitution, such as advertising jobs with Chinese companies for local students. The ratio between language and cultural provision also varies from CI to CI, depending on the host institution. If hosts do not offer Chinese language programs, the CI can add great value in running Chinese modules or even setting up a degree course. Otherwise, the CI will add value more in the cultural provisions, both for the host university and for the wider community. Penn State University is an example of the latter, since it already has a "very robust Chinese-language program":

> We did not use Chinese teachers from Hanban at Penn State, and did not use Hanban pedagogical material – this meant that much of the work the CI could do was restricted to a fairly narrow range of activities within the university – cultural activities and events by visiting Chinese troupes promoted by Hanban for instance, and then some other activities outside the university (support for community events) (cited in Redden, 2014).

Among these cultural activities, the most popular is the China Day at schools. Activities include calligraphy and brush painting, Chinese food and tea tasting, *taiji*, Chinese knot and lantern making, language taster and traditional holiday celebrations. Such cultural activities are often criticised for reducing the diversity of Chinese cultures to a "taxidermised" version, or a product of "culturetainment", meaning "the abridgment of Chinese civilisation in the name of digestible forms of cultural appeal that can be readily shipped overseas" (Redden, 2012). During my interview with the current Director of Goethe Institute China, carried out in August 2015 in his Beijing office, Peter Anders enunciated that:

> The main and obvious difference is our understanding of culture is much broader than those held by the CI concerning cultural activities. Their notion of culture is very traditional, also in a way very repetitive, meaning they are very much focused on calligraphy, Chinese cooking etc. These aspects of life are important, but it would be more successful to open up discussions of contemporary society, to engage with the discourses of the country where they are. The CIs are very close to the academic world, they are easily linked up to the other departments of the University, or bring in somebody from China, this would be a more interesting role to play.

On the one hand, Anders' remarks seem to support Shambaugh's (2013) observation of China's cultural "footprint" being increasingly broad across the globe, but not particularly deep. On the other hand, they show the dilemma for the CI: since it is based on a university campus, it has the stage to play a bigger role, but on the other hand, the controversies it has caused suggest it is safer simply repeating such harmless, traditional cultural activities. Therefore, it is up to the individual CI to use the scope available, in either a more trailblazing manner, or a more "play it safe" mode. The second difference mentioned by Anders in the interview was the approach of the CI:

> Our approach is to develop everything we do together with our partners in the respective countries – for example, we work closely with ministries and the academic world in China to promote professionalisation of German teacher training, while my observation is that the Chinese approach is very much focused on themselves: talking about the significance of Chinese tradition and culture, emphasising the difference of the Chinese way. Of course, it is right there are differences and that's why we're here, to discuss the differences, but we felt the different approach is they want to promote themselves, and we promote the partnership.

This remark is a little ironic in that the CI model itself is a partnership. Nothing is more critical than getting a partner on board in order to make a partnership work. Hanban is actually using the Goethe Institute as a consultant: they meet regularly to exchange ideas, and Anders' comments can suggest areas of improvement to Hanban.

Research: A unique element associated with the CI model

A quick comparison between the scope of activities offered by the CI and its Western counterparts would show one distinct element – research – that is only offered by the CI, which may have to do with its unique model of being based on university campuses. The removal of "research" from the CI's official mandate is intriguing, and there has been no explanation for its removal. However, research activities have not entirely disappeared. In November 2012, the new "Confucius China Studies Program" was launched to channel research from overseas campuses to China. This program

comprises a series of research projects, and includes generous scholarships such as the PhD in China Fellowships, Young Leaders in China Fellowships, and Understanding China Fellowships, which support academics from foreign universities to "undertake research with Chinese researchers in China" (Hanban, 2014). This could be considered a clever move whereby "stepping backward is actually moving forward" by inviting foreign scholars to study the "Other" with the "Other" in the "Other"'s land. It is consistent with the CI's priority task of enhancing mutual understanding, but it has also attracted scepticism and concern, and even led to the closure of the Lyon Confucius Institute (LCI) in September 2013.

The closure was rarely reported until "The Debate over Confucius Institutes" was published on China File in June 2014. The Chair of the LCI Board explained in the debate that since a "new director taking his instructions directly from Beijing arrived in Sep. 2012", he

> insisted strongly on a deeper integration of the LCI in the University itself through participating in teaching of the University degree programs and partnership with the university research centres on the Confucius China Studies Program to send PhD students to study in China (cited in China File, 2014).

As disclosed in a BBC investigation (2015), the CI's new move was perceived as gaining leverage over independent research. When this "interference" was deemed to be "inappropriate since it would put in doubt our academic freedom", and thus refused by the LCI Board, Xu Lin demanded the resignation of the LCI Board chair and announced without warning the suspension of Hanban's funding. As a result, the LCI eventually ceased its activities, becoming the first CI to close due to a research controversy.

If we look into the reasons behind the Penn State University CI's closure, "research" appears to have played a similar role. This CI is one of the few that included "research" specifically in its mission statement, and according to a report in the *New York Times* (Jacobs & Yu, 2014), it was "Hanban's regular rejection of their research plans, including those on the environment, science and politics, saying they were beyond the scope of CI's mission" that led to the termination of the partnership.

An interesting comparison can be made between the two cases. For LCI, Hanban demanded that the CI offer sinology PhD scholarships in China through its partnerships with the university, and this caused the relationship to falter. In the Penn State case, the host wanted to use CI resources to support more research activities, but these ideas were rejected by Hanban for being too far outside its official remit. These two cases may seem to contradict each other, but if we look at the actual "war of position", we can see it is the same fight for power: the significance of the Confucius China Studies program is that China's contribution to research is not just in the form of funds, but more in terms of "knowledge" production. Just providing funds to the host university to do research in which the CI has no direct participation, and thus no control over the research findings, does not make any desirable contribution to gaining a position of influence.

