

# Building the “chinese bridge” : dynamics of transnational engagement through confucius institutes in Southeast Asia

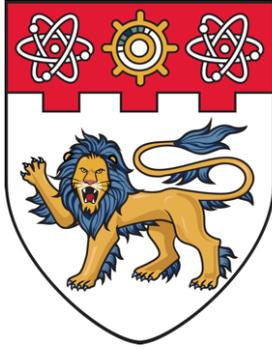
Ma, Sirui

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**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
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**SINGAPORE**

**BUILDING THE “CHINESE BRIDGE”:  
DYNAMICS OF TRANSNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT  
THROUGH CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES IN  
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

**MA SIRUI  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
2018**

**Building the “Chinese Bridge”:  
Dynamics of Transnational Engagement through  
Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia**

**Ma Sirui**

School of Social Sciences

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## **Abstract**

In 2004, China established its first Confucius Institute (CI) in Korea; and a decade later, with more than 500 Confucius Institutes and 1000 Confucius Classrooms worldwide, they now form one of the most extensive cultural networks on the international stage, and also the most controversial one. Whereas traditionally the credibility of cultural institutes is upheld by maintaining a formal independence from the government agencies, CIs made the Chinese government and foreign universities partners. With the joint venture structure and multi-stakeholder engagement unprecedented among its counterparts and predecessors, Confucius Institute has raised new questions to the old practice of cultural diplomacy through language education.

This thesis focuses on the joint venture structure of Confucius Institutes and answers three questions, namely, on what ground is the transnational engagement based; how is it realised and sustained; and what has been produced for whose benefit? Using grounded theory approach and drawing on empirical data from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and China, this thesis offers new approaches to understanding and theorising China's most prominent cultural initiative so far, contributing to the CI literature as well as the discussions on transnational and multi-stakeholder engagement in public diplomacy.

On the one hand, CI's joint venture structure seems to be reflecting the cutting-edge trends in public diplomacy. On the other hand, CIs are initiated by the Chinese government to improve its global image. A gap is presented between the state centric view on CIs, emphasising them as a product of and solution to the problems encountered in China's rise; and the relational approach to CIs,

highlighting their global network structure and synergy. The former is the mainstream in the CI literature.

Neither the state centric nor the relational approach has adequately reflected what is going on in Confucius Institutes. This thesis proposes that the power of language itself underpins the global CI network, providing a shared instrumental interest binding the partners together. The transnational engagement has been sustained by a “dynamic equilibrium”, reconciling potentially conflicting authorities in CI’s administrative structure. And the creation of discourses and meanings reproduces this engagement while empowering the institutionally embedded individuals. Together, they demonstrate the process of structuring in the transnational social space created by Hanban’s “Chinese Bridge” Project.

As a language education programme, the impact of CIs and related projects on individuals may have more to do with the empowering effect of language learning in general. As a cultural diplomacy initiative, its ostensible success in generating a government sanctioned China image is more a product of, by and for the Chinese people themselves. However, by building the “Chinese Bridge” all over the world, it helps to strengthen the network power of Chinese language, grow the number of people who have vested interests in it, which could gradually render the Chinese government more power in shaping our shared form of social coordination, and, in turn, a structural advantage in international communication.

# Introduction

## 1. Old Wine in a New Bottle?

In November 2004, the first Confucius Institute (CI) started its operation in Seoul, Korea. Since then, 525 Confucius Institutes and 1,113 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) have been established in 146 countries and regions, constituting one of the most extensive cultural networks on the international stage.<sup>1</sup> The main tasks of CIs include supporting the host institute in Chinese language education, examination and teacher training; conducting cultural events and educational exchanges; and more generally, providing a channel of information and communication between China and the host society. Having an institute abroad to promote one's language and culture is not novel. France has been running *Alliance Française* since 1883; and the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw different polities with varying, if not opposing, ideologies incorporating cultural tools into their foreign policies. At first sight, Confucius Institute is simply old wine in a new bottle. If so, why has it been so controversial?<sup>2</sup>

Learning a second language is often an empowering experience. However, nations are not funding their language and culture institutes merely for the benefit of the learners. Be it “nationalism”, “*mission civilisatrice*”, “propaganda”, or

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<sup>1</sup> Figures as of December 31, 2017, see Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, “Guanyu Kongzixueyuan/ketang 关于孔子学院/课堂 [About Confucius Institutes/Classrooms],” accessed April 3, 2018, [http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node\\_10961.htm](http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_10961.htm).

<sup>2</sup> In media, since 2006 there has been calls for attention to China's money in the US education system; criticisms reached heights between 2011 and 2014. Early academic works on the CIs appeared around 2006 as well, and in 2014, there was a special journal issue dedicated to the CIs, and many more on the Chinese soft power. An example of scholars' debate in media can be found here: “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes,” *ChinaFile*, last modified June 23, 2014, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/debate-over-confucius-institutes>.

“public diplomacy”,<sup>3</sup> national interest is the central concern and ultimate reason for this state expenditure, as well as the indispensable justification offered to its own citizens. Considering the 20<sup>th</sup>-century battles “over hearts and minds” and the Cold War distinction between the “Communist propaganda” and “democratic public diplomacy”, it is not surprising that the Confucius Institute – a Chinese initiative – has been so controversial, especially in Western countries. The direct investment from Chinese government falls into the worst possible way of conducting cultural diplomacy, as it is tied too closely to the political power; let alone the fact that CIs situate on university campuses and CCs in schools, facing the most receptive audiences.

Often portrayed as a major opponent and competitor against the liberal democratic values, China has a “soft power deficit” in the Western world.<sup>4</sup> Spreading positive information via CIs would thus hardly help to improve China’s image, as they would be viewed with a sceptical eye and interpreted as propaganda machines.<sup>5</sup> In places where China equals a “Communist Other”,<sup>6</sup> CIs are not the remedy for China’s lack of soft power resources as defined by Joseph Nye – modern Chinese culture lacks core value and appeal; its political system

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<sup>3</sup> Language institutes abroad started as a tool of “cultural nationalism”, and acted as “*mission civilisatrice*” especially during the colonial period, became “propaganda” during the two world wars, and evolved into “public diplomacy” for the democratic countries during the Cold War. See for example, Gregory Paschalidis, “Exporting National Culture: Histories of Cultural Institutes Abroad,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15, no. 3 (2009): 275–89; Nicholas J. Cull, “Public Diplomacy before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase,” in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Nancy Snow and Phillip M. Taylor (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 19–23.

<sup>4</sup> David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 210–16.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Jennifer Hubbert, “Ambiguous States : Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 37, no. 2 (2014): 329–49.

<sup>6</sup> Therese L. Lueck, Val S. Pippis, and Yang Lin, “China’s Soft Power: A New York Times Introduction of the Confucius Institute,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 25, no. 3 (2014): 327.

lacks legitimacy; and its foreign policy is perceived as aggressive at times.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, with strong government sponsorship, CIs seem to be conflating public diplomacy with “external publicity (*duiwai xuanchuan*, or *waixuan*)”,<sup>8</sup> generating exactly the opposite of soft power. Public opinions on CIs home and abroad have confirmed China’s image problem. Domestically, this huge investment raised wide criticism on the internet. Doubting the government has any useful ideas to offer to the foreigners, CIs are considered a waste of taxpayer’s money to the best, and a den of official corruption to the worst.<sup>9</sup> Internationally, CIs are accused of communist propaganda in an educational disguise, and sometimes, even centres of espionage.<sup>10</sup>

However, despite domestic distrust, negative media exposure, and vocal objections from prominent scholars and professional organisations,<sup>11</sup> the number

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<sup>7</sup> For sources of soft power, see Joseph S Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success in World Politics*, ebook (PublicAffairs, 2009), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Realising the negative connotation of the word “propaganda”, in 1997, the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee (*zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu*) issued a circular to change the English translation of *xuanchuan* from “propaganda” to “publicity”.

<sup>9</sup> Tracey Fallon, “Chinese Fever and Cool Heads: Confucius Institutes and China’s National Identities,” *China Media Research* 10, no. 1 (2014): 35–47.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Don David Guttenplan, “Critics Worry About Influence of Chinese Institutes on U.S. Campuses,” *The New York Times*, last modified March 4, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/us/critics-worry-about-influence-of-chinese-institutes-on-us-campuses.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/us/critics-worry-about-influence-of-chinese-institutes-on-us-campuses.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&); Eamonn Fingleton, “Is This American Academe’s Most Shameful Moment?,” *Forbes Asia*, last modified August 31, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/eamonnfingleton/2014/08/31/is-this-american-academes-most-shameful-moment/>. In March 2018, U.S. Republican lawmakers were still pushing CIs in the U.S. to register as foreign agents so as to keep a closer eye on them.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Jocelyn Chey, “Chinese ‘Soft Power’, Cultural Diplomacy and the Confucius Institutes,” *The Sydney Papers* 20, no. 1 (2008): 32–46; Marshall Sahlins, “China U.,” *The Nation*, November 2013, 36–43; Marshall Sahlins, “Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12, no. 46(1) (2014), <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Marshall-Sahlins/4220>; Christopher R. Hughes, “Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural,” *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 45–83; Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, “On Partnerships with Foreign Governments: The Case of Confucius Institutes,” *American Association of University Professors*, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.aaup.org/report/confucius-institutes>; “Universities and Colleges Urged to End Ties with Confucius Institutes,” *Canadian Association of University Teachers*, accessed December 17, 2013, <http://www.caut.ca/news/2013/12/17/universities-and-colleges-urged-to-end-ties-with-confucius-institutes>.

of Confucius Institutes kept growing worldwide, reaching the milestone of 500 CIs and 1000 CCs by the end of 2015. More importantly, its current global reach is not an achievement solely by the Chinese government – almost all Confucius Institutes are of a joint venture structure. One host institute, usually a university, propose the setting-up of a CI to the Confucius Institute Headquarters/Hanban in Beijing,<sup>12</sup> and work with a Chinese partner institute, usually also a university,<sup>13</sup> for the establishment of a CI. A start-up fund of US\$100,000 - US\$150,000 is provided by Hanban; and the annual expenses will be split between the Chinese side and the host institute on a 1:1 basis.<sup>14</sup> Each CI normally has two directors, one from the host institute and the other (co-director) the Chinese counterpart. The host institute also needs to provide the administrative personnel to the CI, and in some cases even university-employed teachers. The income of the individual CI is either for its own use or turned in to the host institute, except for that the earnings through various Chinese proficiency tests (such as the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* [HSK]; Youth Chinese Test [YCT], Business Chinese Test [BCT], etc.) are shared by the CI (sometimes with extra examination sites) and Hanban.<sup>15</sup>

Variations of individual cases notwithstanding, it is a common feature presented across the world that the host party also invests in and benefits from CI's development. Thus, the CIs are not only a "Chinese" institute, but also a language education centre of the university hosting it, bearing its credit and legitimacy. In

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<sup>12</sup> Hanban and CIH are the two faces of the same organisation. Hanban's official status is a public institution affiliated to the Chinese Ministry of Education, while CIH is governed by a Council. For more information, see Chapter Three Section 3.3

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes it could be the provincial departments of education

<sup>14</sup> This is the arrangement in principle; situation may vary from case to case. According to my informant in Malaysia, even this basic funding package from Hanban is not universally available.