The most widely-reported CI closure happened at the University of Chicago, which also identified itself as a "research-oriented" CI. The university's official statement referred to the role of Hanban as the only reason for the decision to suspend negotiations for the renewal of the agreement. These cases of CI closures offer us a lot of food for thought. We can see from the above examples that research can be a flashpoint in the interactions

between China scholars, host universities, and the Chinese government. In a way, they demonstrate the tension and potential damage that the endogenous and exogenous constraints of the CI model can produce, as the role played by Hanban as the third party is key to the termination of these partnerships. On the other hand, in the current terrain where the US and Europe hold and try to maintain their "positional superiority", it seems that no matter whether the CI wants to be actively engaged in research or passively refuses to get involved, it all leads to the same discord in the partnerships, which reveals the hidden power relations at the core of these interactions: the hegemonic side holding vantage positions can easily manoeuvre a blocking action based on the CI's location on campus, which was translated as a threat to academic freedom and has become a recurring criticism of the CI. Through the repetition of the same discourse, this perception is manufactured as generally accepted "knowledge" for all the CIs despite their multifarious provisions.

A lesson to be learned is to reduce the government's presence and make the role played by the CI Board more visible, as it consists of both Chinese and foreign scholars, including professors and executive management of the host institutions who have a direct say in the CI's decision-making. More voices need to be given to people-in-the-know who can offer substantial counter-evidence as the pinch of truth to manufactured "knowledge".

Conclusion: So Similar, So Different, and So Chinese

This article has used the lens of "terrain of struggle" to examine what distinguishes the CI from its Western counterparts operating in the same terrain. It has applied theories of Orientalism, cultural hegemony and the knowledge–power nexus to make analytical comparisons that addressed a much broader and deeper dimension beyond the superficial differences in government connections and operating models. The results can be summarised as being "so similar, so different, and so Chinese":

- The missions are very similar; one can even venture to say that government involvement is also a similarity, but they turn out to be perceived as being very different;
- What is visibly different is the deliberate wording of the CI's purpose, its specific operating model and the unique element of research in the range of provisions. But when seen in different historical, cultural and ideological contexts, a largely hidden and vital difference is revealed: the uneven condition in this terrain dominated by Western cultural hegemony, and the ensuing different power positions and relations between the CI and its Western counterparts. This hidden difference explains the perceived differences in the CI's intentions and government involvement;
- The Chinese government's presence both "behind the scenes" and "on-stage" is a distinctive Chinese characteristic. It brings the government "background" to the "foreground", and is thus easily seized upon by the hegemonic side to generate suspicion and resistance.

Through the lens of "terrain of struggle", we can see how some of the similarities between the CI and its Western counterparts are converted into differences: the similar purpose of language and culture promotion is interpreted with political connotations, turning the CI

into an imagined propaganda vehicle; the similar funding sources from government are also interpreted as "strings attached" for the CI because of the different ideology of the Chinese government. This lens reveals that the difference is not in the organisation itself, but in power relations with others, as sharply pointed out by Foucault (1982, p. 791) – "the fundamental point of anchorage of the relationships is to be found outside the institution". If we detach the organisation from the terrain of struggle it is placed in, we distort and inhibit the possibility of a comprehensive analysis.

A specific example is the CI's purpose, for we can see a clear disjunction between Hanban's aspiration and the external perceptions of it. Of course what matters is not how the CI sees its own intentions, but how it is perceived by others, just like the famous Henry Kissinger quote: "It is not a matter of what is true that counts but a matter of what is perceived to be true" – by the hegemonic side, I would add, and the power they hold transforms this perception into accepted "knowledge". McCord (2014) has observed that the greatest problem with the "anti-CI literature is that it often leaps from suspicions and concerns to a conclusion of fact".

While the difference in operating models is surely a major factor that distinguishes the CI from its Western counterparts, it is also an oversimplification that does not challenge the Orientalist ground or the "positional superiority" the hegemonic side has occupied in this terrain of struggle. Instead, this difference has been magnified through the lens of ideology, to the extent of negating the comparability of the CI to its Western counterparts. The way this difference is over-interpreted is actually a strategy of struggle. When the CI tries to engage in a "war of position", it finds itself being dragged into a "battle of location". This strategy has shifted attention away from the real difference in power relations, allowing the hegemonic side to maintain its position through the "locking together of power relationship with strategy and the results proceeding from these interactions" (Foucault, 1982, p. 795).

This article also dissects some cases of CI closures to reveal the lessons that can be learned. From Hanban's point of view, in a sense, it looks to the CI's Western counterparts as role models to learn from and targets to exceed. Although Hanban's initial grandiloquent ambition to condense the achievements of Alliance Française of more than 130 years into 16 years by 2020 was adapted to "having a global distribution network in nearly 500 major cities all over the world" in 2013 (Xinhua, 2013), it was still acclaimed as the "spiritual high-speed rail" (Y. Liu, 2014). With its counter-hegemonic stance, the CI is fighting a "defensive" battle under Western hegemony, but through "offensive" expansion into overseas educational institutions. The government's presence as both the sponsor and censor becomes a critical difference that breeds scepticism about the CI. The "scale, speed, resources and strategic thinking" of the Chinese state-led approach add to the apprehension (Hughes, 2014, p. 75). Perhaps there are better ways of using government input to move the CI's model to a more constructive collaboration and more equal partnership by working on those endogenous and exogenous constraints. Evaluations of the actual practice and effects of China's cultural diplomacy in the field need to be carried out for policy impacts.

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