<sup>15</sup> Interview in Thailand, May 2016

other words, Confucius Institute obtains its material and symbolic capitals from both the Chinese and the hosting institutions, and accommodates potentially conflicting authorities from different countries in its formal administrative structure. To what extent are the CIs still an instrument of and for China's soft power? In an era when public diplomacy is calling for a "relational turn",<sup>16</sup> what can CIs inform us theoretically? With the joint venture structure and multi-stakeholder engagement unprecedented among its foreign counterparts and predecessors, Confucius Institute has raised new questions to the old practice of cultural diplomacy through language education – they are not but old wine in a new bottle.

## 2. Doing Cultural Diplomacy Differently: from Independence to Joint Venture

Be it *Alliance Française* or British Council, *Goethe-Institut* or the Japan Foundation, cultural institutions strive to represent their respective cultures, not governments. In fact, the earliest overseas language and culture centres were not created through government hands. From the 1880s until before the World War I, they were mainly financed and implemented by social actors such as "volunteers, societies, churches, clubs and associations"; the role of the government was "seriously limited".<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, with the hot and cold wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural institutions became an indispensable tool of the government, rendering the cultural and the political intertwined in foreign policies. Despite a conceptual distinction between the "cultural diplomacy" (by and for governments at the policy level) and the "cultural relations" (neutral and

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<sup>16</sup> "Relational strategies as the core imperative" of public diplomacy, see R.S. Zaharna, Amelia Arsenault, and Ali Fisher, "Introduction: The Connective Mindshift," in *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy: The Connective Mindshift*, ed. R.S. Zaharna, Amelia Arsenault, and Ali Fisher (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Paschalidis, "Exporting National Culture: Histories of Cultural Institutes Abroad," 279.

spontaneous exchange for mutual understanding),<sup>18</sup> in practice, they are mutually constitutive. On the one hand, although cultural diplomacy practitioners may want to keep the government at arm's length, the fact that states are funding those activities for their perceived contribution to the long term national interests cannot be denied; on the other hand, spontaneous cultural relations can also flourish through government initiated cultural projects. It is widely recognised that the credibility of cultural programmes can only be preserved by keeping a distance from the political authority, yet it is still in line with national interest that keeping a distance seems necessary.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, it is an established view that the successful operation of a language and culture institute entails managing the tension between spontaneous exchange and the government's attempt to shape it, so that it can contribute to national interests "independently". British Council, one of the best practices of its kind, reflects in its organisational structure a strategic position that is at once independent from the government and working closely with it.<sup>20</sup> Learning from the European examples, the Chinese government also made an effort to neutralise the perceived political influence on the Confucius Institute Headquarters (CIH)/Hanban. With a history that dates back to 1987 but the current structure formed in 2007, CIH/Hanban is put under the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) instead of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the latter is associated with government's foreign policy articulation and implementation). The CIH is

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<sup>18</sup> Richard T. Arndt, *First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005), xviii; J. M. Mitchell, *International Cultural Relations* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 2–6.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas J Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. March (2008): 36.

<sup>20</sup> "Relationship with the UK Government," *British Council*, accessed February 22, 2017, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/facts/what-the-british-council-does/relationship-uk-government>.

governed by a Council. Among its 15 Council Members, 10 are the directors of the overseas CIs (representing the host institutes) and 5 are from the Chinese partner institutes,<sup>21</sup> signifying certain autonomy of the global CIs.

Nevertheless, this arrangement does not mean an “independence” of CIH from the Chinese government. In addition to the 15 Council Members, there are also one Chair, “several” Vice Chairs and Executive Council Members appointed by the Chinese State Council in the CIH Council, with one Executive Council Member being the Chief Executive of the CIH.<sup>22</sup> This arrangement ensures that Chinese government steers the CIH, not to mention that it is only a recent creation. Long before the CIH, Hanban came into being as the Office of the National Leading Group of Teaching Chinese as Second Language (*guojia duiwai hanyu jiaoxue lingdao xiaozu ban gongshi*, thus the abbreviation *Hanban*).<sup>23</sup> Founded in 1987, Hanban was originally composed of representatives from different departments of the Chinese State Council.<sup>24</sup> The Chief Executive of CIH also serves as the Director General of Hanban. The CIH and Hanban overlap in operation and personnel (except for the CIH council); they are basically two faces of the same entity.<sup>25</sup> With strong government presence in the Hanban/CIH, Confucius Institutes are far from the ideal form of cultural institutes overseas.

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<sup>21</sup> “Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes,” *Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters*, accessed August 14, 2017, [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_7880.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Leading group, *lingdao xiaozu*, is a formal administrative institution embedded in or appended to the main administrative structure. For more information, see Chapter Three, section 3.3.

<sup>24</sup> Bisong Lü, *Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue Fazhan Gaiyao 对外汉语教学发展概要 [A Synopsis of the Progress of Teaching Chinese as Second Language]* (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> “About Us,” *Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters*, accessed February 23, 2017, [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_7719.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_7719.htm).

If CIs do not rely on a formal independence from the Chinese government to maintain their credibility – which is a major reason why they are criticised – how are they able to expand with the cooperation of higher education institutions on a global scale? Can the benefits of Chinese funding easily offset the risk to their institutional autonomy and reputation?<sup>26</sup> There may not be a simple answer to this question. Each host institute had different motivations that propelled the cooperation; and over time, motivations may also change. Yet, given the sensitivity of this engagement and the heated debates, the fact that CIs kept growing and maintained their global presence deserves more scrutiny than a moral judgement.

Instead of using a formal independence from the government as the institutional buttress of their credibility, Confucius Institutes have adopted a joint venture structure that obtains authority from both the Chinese and hosting institutions. In most cases, each overseas CI has its own Board of Directors (*lishihui*) consisting of members from the host institution and its Chinese partner, with the total number and component ratio determined through consultation. Two directors (*yuanzhang*), one from China and the other the host institution, will oversee CI's daily operation.<sup>27</sup> In some cases, there will be only one director from the host institution.<sup>28</sup> This administrative structure means that the relationship between individual CIs and the Hanban/CIH is not strictly hierarchical, despite the latter's

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<sup>26</sup> The shortage of funding has been identified as a crucial problem especially in the US higher education system, and also the motivation for universities to cooperate with the Chinese government. See “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes”; Amy Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2014); Hughes, “Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural.”

<sup>27</sup> “Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes.”

<sup>28</sup> For example, in Singapore and Australia. see Falk Hartig, “Cultural Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics : The Case of Confucius Institutes in Australia,” *Communication, Politics & Culture* 45 (2012): 263.

command of the material and human resources. The host institutes provide CIs with established local footholds, without which CIs would not be able to operate as they have done for more than a decade. Meanwhile, the Chinese side – that is, both the university and Hanban – has only partial discretion over CIs’ operation. The remaining room to control by the hosting side, or simply the feeling of having such control, made CIs “theirs” as well. In other words, the host institutes endow CIs with legitimacy, maintain authority over their operation, and have stakes in their success. It is this multi-stakeholder structure that underlies CIs’ existence and enabled their global expansion as an accumulated effect of individual choices. The multi-stakeholder joint venture is an interesting phenomenon empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it provides CIs with a crucial source of credibility and forms the institutional basis of their vitality, which deserves more in depth analysis. Theoretically, it pertains to an underdeveloped literature on the processes and mechanisms of “mutuality” and “engagement” in cultural and public diplomacy, especially when both state and non-state actors are involved. In cultural diplomacy, scholars have identified that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, going “beyond the national interest” to embrace dialogue and collaboration is “in the national interest”.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, public diplomacy literature has been emphasising mutuality, exchange and relationship building, rather than unidirectional dissemination of information. Concepts such as the networked public diplomacy<sup>30</sup> and strategic and multi-stakeholder engagement<sup>31</sup> point to the fact

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<sup>29</sup> Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 378.

<sup>30</sup> Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher, “Introduction: The Connective Mindshift.”

<sup>31</sup> R.S. Zaharna, “Strategic Stakeholder Engagement in Public Diplomacy” (paper presented at the International Studies Association Conference, Montreal, March 15-19, 2011), doi:10.2139/ssrn.2194113; Brian Hocking, “Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Forms, Functions, and Frustration,” in *Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Steve Slavik (Malta and Geneva: DiploFoundation, 2006), 13–29.

that actors are “no longer able to achieve their objectives in isolation from one another”, and the traditional state-centric diplomatic culture needs to adapt to the milieu of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, mutuality and engagement are easier said than done. For one thing, the “rat race” in soft power rendered cultural diplomacy tore between “the opposing dynamics of competition and mutuality”.<sup>33</sup> For another, unlike the “clear normative expectations of behaviour” in the traditional state-centric model of public diplomacy, the multistakeholder model may witness clashes between the “sovereignty and non-sovereignty based rules”, and between the expectations of stakeholders.<sup>34</sup> To accentuate mutuality and engagement does not equal them being realised. It is thus crucial to spell out the potential difficulties and conflicts of interests in the process of engagement, so that the theoretical construction of multi-stakeholder engagement can reflect the complexity of reality, and that the process of relation building can inform the development of the “rules of engagement” between actors and stakeholders from different countries.<sup>35</sup>

Confucius Institute, with its multi-stakeholder joint venture structure, is where the tension between “cultural diplomacy” and “cultural relation” concentrates, and also where the “rules of engagement” in multi-stakeholder public diplomacy are being negotiated. Enhancing China’s soft power is undeniably one of the strategic goals behind the hundreds of millions of dollars spent annually in running CIs worldwide.<sup>36</sup> The Chinese government would hope the operation of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>33</sup> Ang, Isar, and Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” 374.

<sup>34</sup> Hocking, “Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Forms, Functions, and Frustration,” 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ang, Isar, and Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” 378; Hocking, “Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Forms, Functions, and Frustration,” 27.

<sup>36</sup> According to the annual reports, the rough annual spending reached 120 million USD in 2008, and in 2016 is was more than 314 million. See <http://www.hanban.edu.cn/report/>

CIs to follow the rules based on sovereignty and further China's national interest. However, this pursuit may not be in line with other stakeholders' objectives and priorities. As a language teaching institution, the pedagogical-based professional rules should govern CI's daily work; not to mention the potential conflict of values between the different authorities entering this joint venture. How would this tension play out? Moreover, if the tension is constantly presented, what mechanisms are in place to deal with the potential conflicts among stakeholders and keep the joint venture going? Some pressing questions about CI's transnational joint venture structure await explanation and theorisation.

### 3. Research Questions and Thesis Outline

This research takes the fact that Confucius Institutes are co-produced by multiple stakeholders from different countries as the starting point, and focuses on the *basis*, *process* and *product* of their joint venture structure. It asks the following three questions:

Firstly, on what ground is the CI joint venture based? While China's soft power ambition is not shared by CIs' global partners, what binds them together?

Secondly, how this partnership is maintained? What is the mechanism and infrastructure of the global CI network whereby Hanban/CIH and its global partners negotiate a workable relation?

Thirdly, what results has been produced from constructing this transnational social space, and who are getting the benefits?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to make a distinction between the ideologically charged policy statements on China's "external publicity" and what has been happening on the ground. Let us not forget that the policy designs do

not equal to their implementations, and certainly not consequences. The point is not simply to criticise the government when it interferes with and politicises the cultural activities; more importantly, we should spell out how the government, facing constraints and limitations beyond their sovereign power, is finding ways to express its interests; and similarly, how other stakeholders do the same. Answering these questions can help to explain not only the on-the-ground dynamics of relation building, but also the formation of rules, norms and values in the multi-stakeholder engagement in public diplomacy, where the sovereignty-based rules are inadequate in dealing with the complexity of reality, yet the state remains the predominant resource provider.

Following the introduction, Chapter One gives a more comprehensive literature review on Confucius Institutes as well as the trends of theoretical construction in public diplomacy in general and the China topic in particular. It suggests that because of the paradoxical role of state in public diplomacy, the literature is prone to be caught in a dichotomy of the “political state” versus the “spontaneous society”. The literature on governance, although not readily useable for analysing the CI phenomenon, offers inspiring insights about how this gap can be bridged and how the process of relation-building can be accounted for.

Chapter Two will introduce the methodology and methods used in this research. Grounded theory provides a good methodology that can capture what is substantive to CIs in reality, rather than letting concepts dominate the discussion. This chapter will bring in the Southeast Asian perspective by illustrating the different concerns CIs face in different geopolitical and cultural contexts. Rather than assuming the decisive role of inter-state relations in the CI cooperation, it suggests that the analysis should incorporate the macro, meso and micro level

conditions for a contextualised answer to the research questions that are of general relevance to CIs worldwide.

Chapter Three will go beyond the dominant discourses in the West and suggest that the power of language itself is underpinning the global CI network. Based on a theoretical review of the power implications in language nationalisation and internationalisation, as well as a historical account of the emergence of Hanban and Confucius Institutes, this chapter suggests that this new explanation to the basis of the CI joint venture can help to bridge the gap between the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives in CI literature.

Chapter Four will answer the question on how the transnational partnership has been maintained. Proposing the idea of “dynamic equilibrium” to explain the process of multi-stakeholder engagement, this chapter will explain how the dynamic processes of negotiation and finding balances are realised in different domains of activities in CIs; and demonstrate the usefulness of this concept in understanding the case-by-case variations among CIs even within a country and the overall resilience of the global CI network. In addition, the dynamic equilibrium also offers a preliminary theorisation of the process and mechanisms of transnational engagement in public and cultural diplomacy. Instead of emphasising either the intention of state or the ideal of cooperation, it highlights how authorities are contested in various aspects of this transnationally created social space.

Chapter Five will look at the implications of having the transnational social space created via the CI collaboration. Focusing on the functioning of human agency in the “Chinese Bridge” language competition in Thailand and drawing

comparisons within and beyond the country, this chapter offers a detailed analysis of the production of discourses and meanings, and illustrates how this has contributed to the reproduction of structural forces in CIs while empowering the individuals, substantiating the conclusions of the previous two chapters on a personal level.

And the conclusion will summarise the findings and reiterate the process of structuring in China's so far most prominent global cultural initiative. It shows in a nut shell the dynamics of transnational engagement in Confucius Institutes; and revisits the theoretical implications of CIs as an embodiment of the substantive complexity when public diplomacy embraces transnational collaboration. Towards the end, the limitations and problems of this thesis are discussed to inform future researches.

# **Chapter One**

## **Confucius Institutes Reassessed**

Widely regarded as China's charm offensive, Confucius Institutes are examined via the soft power lens in the mainstream literature. Despite some evidence of improved perception on China and Chinese culture under certain conditions, the majority of the studies doubt that CIs can effectively contribute to enhancing China's overall image. Important as they are, the discussions on soft power have not sufficiently addressed CI's unique joint venture structure and how they might have affected CIs operation and significance. Some scholars have zoomed in on this structure. Yet more often than not, it is either portrayed as a mechanism of Chinese government manipulation, or an abstract and idealised model of transnational collaboration. A gap can be observed in the CI literature between what I call the "China rising" perspective and "Global connectivity" perspective, which is not helped by the long existing tension between state and society in public diplomacy literature. A third way that can reflect the processes and dynamics of CIs as a multi-stakeholder co-production is thus entailed. Inspired by discussions in governance literature, this chapter suggests that firstly, the gap in CI and public diplomacy literature can and should be bridged by a new theoretical explanation on the basis of the transnational partnership; secondly, rather than looking at the motivations of different actors, we may instead look at the types of relations and areas where power is contested to account for the process and mechanisms of transnational engagement; and thirdly, the institutional embeddedness of actors should also be taken into consideration so as to depict a complete loop of structuration in this transnational social space.

## 1. Confucius Institutes in the Literature: A Critical Review

What does the current literature tell us about the CIs? Being a new development accompanies China's rise, CIs' contribution to China's soft power appears to be a foremost empirical question shaping the discussions. Optimistic views hold that the CIs symbolise the rise of China's soft power through the promotion of Chinese language and culture.<sup>37</sup> CIs signify a turn from the "centralized arrangements to more market-mediated regulations" in teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL); and the global CIs help to connect different parts of the world while primarily serving the local societies, constituting a new soft power manifestation for China.<sup>38</sup> A quantitative case study seems to support this argument. By surveying more than 500 CI students in 16 Confucius Institutes in the US, Russia, Thailand, Japan and Lebanon, it shows that half of them had more positive impression on China after learning Chinese.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, these statistics only reflect the view of a very specific group of people, thus cannot testify China's soft power on a broader scale. China's image is influenced by various factors, and CIs per se can hardly change that.<sup>40</sup> On a macro level, it seems that a country's socio-economic development, measured by the UN Human Development Index, is negatively correlated with its view of China.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sheng Ding and Robert a. Saunders, "Talking up China: An Analysis of China's Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language," *East Asia* 23, no. 2 (June 2006): 3–33.

<sup>38</sup> Hongqin Zhao and Jianbin Huang, "China's Policy of Chinese as a Foreign Language and the Use of Overseas Confucius Institutes," *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 9, no. 2 (2010): 127–42.

<sup>39</sup> Ying Wu, *Kongzixueyuan Yu Zhongguo Wenhua de Guoji Chuanbo 孔子学院与中国文化的国际传播 [The Confucius Institute and the International Communication of Chinese Culture]* (Zhejiang: Zhejiang University Press, 2013), 132.

<sup>40</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 68–69; Falk Hartig, "Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China's Strategic Narratives," *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 245–58.

<sup>41</sup> Tao Xie and Benjamin I. Page, "What Affects China's National Image? A Cross-National Study of Public Opinion," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 83 (2013): 850–67.

Besides, the CIs are confronted with many practical problems,<sup>42</sup> from finance and management to pedagogy and enrollment, which are still present after more than a decade of operation.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, scholars are yet to be convinced of CI's contribution to Chinese soft power,<sup>44</sup> if not sceptical of the relevance of this concept altogether, as CI's success is one of economy rather than culture,<sup>45</sup> although the growing importance of the Chinese language in international activities has been acknowledged.

If CIs are not yet producing soft power for China, what are their impacts? Chinese universities are considered potentially the “real winner”.<sup>46</sup> Although they often consciously avoid being associated with politics and diplomacy,<sup>47</sup> the fact that CIs provide a gateway to internationalisation is attractive enough for most Chinese universities to embracing this project.<sup>48</sup> For the foreign universities, as they also have to invest in the CIs which are not for-profit organisations, the latter

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<sup>42</sup> Don Starr, “Chinese Language Education in Europe: The Confucius Institutes,” *European Journal of Education* 44, no. 1 (2009): 78.

<sup>43</sup> For example Lihua Xu, “Kongzixueyuan de Fazhan Xianzhuang Wenti Ji Qushi 孔子学院的发展现状、问题及趋势 [Development of Confucius Institutes: Status Quo, Problems and Future Trends],” *Journal of Zhejiang Normal University (Social Sciences)* 33, no. 5 (2008); Xiliang Cui, “Hanyu Guoji Jiaoyu ‘sanjiao’ wenti de Hexin Yu Jichu 汉语国际教育‘三教’问题的核心与基础 [On the ‘Three Concerns’ of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language],” *Chinese Teaching in the World* 24, no. 1 (2010); Cheng Liu and Ran An, “Kongzixueyuan Guonei Yanjiu Xianzhuang Tedian Ji Zouxiang 孔子学院国内研究现状、特点及走向 [A Review of Domestic Research on Confucius Institutes and Its Prospect],” in *Kongzixueyuan Chuanbo Yanjiu 孔子学院传播研究 [Communication Studies on the Confucius Institutes]* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012), 20–27; Rong Dai, *Kongzixueyuan Yu Zhongguo Yuyan Wenhua Waijiao 孔子学院与中国语言文化外交 [Confucius Institutes and Chinese Language and Culture Diplomacy]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2013), 89–98.

<sup>44</sup> Zhenjie Yuan, Junwanguo Guo, and Hong Zhu, “Confucius Institutes and the Limitations of China’s Global Cultural Network,” *China Information* 30, no. 3 (2016): 334–56.

<sup>45</sup> Ying Zhou and Sabrina Luk, “Establishing Confucius Institutes: A Tool for Promoting China’s Soft Power?,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 628–42.

<sup>46</sup> James F. Paradise, “China and International Harmony: The Role of Confucius Institutes in Bolstering Beijing’s Soft Power,” *Asian Survey* 49, no. 4 (2009): 665.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 657; Hartig, “Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China’s Strategic Narratives,” 249.

<sup>48</sup> Su Yan Pan, “Confucius Institute Project: China’s Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Projection,” *Asian Education and Development Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 22–33.

is far from a cash cow for the former.<sup>49</sup> However, hosting a Confucius Institute still injects additional money and personnel into the resource-drained language departments, constitutes a gesture by the administration to prepare students for the competitive global economy,<sup>50</sup> and in some cases, a boost to the host institute's symbolic capital. Whatever the reasons for joining in the CI programme, benefiting the students and the teachers is always the most important justification for the decision. Yet it is a vision that may not always realise.

CI's implication for teachers may be quite different from that for the university administrators. Whether going abroad willing or reluctantly, the Chinese professors and teachers often find themselves in an awkward situation on American campuses. Their educational background and Hanban related training cannot render them adequate professional authority; and the distrust by their hosting counterparts constitutes "an affront to their rarely nationalistic professional sensibilities".<sup>51</sup> Despite that the Chinese government is confident in their teachers' proactivity in defending national interest,<sup>52</sup> in fact, the teachers' credibility is often preserved by diverting from the state policy and presenting themselves as "candid and introspective individuals rather than subordinated representatives of a socialist state".<sup>53</sup> When confronted with conflicts between national agenda and professional credibility, focusing on the latter seems to be a

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<sup>49</sup> Hartig, "Cultural Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics : The Case of Confucius Institutes in Australia," 263.

<sup>50</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 62–75.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>52</sup> Madam Xu Lin said that all the Chinese teachers will not hesitate in saying that Taiwan belongs to China. See John Sudworth, "Confucius Institute: The Hard Side of China's Soft Power," *BBC News*, last modified December 22, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30567743>.

<sup>53</sup> Hubbert, "Ambiguous States : Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom," 342.

wiser choice. The faculty members of the hosting institutes are in a different set of dynamics; and their priority varies between different cases. They may find the Chinese teachers valuable colleagues and timely helpers; or may feel the heightened competition in job market brought about the free and “authentic” alternative labour force.

With university administrators devoted to generating more resources and Chinese teachers under pressure to prove themselves, it looks like a favourable situation to the students. But again, the reality is multifaceted. In Britain, the promotion of *Putonghua* has raised worries of a wider generational gap in overseas Chinese communities;<sup>54</sup> in Canada, the “racialised representation” of Chinese culture may hinder real ethnic equality and mutual understanding;<sup>55</sup> in Kenya, the Chinese language has become a new competitor in addition to English of the local languages for a favourable language policy, while the alleged benefits of learning Chinese turned out to be more restricted than students had expected.<sup>56</sup> And in the US, the social interactions enabled by and realised through the CIs flow “in myriad ways”, rather than following “a script that administrators or CI representatives laid out”.<sup>57</sup> The participants of CI activities may not primarily be the target audience, i.e. the local students; and even when they come, it may not be motivated by gaining international mobility through learning the language as described in the administrators’ rhetoric, but can be the complete opposite: helping

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<sup>54</sup> Hua Zhu and Wei Li, “Geopolitics and the Changing Hierarchies of the Chinese Language: Implications for Policy and Practice of Chinese Language Teaching in Britain,” *The Modern Language Journal* 98, no. 1 (2014): 335–36.

<sup>55</sup> Heather Schmidt, “China’s Confucius Institutes and the ‘Necessary White Body,’” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 4 (2013): 647–69.

<sup>56</sup> Anita Wheeler, “Cultural Diplomacy, Language Planning, and the Case of the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 49, no. 1 (2013): 49–63.

<sup>57</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 83.

the Chinese students to be incorporated into the American society.<sup>58</sup> And the Taiwanese parents may “correct” what has been taught to their children in class, but still value the Chinese speaking environment provided by the CI.<sup>59</sup> In general, it seems that those who are already “globally connected” are “in better positions to take advantage of CI programming than are the audiences to whom such programming is pitched”.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond the university campuses, CIs also influence bilateral economic relations and potentially China’s overall economy. And it is not only because that language teaching and examination can develop into a lucrative industry.<sup>61</sup> A series of researches were conducted on the relation between establishing CIs and the volume of international trade, foreign direct investment (FDI) and tourism between China and the host countries. It has been found that during the initial years of the CI project, in addition to being an English-speaking developed country, imports from China positively impacted the establishment of CIs;<sup>62</sup> and after the CIs were founded, they increased both Chinese exports and outward FDI flows, and the impact appeared more significant in the developing countries.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, in the US, with each additional CI branch established in a given state, there was a 5-6% increase in state exports to China.<sup>64</sup> And globally, the presence

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 90–91.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph L Cichosz and Qian Zhang, “On the Shoulders of Confucius: China’s Century-Old Dream,” *China Media Research* 10, no. 1 (2014): 29–35.

<sup>62</sup> Donald Lien and Chang Hoon Oh, “Determinants of the Confucius Institute Establishment,” *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance* 54, no. 3 (2014): 437–41.

<sup>63</sup> Donald Lien, Chang Hoon Oh, and W. Travis Selmier, “Confucius Institute Effects on China’s Trade and FDI: Isn’t It Delightful When Folks Afar Study Hanyu?,” *International Review of Economics & Finance* 21, no. 1 (2012): 147–55; Muhammad Akhtaruzzaman, Nathan Berg, and Donald Lien, “Confucius Institutes and FDI Flows from China to Africa,” *China Economic Review* 44 (2017): 241–52.

<sup>64</sup> Donald Lien and Catherine Yap Co, “The Effect of Confucius Institutes on US Exports to China: A State Level Analysis,” *International Review of Economics & Finance* 27 (2013): 566–71.

of the CIs will increase tourism to China in general and business and worker tourists in particular.<sup>65</sup> Despite that the authors did not develop a full discussion to explain empirically the positive correlation between the CIs and economic activities, these researches managed to demonstrate the big picture of an intensified flow of people and goods between China and the hosting countries, which is a development welcomed by China.

The theoretical discussions on CI and China's soft power and the empirical analysis of CIs impacts indicate that neither "Trojan horse" nor cash cow can adequately summarise CIs' role vis-à-vis their hosting institutions. They may not immediately benefit China's soft power in terms of advancing specific political agendas and are yet to figure out how to be operationally sustainable; but the Chinese universities value the international outreach associated with the CIs, and the host institutes value the additional resources provided by Hanban for their own developments. The alleged benefits promised to the students are not always getting realised, but CIs have indeed served as the platform for more contacts and, in some cases, more cooperation.

Being a unique and defining feature of CIs, the joint venture structure also attracted scholars' attention. It has been featured by Zaharna and Hartig in different ways. Zaharna believes that the CIs are a successful example of the "network-based collaborative" initiative of public diplomacy – its network structure is of high-density, centralised for effective management of diversity; its network synergy is successful in absorbing "culturally diverse global

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<sup>65</sup> Donald Lien, Sucharita Ghosh, and Steven Yamarik, "Does the Confucius Institute Impact International Travel to China? A Panel Data Analysis," *Applied Economics* 46, no. 17 (2014): 1985–95.

membership” and in building internal and external relations by combining teaching activities with cultural ones; its network strategy has transformed “network structure into a collaborative process” where storyline is co-created, and pedagogical innovation achieved, as can be seen during the annual CI conferences. <sup>66</sup> Employing Zaharna’s concept of strategic stakeholder engagement, Hartig focuses more on the micro level conditions and environments of cooperation, suggesting that the CIs may not be as ideal as the theory predicts, as the effectiveness of engagement is limited by the conflict of goals.<sup>67</sup> Yet, the joint venture still renders more credit to image shaping than the Chinese going-out media.<sup>68</sup>

Hsiao and Yang see the working of the joint venture differently. Using examples in Southeast Asia, they proposed a four-layered interactive network surrounding the politics of *guanxi* (“*guanxi zhengzhi wangluo*”) where the CIs serve as “nodes”. The first layer is a government-to-government relation that uses CIs for politicised cultural activities; the second is one of institution-to-institution that links partner universities for shared cultural and educational resources; the third is institution-to-government that provides training in Chinese language for people serving the local public sectors; and the fourth is institution-to-society that connects Beijing to overseas Chinese communities.<sup>69</sup> Different local dynamics

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<sup>66</sup> R.S. Zaharna, “Network Purposes, Network Design: Dimensions of Network and Collaborative Public Diplomacy,” in *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy: The Connective Mindshift*, ed. R.S. Zaharna, Amelia Arsenault, and Ali Fisher (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 173–91.

<sup>67</sup> Hartig, “Cultural Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics : The Case of Confucius Institutes in Australia.”

<sup>68</sup> Falk Hartig, “Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2012): 53–76.

<sup>69</sup> Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Hao Alan Yang, “Kongzi Xueyuan Zai Zhongguo-Dongnanya Guanxizhengzhi Zhong de Juese 孔子學院在中國-東南亞關係政治中的角色 [The Role of Confucius Institutes in the Politics of Guanxi between China and Southeast Asia],” *Prospect Foundation Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2014): 1–55.

may influence which type of *guanxi* is more prominent. For example, the CIs in Cambodia highlight the close cooperation between the two governments, whereas those in Myanmar rely more on the ethnic Chinese community.<sup>70</sup>

On a global level, the geopolitical influences of the CI network have been discussed by Kluver based on Castells' communication power. As the state per se "has little ability to impact global patterns of cultural consumption" in the contemporary setting, the CI project can be understood as an attempt to develop a "node" that articulates and enacts Chinese culture so as to "liberate" it from its "traditional geographic and linguistic boundaries" and "enter the global network of cultural influence".<sup>71</sup> Li, Mirmirani and Ilacqua suggested how this communication network had been supported by distributed leadership and knowledge sharing.<sup>72</sup>

These studies highlighted the joint venture and network features of CIs. However, there seems to be a gap in interpreting their logic and dynamics. Are they a channel of Chinese infiltration, manipulation and a web for reaping extended benefits; or do they embody successful transnational collaboration? Some studies tried to substantiate their own interpretations by demonstrating the process of engagement. Peng focused on how China has been pushing forward its cultural persuasive strategy through the local elite network in Japan, giving a more nuanced picture of how joint venture actually works.<sup>73</sup> Hartig also emphasised the

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<sup>70</sup> Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Hao Alan Yang, "Differentiating the Politics of Dependency: Confucius Institutes in Cambodia and Myanmar," *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 11–44.

<sup>71</sup> Randolph Kluver, "The Sage as Strategy: Nodes, Networks, and the Quest for Geopolitical Power in the Confucius Institute," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7, no. 2 (2014): 201–5.

<sup>72</sup> Hsi Chang Li, Sam Mirmirani, and Joseph A. Ilacqua, "Confucius Institutes: Distributed Leadership and Knowledge Sharing in a Worldwide Network," *The Learning Organization* 16, no. 6 (2009): 469–82.

<sup>73</sup> Fan Peng, "Confucius Institutes in Japan: The Chinese Practice of Cultural Persuasive Strategy" (Master's thesis, Soochow University, 2015).

importance of the hosting sides, but ended up acknowledging their conflict of goals with China, instead of taking it as the question to be explored.

Despite offering insightful observations, the tension between the need to satisfy different parties and reconcile different rules in CIs is only acknowledged, but not directly addressed by the current literature. Instead, a gap is presented between two perspectives underlying the observations made so far, namely, the “China rising” perspective and the “global connectivity” perspective. The former is the mainstreaming, focusing on China’s intention, strategy and influence (or the lack of it), and neglecting the structural condition where authority over CIs is shared among various actors. Even in cases where the local conditions are given due consideration (e.g. Hsiao and Yang, Hubbert, Wheeler, Hartig), the dynamics of the joint venture and the processes of engagement still appear ambiguous. The “global connectivity” perspective, on the other hand, featured the collaborative structure and network logic of CIs, but treated them as an abstract and idealised version of horizontal connections without due consideration of the power implications and the unavoidable conflict of interests (e.g. Zaharna, Li et al., Kluver). Stambach and Peng respectively offered inspiring contextualisation of how CIs actually work, but a more focused explanation should be devoted to the rationale and dynamics of the joint venture, which is the direction this research is going to.

As an almost universal and defining feature of CIs worldwide, the joint venture structure and its implications shall be re-evaluated on a theoretical level while taking into account the subjectivity of the actors involved. In fact, the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspective each has identified one aspect of this joint venture. It is a channel of Chinese influence, but also one of

transnational collaboration. In order to bridge the gap and provide new explanations to the structural feature of CIs, it is necessary to put into context why there is a gap in the first place. It finds its origin in the state-society division in public and cultural diplomacy, to which the “China factor” adds an additional layer of complexity.

## 2. Between State and Society: Public Diplomacy Revisited

The gap between the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives reflects a long existing tension between state’s unified political will and clearly defined interests and society’s spontaneous exchange of information and network of relations. Although this distinction between state and society is only conceptual, it has heavily influenced the discussion on cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy and soft power, which are extensively employed in the CI literature. It is then necessary to revisit these concepts and the state-society relation in them, so that the origin and evolvement of this tension could be understood and addressed accordingly.

Firstly, from a state perspective, cultural and public diplomacy can be used to achieve various foreign policy goals, and enhancing soft power is usually featured as a long-term object. As cultural diplomacy often targets foreign public as the audience, it has been discussed a form of public diplomacy since the 1980s.<sup>74</sup> Soft power is by no means the only objective of public diplomacy, as the latter can also be wielded for economic benefits and facilitating hard power

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<sup>74</sup> Cull, “Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories,” 33; Ang, Isar, and Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” 368; G. D. Malone, *Political Advocacy and Cultural Communication: Organizing the Nation’s Public Diplomacy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 3–4; Benno H. Signitzer and Timothy Coombs, “Public Relations and Public Diplomacy: Conceptual Convergences,” *Public Relations Review* 18, no. 2 (1992): 137–47.

projections.<sup>75</sup> Soft power, as coined by Joseph Nye, means “getting others to want the outcomes that you want”; and it has three sources, i.e. a country’s culture, political values, and its foreign policies.<sup>76</sup> Public diplomacy, if we follow Nye’s logic, then means the “instrument that governments use to mobilise these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments”.<sup>77</sup> This definition of public diplomacy is going to be revised in the “new public diplomacy” literature, as will be discussed in later in this section. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to make the point that cultural and public diplomacy can thus help a country’s soft power in two ways, namely, by being moral and legitimate policies themselves; and by making the culture and political values of the country more widely understood. Now generally considered one aspect of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy can be narrowly defined as the agreements made between governments to “permit, facilitate or prescribe cultural exchanges”. Mitchell called it the “first order” meaning of cultural diplomacy, including “the inter-governmental negotiation of cultural treaties, conventions, agreements and exchange programmes”.<sup>78</sup> While in practice, cultural diplomacy is often used in a “second-order” sense to describe “the execution of these agreements and the conduct of cultural relations flowing from them”.<sup>79</sup> The boundary between cultural diplomacy and cultural relations is

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<sup>75</sup> Jan Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice,” in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 14.

<sup>76</sup> Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success in World Politics*, 5,10.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 95.

<sup>78</sup> Mitchell, *International Cultural Relations*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

therefore often blurred, although a conceptual differentiation can be maintained by asking whether there is the intention to advance one-sided interest.<sup>80</sup>

Interrelated as they are, these concepts have distinct histories in their application. The practice of cultural diplomacy long predated the term. Arndt called diplomacy through cultural means the “first resort of kings” for “at least three millennia” before the Americans embraced the idea of managing foreign relations through cultural exchange in the 1930s.<sup>81</sup> The same could be said for soft power. Although coined in the 1990s and often regarded as reflecting an “American-centric conception of international affairs”<sup>82</sup> and bearing a “particularly American” paradox where the US symbolises both the exceptional and the universal,<sup>83</sup> the core value of soft power as the ability to attract others and define what is desirable can also be found in the ancient Chinese understanding of the world system. Confucius (Analects 16:1) had it, “if the distant people are not submissive, [your own] civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them”; and Mencius advocated for the “kingly way (*wang dao*)”,<sup>84</sup> where moral righteousness shall be the basis of a regime rather than the hard military power. Public diplomacy though is a much more recent conception, coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion to indicate the “cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries”.<sup>85</sup> This term was originated as a call for “openness” in international system; and by the 1950s, when openness turned into intensive

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>81</sup> Arndt, *First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, 1,49.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Albrow, “The Disjunction of Image and Word in US and Chinese Soft Power Projection,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 386.

<sup>83</sup> Yiwei Wang, “Lun Ruanshili Beilun Jiqi Zhongguo Chaoyue 论软实力悖论及其中国超越 [the Paradox of Soft Power and Its Chinese Surpass],” *Studies on Cultural Soft Power* 1, no. 2 (2016): 10–13.

<sup>84</sup> Craig Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), 171.

<sup>85</sup> Cull, “Public Diplomacy before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase,” 19.

propaganda and psychological warfare, a new terms was needed to convey a benign meaning as an alternative to the “anodyne term information or malignant term propaganda”, and thus came into being the term public diplomacy in Gullion’s sense.<sup>86</sup>

The overseas language and culture institutes, originated as a product of grassroots cultural nationalism in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, turned into a form of “cultural foreign policy” employed by countries across the Atlantic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>87</sup> State involvement, since then, had made international cultural communication torn between serving the national interest by working for the government and serving a common good by engaging different societies.<sup>88</sup> This tension did not only find its expression in the cultural arena, in public diplomacy in general, a division between the “tough- and tender-minded schools of thought” was troubling US in the 1970s.<sup>89</sup> The tough-minded believed in persuasion and propaganda for short-term policy ends and preferred hard political message disseminated through mass media for quick results, whereas the tender-minded argued for bypassing immediate policy goals to concentrate on creating a “receptive atmosphere” for future policies by demonstrating lifestyle, art, custom of a society for genuine understanding from the other side.<sup>90</sup> The two schools actually identified two different functions of public diplomacy, i.e. to “explain and defend government policies” and to portray “the national society in toto”.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 19–22.

<sup>87</sup> Paschalidis, “Exporting National Culture: Histories of Cultural Institutes Abroad,” 277–79.

<sup>88</sup> For the US example, see Kevin V. Mulcahy, “Cultural Diplomacy and the Exchange Programs: 1938–1978,” *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 29, no. 1 (1999): 12.

<sup>89</sup> Terry L. Deibel and Walter R. Robert, *Culture and Information: Two Foreign Policy Functions* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1976), 14.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 14–15.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 15.

The tension between the two functions led to the proposal in their institutional separation, which contributed to the gradual independence of cultural institutions from the government in terms of administration and funding. Nevertheless, the formal separation did not put the conflict of goals to an end; and semi-independent from the government, cultural institutions were still struggling between mandates in cultural diplomacy and cultural relations.<sup>92</sup> Despite all the efforts to separate different functions and goals, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public diplomacy remained a top-down information flow with people as the “targets” of foreign policy.<sup>93</sup> The mission of public diplomacy was often defined by the state and its immediate foreign policy goals, manifested in the definition that public diplomacy meant “to influence the behaviour of a foreign government by influencing the attitudes of its citizens”, through controlling “information” and the “communication terrain”.<sup>94</sup> “Strategic public diplomacy” was thus a form of propaganda in the earliest sense,<sup>95</sup> and also its benevolent euphemism.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seemed that states began to retreat. Recently in the field of public diplomacy, scholars are calling for a “connective mindshift” that emphasises “relational strategies” and collaboration as the “core imperative”.<sup>96</sup> This development finds its earlier stage in the discussions on “new

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<sup>92</sup> Cull, “Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories,” 33.

<sup>93</sup> Brian Hocking, “Rethinking the ‘New’ Public Diplomacy,” in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35–37; Jan Melissen, “Introduction,” in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>94</sup> Malone, *Political Advocacy and Cultural Communication: Organizing the Nation’s Public Diplomacy*, 3; Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher, “Introduction: The Connective Mindshift,” 3.

<sup>95</sup> Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>96</sup> Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher, “Introduction: The Connective Mindshift.”

public diplomacy” that is distinguished from the “traditional” public diplomacy in at least three aspects, namely, the inclusion of non-state actors, supranational and subnational players in a networked environment; the need to coordinate public affairs (aimed at socialising domestic audience) and public diplomacy (aimed at addressing foreign publics); and a turn from using information to persuade foreign audience to using dialogue to engage them.<sup>97</sup> Admittedly, the incorporation of non-state actors is not a new invention, and listening as the “holy grail of public diplomats” was in “on the take-offs” of the concept, rather than a 21<sup>st</sup> century add-on.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the new public diplomacy is calling for a paradigm shift in the strategic position of public diplomacy – embrace the “network phase... to draw on the collective ability of the network rather than building connections to tell others what they should do”, in which “collaboration” becomes “the public diplomacy equivalent of negotiation in traditional diplomacy”.<sup>99</sup> Lord Palmerston had famously said that nations do not have permanent friends, but only permanent interests. However, the paradigm shift means that “in order to safeguard their interests in a globalized world, countries need ‘permanent friends’ in other nations”.<sup>100</sup> Public diplomacy needs to stop fixating on generating specific foreign policy gains; rather, national interest shall be served by going beyond it.<sup>101</sup> In this sense, new public diplomacy constitutes

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<sup>97</sup> Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice,” 11–14; Nancy Snow, “Rethinking Public Diplomacy,” in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Nancy Snow and Phillip M. Taylor (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 6.

<sup>98</sup> Cull, “Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories,” 32; R. F. Delaney, “Introduction,” in *International Communication and the New Diplomacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 3–4.

<sup>99</sup> Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher, “Introduction: The Connective Mindshift,” 6–7.

<sup>100</sup> Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice,” 23.

<sup>101</sup> Ang, Isar, and Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?”

an effort to shed the historical burden of public diplomacy loaded with one-sided national interest, and reinvent it into a platform for mutual engagement.

This paradigm shift echoes a general trend in social science research where scholarship moves away from a state-centred approach to a network perspective that attaches greater importance to non-state actors and non-hierarchical relations, which has been called a “transnational turn”. The word “transnationalism” got popularised in the 1990s in many disciplines to mark the ever more salient tension between the state power and transnational processes in an increasingly globalised world.<sup>102</sup> Scholars began to evaluate to what extent the states as “containers” of power, wealth, culture and society were leaking.<sup>103</sup> At the beginning of the new millennium, the well-known sociologist Ulrich Beck pushed further the significance of this trend by calling for a paradigm shift from “the first to the second age of modernity”, where the “cosmopolitan world order” supersedes a “nation-state world order”.<sup>104</sup> He was joined by scholars critiquing the presence of a “methodological nationalism” that develops theories and understands society within the boundary of nation-states, and takes the state-centric form of the modern world for granted.<sup>105</sup> Since then, much more attention has been paid to the “movements and forces”, “networks, processes, beliefs, and institutions” that cut across national boundaries and transcend “politically defined spaces”.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Cristina Szanton Blanc, Linda Basch, and Nina Glick Schiller, “Transnationalism, Nation-States, and Culture,” *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 4 (1995): 683–86.

<sup>103</sup> P. J. Taylor, “The State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System,” *Progress in Human Geography* 18, no. 2 (1994): 151–62.

<sup>104</sup> Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2000): 79–105.

<sup>105</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301–34.

<sup>106</sup> Simon Macdonald, “Transnational History: A Review of Past and Present Scholarship” (London, 2010), [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/centre-transnational-history/objectives/simon\\_macdonald\\_tns\\_review](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/centre-transnational-history/objectives/simon_macdonald_tns_review); Akira Iriye, “Transnational History,” *Contemporary European History* 13, no. June 2004 (2004): 213.

Manuel Castells named the new social morphology the “network society” marked by the “diffusion of networking logic” and the “devolution of power” to non-state actors.<sup>107</sup>

“Diplomacy is no exception to the ‘logic of the network society’.”<sup>108</sup> Keohane and Nye “reinvented” the word transnationalism in political science in the 1970s to describe the relations and interactions across national borders where “at least one participant is a non-state actor”.<sup>109</sup> And 40 years later, this rudiment phenomenon has well developed into a sweeping power shift in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a “power diffusion” from states to non-state actors.<sup>110</sup> Viewing in this light, new public diplomacy and its “connective mindshift” are an expression of the changing social conditions in the field of diplomacy. It represents an acknowledgement of the empowered non-state actors in the “second age of modernity” and an adjustment of diplomatic strategy from monologue to engagement accordingly.

With a deep government involvement and a joint venture structure, Confucius Institutes demonstrate features of both state control and social engagement. The gap between the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives reflected the divergent orientations derived from the state-society binary – when public diplomacy is understood as a policy tool wielded by the government, CIs are inevitably instruments of Chinese propaganda; when it is expected to embrace network, CIs can be seen as a successful example of transnational collaboration.

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<sup>107</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Second Edi (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 500; Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39–40.

<sup>108</sup> Bruce Gregory, “Public Diplomacy and Governance: Challenges for Scholars and Practitioners,” in *Global Governance and Diplomacy: Worlds Apart?*, ed. Andrew F. Copper, Brian Hocking, and William Maley (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 250.

<sup>109</sup> Macdonald, “Transnational History: A Review of Past and Present Scholarship,” 3–4.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), xv.

However, neither of the perspectives alone can fully explain the dynamics of CI's development. What needs to be addressed is how the state and society interact through the CI partnership. In contrast to the relational turn in public diplomacy literature, the mainstream CI literature still embraces the state-centric perspective. This leads us to the "China factor".

### 3. Rising in an Interconnected World: China's Public Diplomacy Dilemma

Many scholars have written about the Chinese understanding of soft power and public diplomacy as well as the administrative systems and resources to boost the national image and "talk back".<sup>111</sup> It is not necessary to repeat the details here; instead, I would highlight some findings that influenced how the Confucius Institutes have been understood.

Firstly, Chinese government tends to see public diplomacy and soft power from the perspective of state-centric, hierarchical control over information, despite incorporating multiple actors and people-to-people relation in its practices.<sup>112</sup> The mechanism of publicity work, i.e. *xuanchuan*, has been inherited in public diplomacy and image building.<sup>113</sup> It takes for granted the effectiveness of self-presentation in conveying the national values and norms to a foreign audience.<sup>114</sup>

For example, when addressing the publicity departments nationwide in 2010, the

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<sup>111</sup> Jian Wang, "Introduction: China's Search of Soft Power," in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication*, ed. Jian Wang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10; Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2016), 57–76.

<sup>112</sup> Ingrid D'Hooghe, "Public Diplomacy in the People's Republic of China," in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89; Ingrid D'Hooghe, "The Expansion of China's Public Diplomacy System," in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication*, ed. Jian Wang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 21; Qizheng Zhao, "You Minjian Waijiao Dao Gonggong Waijiao 由民间外交到公共外交," *Waijiao Pinglun 外交评论 [Diplomacy Review]*, no. 5 (2009): 2.

<sup>113</sup> Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, 216; Wang, "Introduction: China's Search of Soft Power," 2.

<sup>114</sup> Albro, "The Disjunction of Image and Word in US and Chinese Soft Power Projection," 384.

then Head of the Publicity Department of Chinese Communist Party Liu Yunshan asked for an “omni-directional, multi-angle talking about China” – the world should be told about what China had contributed to the international society; the foreign media should be directed to produce more objective news reports; we should always be prepared for struggles over international public opinions on Chinese domestic affairs; and culture should “go out”. The aim was to create a favourable international public opinion.<sup>115</sup> The logic underpinning this policy guideline reflects an “illusion of transparency”<sup>116</sup> – the current “soft power deficit” can be attributed to a lack of “accurate information” about China thanks to the hostile Western media reports,<sup>117</sup> therefore, more “objective” – and necessarily more positive – information should be provided. Public diplomacy should also serve this purpose by seeking “understanding for [China’s] political system and policies”,<sup>118</sup> so as to improve national image, enhance national stature, and convey national intention.<sup>119</sup>

Secondly, the discussion on China’s soft power and public diplomacy has been closed associated with China’s rise,<sup>120</sup> where its image becomes the “greatest

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<sup>115</sup> Yunshan Liu, “Zhashi Zuohao Jinnian Xuanchuang Sixiang Wenhua Gongzuo 扎实做好今年宣传思想文化工作 [On Doing Well This Year’s Publicity Work],” *Renmin Wang 人民网 [People.cn]*, last modified January 27, 2010, <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/41038/10855384.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Ang, Isar, and Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” 375.

<sup>117</sup> Wang, “Introduction: China’s Search of Soft Power,” 10; Zhao, “You Minjian Waijiao Dao Gonggong Waijiao 由民间外交到公共外交.”

<sup>118</sup> D’Hooghe, “The Expansion of China’s Public Diplomacy System,” 24.

<sup>119</sup> Yiwei Wang, “Relational Dimensions of a Chinese Model of Public Diplomacy,” in *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy: The Connective Mindshift*, ed. R.S. Zaharna, Amelia Arsenault, and Ali Fisher (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 87.

<sup>120</sup> For example, Yiwei Wang, “Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 257–73; Gary D. Rawnsley, “China Talks Back: Public Diplomacy and Soft Power for the Chinese Century,” in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Nancy Snow and Phillip M. Taylor (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 282–91; Jian Wang, ed., *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*.

strategic threat”.<sup>121</sup> Facing the imbalance between hard and soft power, China strengthened its public diplomacy measures. Unfortunately, instead of making up for the “biggest liability” in its international image, i.e. the political system,<sup>122</sup> China’s state-centric model of public diplomacy relies exactly on this liability, making public diplomacy ineffective, if not counterproductive. It is then not surprising for Chinese public diplomacy to be called “propaganda” in the negative sense. Although some scholars are trying to come up with a Chinese interpretation of soft power and public diplomacy that draws on traditional Chinese culture and also emphasises reciprocity,<sup>123</sup> the vicious circle formed by the relying on a liability to make up for national image simply does not leave much room for such an interpretation to be justified, let alone having practical significance. Confucius Institutes, widely considered a major step in public diplomacy for generating soft power, can hardly escape a critical scrutiny.

China’s public diplomacy is in a dilemma. On the one hand, it is so important to China that the government puts extra emphasis on it and gets deeply involved. On the other hand, this state-centric model means relying on a “liability” to make up for its soft power deficit, rendering the government involvement all the more counterproductive. It explains why Confucius Institutes are watched with a suspicious eye by both scholars and the general public,<sup>124</sup> and also accounts for the general neglect of the joint venture in CI literature – after all, with a

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<sup>121</sup> Joshua Cooper Ramo, “Brand China,” *The Foreign Policy Centre* (London, 2007), 12.

<sup>122</sup> D’Hooghe, “The Expansion of China’s Public Diplomacy System,” 27.

<sup>123</sup> Wang, “Lun Ruanshili Beilun Jiqi Zhongguo Chaoyue 论软实力悖论及其中国超越 [the Paradox of Soft Power and Its Chinese Surpass]”; Wang, “Relational Dimensions of a Chinese Model of Public Diplomacy.”

<sup>124</sup> See Chapter Three Section 1 for more discussion

systematic control of information expanding beyond its borders,<sup>125</sup> Chinese public diplomacy would not be considered part of the “relational turn”.

To summarise, the rise of new public diplomacy and the current relational turn are simultaneously a reiteration of “tender-minded” tradition in public diplomacy and a reinvention of it to suit the globalisation context. However, being yet another normative call, it shelved rather than solved the conceptual tension between “the state/political” and “the society/spontaneous”. Meanwhile, China’s state-centric understanding of public diplomacy seems to be an outsider of the relational turn. The Chinese government took the initiative in elevating public diplomacy to a completely new level of importance to combat the hostile Western opinion on its rise, and at the same time conflated public diplomacy with external publicity in a state-centric, hierarchical framework of information management. As a result, the mainstream CI literature neglected the empirical questions posed by the co-existence of multiple authorities in Confucius Institutes, and equated China’s intention with CI’s mandate, rendering soft power the central concern, forgetting that strengthening China’s soft power is not a goal shared by the multiple authorities coming together in this collaboration.

#### 4. Finding a Third Way: as a Multi-Stakeholder Co-Production

The conceptual distinctions presented in the literature, be it the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives in studying the CIs, or the political state and spontaneous society in cultural and public diplomacy, can hardly match realities on the ground. The “China rising” perspective often neglects the

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<sup>125</sup> David Shambaugh, “China’s Softpower Push: The Search for Respect,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 104; William A. Callahan, “Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream,” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 224.

existence of multiple stakeholders and the projection of their interests and wills, whereas the “global connectivity” perspective often overlooks how Chinese government steers and shapes this collaborative project. This division is not helped by the long existing gap between state and society in public diplomacy literature. State involvement is often negatively correlated with the credibility of cultural and exchange programmes and has been a point of criticism in both academic and public discussions. As a result, the best practices in cultural and public diplomacy advocate for its formal independence; and the retreat of state in social science discussions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century further pushed state aside. The role of state in public and cultural diplomacy thus seems not only negative but also outdated.

However, no matter how hard one emphasises the network and relational aspects of public diplomacy and the “connective mindshift”, it would still be an ideal type rather than a grounded theory if state is left out of the focus. Given the undeniable strategic value of public diplomacy, it is a futile struggle in trying to avoid the discussion of government’s influence and interests. Therefore, a third way that can do justice to the reality on the ground is needed when theorising public diplomacy campaigns and cultural exchange programme such as the CIs.

Confucius Institutes are neither an ideal type of the connective mindshift in new public diplomacy nor a tool of the nation-state in the conventional sense. Rather, they embody the substantive complexity when public diplomacy embraces collaboration – initiated for a national purpose, but can only survive by serving all stakeholders. In fact, the collaboration in CIs has pushed the tension between the state-centric and networked models of public diplomacy to a new level. While in other cases the tension has been eased by separating the political activities

from the cultural, as shown in the aloof relation between other language and culture institutes and their respective governments, Confucius Institute incorporated such tension into the administrative structure and internalised it into the daily operation. Authority over and responsibility for the CIs are shared with foreign and non-state actors, but a variety of formal and informal mechanisms of control are still in the hands of Chinese government. So far, it is working – out of the more than 500 CIs only less than 10 terminated operation. The question then follows, why and how does it work?

Answering this question entails reconciling the China rising and global connectivity perspectives and explaining the process and mechanisms of engagement among various stakeholders. And the governance literature, although not directly applicable, offers new angles to understand CIs. I found three discussions particularly inspiring. Firstly, Bell and Hindmoor’s “state-centric relational approach” to governance; secondly, Barnett and Duvall’s discussion on power in global governance; and thirdly, Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson’s discussion on the rise of transnational regulations.

In response to the “weakening of state” claims in governance literature, Bell and Hindmoor argued that not only the “excise of state authority remains central to most governance strategies”, but the capacities of states are expanding “by strengthening central state institutions” and “by forging new governance partnerships with a range of social actors”.<sup>126</sup> They rejected the notion that governance presents a “fundamental transformation” and a “substantial break

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<sup>126</sup> Stephen Bell and Andrew Hindmoor, “A State-Centric Relational Approach,” in *Rethinking Governance: The Centrality of the State in Modern Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–2.

from the past” because the involvement of various actors within the governing processes and the rise of networks and markets have superseded or marginalised the state.<sup>127</sup> Rather, they proposed an approach that is both “state-centred” and “relational”, that is, not only that governance through hierarchical control of the state is “alive and well”, the non-state actors are employed to enhance the capacity of governments. The state-society relation is mutually beneficial but not equal; and the state, even when governing via markets and networks, retains the responsibility for meta-governance.<sup>128</sup>

To further specify the relations between various actors in governance, it entails an analysis of power, which is, according to Barnett and Duvall, surprisingly not fully considered in global governance literature. Viewing power as a production “in and through social relations”, they identified four expressions/forms of power. Firstly, compulsory power is presented in relations of interaction where one actor “have direct control over another”. Secondly, institutional power is where “actors exercise indirect control over others”, for example, via shaping the institutions that all actors have to operate within. Thirdly, structural power derives from the mutually constitutive social positions of different actors that would shape their respective interests and capacities. And lastly, productive power pertains to the production of subjects through the diffusion of “systems of knowledge and discursive practices”.<sup>129</sup> This discussion draws our attention to the exertion of power in areas where no direct hierarchy is presented.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 3–4.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 10–11.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in Global Governance,” in *Power in Global Governance*, ed. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–32.

The state is not the only actor that possesses and wields power. All actors, with their respective interests and initiatives, shape the power interaction together in the process of governance. At the same time, actors are institutionally embedded; and the institutions are themselves a result of negotiation and also subjected to change. To capture this “multi-level character of transnational governance”, Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson proposed to use the concept of “fields” to observe the processes of engagement and the emergence of order and rules. Here, fields are spatial, relational and have a meaning dimension as well. They are “complex combinations of spatial and relational topographies with powerful structuring forces in the form of cultural frames or patterns of meaning”.<sup>130</sup> This ambitious theoretical construction aims to bridge the actor-centred, the process-centred and the institution-centred literature on governance to have an overarching framework on the emergence of regulation in transnational contexts.

Confucius Institutes are not a typical object of study featured in the governance literature, which often focuses on the common problems to be resolved or goals to be attained, such as environmental protection, terrorism prevention, public service provision, and economic development. But in Confucius Institutes, the “common problem” and “shared goal” are not easily identifiable; and the interest of a particular actor – the Chinese government – is so prominent in the discussion that we tend to forget that China’s soft power ambition is only one aspect of CIs as a global phenomenon and is not universally relevant to all actors involved. Nevertheless, running CIs are essentially about coordinating social actions;<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Marie-Laure Djelic and Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson, “Introduction: A World of Governance: The Rise of Transnational Regulation,” in *Transnational Governance: Institutional Dynamics of Regulation*, ed. Marie-Laure Djelic and Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–28.

<sup>131</sup> Thomas Risse, “Governance in Areas Of Limited Statehood,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*, ed. David Levi-Faur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 700.

and the layout of multi-stakeholder transnational engagement has many similarities with the problems dealt with in the governance literature. The aforementioned discussions render us fresh insights in at least three aspects.

Firstly, the gap between the Chinese-state-centred and the global-society-centred perspectives can and should be reconciled for a better theoretical explanation of the global CI phenomenon – when state engages non-state actors, it is not an either-or choice between incompetence and domination. Secondly, as both a government initiative and a multi-stakeholder co-production, we shall use this example to explore the “how” question in cultural and public diplomacy – how could the relational approach be implement when government is an indispensable actor? Little is known about the dynamics of relation building, especially one that brings people from different nation-states in a collaborative project.<sup>132</sup> And rather than looking at the motivation of different actors, we may instead look at the types of relations and areas where power is contested to account for the process and mechanisms of transnational engagement. Thirdly, since all actors are institutionally embedded, we should also take into consideration the process of structuration in the global CI network, where the individual agents and the institutional forces are mutually constitutive and mutually restrictive. Policy intention does not equal to its impact. By looking at the basis, process and product of relation building in the global CI network, we could then account for its impact and significance beyond the policy intentions of China. The three empirical chapters in this thesis will explore these aspects respectively.

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<sup>132</sup> Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher, “Introduction: The Connective Mindshift,” 8; Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault, “Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 22.

In accordance with the research questions raised in the introduction, chapter three answers the question “on what ground is the CI joint venture based”. It gives a diachronic review of how a global network of Chinese language education took shape and bridges the gap between “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives by offering a new theoretical explanation to the rationale of this transnational multi-stakeholder engagement.

Chapter four answers the question “how this partnership is maintained” and explores the process whereby the transnational engagement is realised. It does not take for granted the domination of either state or network, but zooms in on the areas of where authorities and power are exerted and contested to describe the negotiation, competition and cooperation among various actors. It proposes a framework for analysing how the relational approach is employed with state being a prominent actor, offering an original explanation to the dynamics of relation building in China’s public diplomacy initiative.

Chapter five answers the question “what has been produced for whose benefits”. It looks at the functioning of human agency as they enter into the transnational social space. The subjective meaning making not only forms an integral part of the reproduction of social relations, but also explains the real-life significance of the CI project. This chapter will further substantiate the conclusions of the previous two chapters.

By answering the research questions raised in the introduction, these empirical chapters will demonstrate the “structuring” in the global CI network.<sup>133</sup> It is a dynamic process co-produced by various stakeholders through negotiation, rather

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<sup>133</sup> Structuring as in Helen Siu, “Key Issues in Historical Anthropology: A View from ‘South China,’” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 13 (2014): 182.

than a static design by the Chinese government in advance. The people involved are active users of the social conditions within which they are positioned, and not passive recipients of official messages packed in material benefits.

##### 5. A Summary: “Belong to China and Belong to the World”

This chapter gives a critique review of the CI literature as well as the trends of theoretical construction in public diplomacy in general and the China topic in particular. It suggests that because of the paradoxical role of state in public diplomacy, the literature is prone to be caught in a dichotomy of the “political state” versus the “spontaneous society”. Although not directly applicable, the literature on governance offers inspiring insights about how the dichotomy can be mitigated. Rather than assuming, or hoping for, certain logic of engagement to prevail, we should look at the process where multiple actors mutually complement and limit each other in their quest for more power and interest.

The challenge posed by Confucius Institutes to cultural and public diplomacy is far beyond that of a moral dilemma where an authoritarian government fills up the budget needs of the foreign universities as they are torn between the classical role of pursuing truth for humanity and the pragmatic role of training people for employment.<sup>134</sup> More importantly, the CIs reify a common problem faced by public diplomacy in an “open source” era.<sup>135</sup> Exploring what sustains Confucius Institutes’ global network requires more than questioning the legitimacy of Chinese government sponsorship – which varies between different contexts – we need to ask, how order is negotiated, imposed, or rejected in the transnational

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<sup>134</sup> Hughes, “Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural,” 48.

<sup>135</sup> Mark McDowell, “Public Diplomacy at the Crossroads: Definitions and Challenges in an ‘Open Source’ Era,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2008): 7.

social space created by the CIs, outside of the realm of state sovereignty and beyond the reach of hierarchical bureaucracy? What implications do the CIs have on and beyond the national interests of China? As a multi-stakeholder co-production, CIs are no longer only a diplomatic tool of and for China. Chinese President Xi Jinping's comment that the CIs "belong to China" and also "belong to the world" happens not to be only rhetorical,<sup>136</sup> whether he liked it or not.

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<sup>136</sup> "Congratulatory Letter of President Xi Jinping," in *Exerpts Congratulatory Letter of the 10th Anniversary of Confucius Institute* (Beijing: Confucius Institute Headquarters, 2014), 5.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theorisation from Bottom Up**

In order to bridge the gap presented in the literature, a bottom up approach is entailed. Grounded theory provides a good methodology that can capture what is substantive to CIs in reality, rather than letting concepts dominate the discussion. Instead of debating whether the motivation of a particular actor is legitimate and justifiable, I bring in “Conditional Matrix”<sup>137</sup> to analysis the dynamics of relation building between the Chinese government and its global partners, and evaluate from the broadest social and economic conditions where CIs came into being to the meso level institutional conditions, and then to the micro level individual meaning-making and embeddedness. In contrast to the mainstream literature that is either based primarily in Western contexts or analysed from a western perspective, I focused on Southeast Asia and selected CIs in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand as fieldwork sites. For one thing, choosing Southeast Asian cases adds to the existing literature by drawing our attention to the different rhetoric and socio-political contexts framing the CIs. For another, examining the selected cases with a grounded theory approach answers the research questions raised, offering contextualised understanding of the dynamics and impacts of this transnational partnership. As a qualitative research, the conclusions drawn in this thesis are not readily generalisable. However, since they answer a set of questions that is generally relevant to CIs worldwide, they serve as a preliminary analytical framework for other cases and can be tested against more cases for its further evolvement and growth.

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<sup>137</sup> Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, “Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria,” *Qualitative Sociology* 13, no. 1 (1990): 11–12.

## 1. A Constructivism Paradigm

It is necessary to clarify my basic ontological and epistemological assumptions. Firstly, the reality of social life is relative and constructed. Participants of the CIs have their own priorities in life and do not necessarily have similar views on the meaning and value of CIs. We cannot say that some constructions are more “correct”, but only more or less “relevant” to the people in question. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the CI-related works may be recognised and shared by people across various local contexts. These aspects then acquire significance on a structural level, constituting a factor beyond the individual’s control. Meanwhile, social life is a dynamic process where the individual’s actions are both constrained and enabled by the structural forces, which also exert influence on the structure, whether intended or not.<sup>138</sup> Secondly, this research does not claim to hold “the truth”. In fact, there is no pre-existing reality out there waiting to be discovered.<sup>139</sup> The findings are “enacted” in a sense that they are inevitably influenced by the investigator and are essentially a knowledge produced through the interaction between the investigator and the object of study.<sup>140</sup> The issue of positionality is also presented.<sup>141</sup> While being aware of the influence of

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<sup>138</sup> John Monaghan and Peter Just, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>139</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 279.

<sup>140</sup> Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 110–11.

<sup>141</sup> Gillian Rose, “Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics,” *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305–20; Brian Bourke, “Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process,” *The Qualitative Report* 19, no. 33 (2014): 1–9; Kim England, “Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, And Feminist Research,” *Professional Geographer* 46, no. 1 (1994): 80–89; Deianira Ganga and Sam Scott, “Cultural ‘insiders’ and the Issue of Positionality in Qualitative Migration Research: Moving ‘Across’ and Moving ‘Along’ Researcher-Participant Divides,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 7, no. 3 (2006): Art. 7.

subjectivity and positionality, I still strive to reflect faithfully the perspectives of the people involved, as they are real in a sense that they have real-life consequences and significance to the people, who are both the means and ends of cross culture exchange. Thirdly, as to how the findings are produced, this research adopted a hermeneutical approach to the various constructions by scholars and practitioners, which are dialectically compared and contrasted, before drawing my own conclusion on a new, and hopefully more nuanced and sophisticated, construction about the CIs.<sup>142</sup> Taken together, this research adopts a constructivist paradigm with an understanding of social process as structuration.

## 2. A Grounded Theory Approach

There lacks a well-developed theoretical framework to analyse the empirical questions about the Confucius Institutes as a joint venture, because “collaboration” – the third layer of public diplomacy and often the “more effective means” to engage foreign public – through projects involving members from different nation-states has been largely ignored by scholars until recently.<sup>143</sup> And the turn towards a “relational approach” in public diplomacy has yet to form a conversation with the empirical accounts of the CIs. This research does not follow a pre-set theoretical framework and filter the object of observation through its lens, as this may distort what is significant *in situ*. Instead, it uses grounded theory as the methodology, aiming at developing a theoretical interpretation that

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<sup>142</sup> Guba and Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” 111.

<sup>143</sup> Cowan and Arsenaault, “Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy,” 21–22.

is “grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed”, so that the subject of research could be empirically better understood before getting theorised.<sup>144</sup>

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 to address two trends in social science research. Firstly, the dominant functionalist and structuralist theories appeared to be “inordinately speculative and deductive in nature”, and a new type of theory is needed to close the “embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research”; secondly, it reiterated the legitimacy of qualitative research which was losing status when facing a positivist understanding of scientific research.<sup>145</sup> It is a general methodology that can be used to deal with both the quantitative and qualitative data, although it was through its application to qualitative research that this methodology got widely recognised. The task of grounded theory is “to develop a well-integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study” through a “continuous interplay between analysis and data collection”, i.e. a “constant comparative analysis”, to ensure that the theories thus drawn are generated from the data, elaborated and modified while more data are coming in through rigorous matching of theory against data.<sup>146</sup> The “fitness” of the theory to everyday realities in a substantive area is an important feature of grounded theory, whether it is a substantive or a general (formal) “higher-order” theory that is to be developed.<sup>147</sup> On the one hand, this fitness means that grounded theory is fluid and flexible, emphasising “temporality and process” and

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<sup>144</sup> Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview,” 273; Kathy Charmaz and Richard G. Mitchell, “Grounded Theory in Ethnography,” in *Handbook of Ethnography*, ed. Paul Atkinson et al. (London: Sage, 2001), 160–74, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848608337.n11>.

<sup>145</sup> Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview,” 275.

<sup>146</sup> Corbin and Strauss, “Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria,” 5; Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview,” 273.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 276,281.

embracing new concepts in its analysis. On the other hand, it also means higher requirements on conceptualisation, which needs to be constantly tested against data.

Following the basic procedures and canons in grounded theory approach,<sup>148</sup> this research carried out early data collection through in-depth interviews in Nanjing, China, which was followed by fieldwork in Confucius Institutes and sites of their activities in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and several other cities in China, including Beijing, Jinan and Shanghai. Emerging concepts and categories were summarised and analysed while I was in the field, so that the information gathering can be systematic and useful to testing the concepts and categories in formation. Cross case comparisons were made not only through multi-sited fieldwork, but also by participatory observation in the 2015 annual conference of Confucius Institutes, which was followed by the International Conference on Chinese Language Teaching, where the administrators of CIs and professionals in teaching Chinese as a second language all over the world gathered in intensive information exchange. A “conditional matrix”<sup>149</sup> has been used to organise the analysis on the different levels of conditional features within which the Confucius Institutes are taking shape, from the macro level historical context to the meso-level institutional dynamics, and the micro level individual meaning-making and embeddedness. In short, by following grounded theory, this thesis adds to the literature with a contextualised understanding of the CI partnership.

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<sup>148</sup> Corbin and Strauss, “Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria,” 6–12.

<sup>149</sup> Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview,” 275.

Describing the process of multi-stakeholder engagement entails a good grasp of CI's daily operations. However, for various legal and practical reasons, CIs' administrative information is not publicly accessible. The criticisms they have received also raised the psychological barrier between the researchers and the teachers and directors from China. Not to mention that as a co-managed institute that changes the director periodically, the continuity of administrative information is sometimes undermined. Nevertheless, it is worth going the extra mile to find out more about the operation of CIs while it is happening, not only because that it will better inform us the context within which actions are taken, more importantly, it can catch the informal mechanisms of coordination and processes of negotiation which will not necessarily leave a trace in the official documents produced and archived, if at all, for future reference. The same could be said for the meaning-making by the actors. It is exactly these matters that shape the global CI infrastructure, which makes on-site observation indispensable.

Therefore, this research uses participatory observation and in-depth unstructured interviews to collect the main body of primary data. Interviews were done throughout the data collection period from June 2015 to August 2016 in China (Nanjing, Shanghai, Jinan and Beijing), Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. From August 2015 to March 2016, I worked for about eight months in CI-Singapore, through which got into the annual CI conference as well as contact with fieldwork sites in Malaysia and Thailand, where I spent four and one month respectively. In Singapore, I got familiar with CI's daily operation and the "pain points" a transnationally maintained partnership may encounter. In Thailand, I broadened my knowledge gained in Singapore by interviewing and visiting more CIs in the

Bangkok region and northern Thailand; and saw an entirely different dynamics of language learning as demonstrated in the “Chinese Bridge” Competition. In Malaysia, I tested some of the conclusions drawn from previous cases and discovered an additional development path of CI. Singapore is a special case; it does not have a Chinese director who is constantly presented. But as the entrance to the field of CIs, the experience I had in Singapore was indispensable to my study. It helped me to gain almost an “insider’s status”, which then granted me access to key occasions such as the annual CI conference, and facilitated a quick navigation in Thailand and Malaysia where I had only limited time to spend.

Other sources of data include the summary and work diary written by Hanban dispatched teachers and volunteers, available online or in print; the CI annual conference materials, produced and distributed by Hanban during the CI conference to the participants; and materials related to teaching Chinese as a second language, including the examination syllabus, the advertisements of textbook publishers, as well as materials produced by individual Confucius Institutes on language and culture courses, seminars and activities.

### 3. A Southeast Asian Perspective

Southeast Asia is my main fieldwork site, but it should be clarified that the research questions raised in the introduction and the literature gap identified in Chapter One are of general relevance to studying Confucius Institutes worldwide. In other words, it is not specifically for Southeast Asia that those questions are asked. It would be very helpful to look at cases from different geopolitical contexts and social-cultural backgrounds for a higher level theoretical construction. However, due to limited time and resources, I chose to start from

the region that I am personally based in. What this research aims to contribute to the existing literature is not the Southeast Asian cases per se – other scholars, like Hsiao and Yang in Taiwan, are also studying CIs in the region – but how the gap between a China-centred soft power approach and a network-centred ideal type can be bridged, and how the process of relation building in public diplomacy can be accounted for, by using on-the-ground fieldwork data from the Southeast Asia region.

That being said, choosing Southeast Asian cases is not only the most practical, but can also directly add to the literature if we bring in the local perspectives and social contexts. In Southeast Asia, China's soft power deficit is a lesser issue comparing with that in the West; and neither is its political system a big liability. The relations between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours have always been richer, more multifaceted and complex than government-level interaction and ideological confrontation, as suggested by Liu in proposing a new paradigm to Sino-Southeast Asia Studies.<sup>150</sup> History, economy, culture, identity are as important as considerations of security and power balance in Sino-Southeast Asia relations; and together, they constitute the “realpolitik” of the region.

In imperial Chinese history, political legitimacy, rather than sovereignty, was central to maintaining the domestic order as well as managing the interstate relations with its neighbours in the Southern Ocean.<sup>151</sup> The tributary system, which though may not be entirely suitable to describe all sorts of interactions

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<sup>150</sup> Hong Liu, “Sino- Southeast Asian Studies: Towards an Alternative Paradigm,” *Asian Studies Review* 25, no. 3 (2001): 259–83.

<sup>151</sup> Leonard C. Sebastian, “Southeast Asian Perceptions of China: The Challenge of Achieving a New Strategic Accommodation,” in *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Security*, ed. Derek da Cunha (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2000), 161; Gungwu Wang, “Sovereign Relationships Are Not Absolute,” in *Renewal: The Chinese State and the New Global History* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2013), 56.

within the region,<sup>152</sup> still offers a useful conceptualisation of the dominant themes in Sino-Southeast Asia relations for centuries, i.e., political order based on a particular cultural worldview and the intra-Asia trade.<sup>153</sup> Despite that the official relations were interrupted by colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social interactions did not. In fact, they expanded via mass immigration of Chinese population into Southeast Asia,<sup>154</sup> making the latter home to the largest number of Chinese overseas even until today. This migration trend was accompanied by a period of Chinese “high nationalism”.<sup>155</sup> The awakened self-identification and political loyalty directed towards the motherland among the Chinese overseas as well as the economic power held by some rendered them a “problem” to their hosting countries after independence, constituting another important dimension of Sino-Southeast Asia relations. This ethnic Chinese “problem” was intertwined with the threat of Communism to the Southeast Asian regimes against the background of Cold War, and was further complicated by domestic politics and regional power balance.<sup>156</sup> In other words, the “contact zones” between China and Southeast Asia took various forms even during the height of the Cold War.<sup>157</sup> With the end of Cold War and the settlement of Cambodian conflict in 1991, the

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<sup>152</sup> Paul Evans, “Historians and Chinese World Order: Fairbank, Wang, and the Matter of ‘indeterminate Relevance,’” in *China and Interantional Relations: The Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gungwu*, ed. Yongnian Zheng (New York: Routledge, 2010), 42–57.

<sup>153</sup> Takeshi Hamashita, “The Tribute Trade System and Modern Asia,” in *Japanese Industrialization and the Asian Economy*, ed. A.J.H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu (London: Routledge, 1994), 91–107.

<sup>154</sup> G. William Skinner, “Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 321 (1959): 137–38.

<sup>155</sup> Prasenjit Duara, “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900-1945,” *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (1997): 1301.

<sup>156</sup> As demonstrated by many incidents happened during this period such as the Thirtieth of September Movement in Indonesia and the Cambodian conflict, see Taomo Zhou, “China and the Thirtieth of September Movement,” *Indonesia*, no. 98 (2014): 29–58; Sebastian, “Southeast Asian Perceptions of China: The Challenge of Achieving a New Strategic Accommodation,” 164–66; Muthiah Alagappa, “Regionalism and the Quest for Security: ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict,” *Journal of International Affairs* 46, no. 2 (1993): 439–67.

<sup>157</sup> Liu, “Sino - Southeast Asian Studies: Towards an Alternative Paradigm,” 264.

regional dynamics saw a fundamental changed; and Southeast Asia was willing to expand relations with China and viewed the latter as a potential trading partner. A new form of transnationalism was in the making.<sup>158</sup>

In 2004, a pivotal agreement was sealed for the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area for goods. And in 2010, ASEAN surpassed Japan to be China's third largest trading partner and remained so ever since; while China has been ASEAN's biggest trading partner for eight years by 2017. In China's overarching development plan and foreign strategy announced in 2013, i.e., the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), Southeast Asia occupies a special position – for its geographical and economic closeness to China, it is not only important to China's "national and economic security", but also acts as a "testing ground" for the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative" and a "bridge to other regions".<sup>159</sup>

Indeed, Southeast Asia is not – and has never been – a "harmonised" monolith in dealing with China. Based on each country's perception of the security threat and expectation of the economic benefits that China brings about, different strategies will be adopted in response to China's rise, demonstrating "a spectrum of desirability of China".<sup>160</sup> Among the Southeast Asian countries, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have demonstrated relatively positive response to China's engagement with the region, albeit with reservations and uncertainties as well.

Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are the main trading partners of China in ASEAN, they accounted for 62.3 percent of the total trade volume of ASEAN

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 273–75.

<sup>159</sup> Shaofeng Chen, "Regional Responses to China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018, 1, doi:10.1080/10670564.2018.1410960.

<sup>160</sup> Ian Tsung Yen Chen and Alan Hao Yang, "A Harmonized Southeast Asia? Explanatory Typologies of ASEAN Countries' Strategies to the Rise of China," *Pacific Review* 26, no. 3 (2013): 265–88.

with China on average from 2003 and 2014.<sup>161</sup> China's Belt and Road Initiative has received strong support from Malaysia and conditional support from Singapore and Thailand.<sup>162</sup> In Malaysia, China's rise has been portrayed mostly in a positive light; and its domestic politics did not change significantly its policy towards China.<sup>163</sup> Adopting a moderate gesture towards disputes and embracing economic cooperation, Malaysia's China policy emphasised the benefit it can harvest by "capitalising on the big power's rise".<sup>164</sup> Similar tendencies can be observed in Thailand especially since the 2014 coup that brought the military junta in power.<sup>165</sup> Yet the postponed China-Thailand Railway project still manifested the presence of vigilance and suspicion towards Chinese influence in the country, making the relation between future Thai governments and China less straightforward. Singapore's attitude towards China used to be determined by the dynamics of Singapore as a Chinese-majority small city-state situating amid large Muslim neighbours. But this concern is no longer salient given the improvement of domestic situations in Malaysia and Indonesia as well as their expanding ties with China.<sup>166</sup> Sino-Singapore relations has been marked by close cooperation in economy and governance since the 1990s. Singapore has been the largest investor in China since 2013, whose projects ranged from private sector commercial ones

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<sup>161</sup> Zheng-Xin Wang and Hong-Tao Zhu, "Testing the Trade Relationships between China, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand Using Grey Lotka-Volterra Competition Model," *Kybernetes* 45, no. 6 (2016): 932, doi:10.1108/K-04-2015-0110.

<sup>162</sup> Chen, "Regional Responses to China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative in Southeast Asia," 18.

<sup>163</sup> Ce Liang, "The Rise of China as a Constructed Narrative: Southeast Asia's Response to Asia's Power Shift," *Pacific Review*, 2017, 1–19, doi:10.1080/09512748.2017.1371209.

<sup>164</sup> Cheng Chwee Kuik, "Making Sense of Malaysia's China Policy: Asymmetry, Proximity, and Elite's Domestic Authority," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 4 (2013): 467.

<sup>165</sup> Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," *Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2018): 116–30.

<sup>166</sup> Yongnian Zheng and Liang Fook Lye, "Introduction," in *Singapore-China Relations: 50 Years*, ed. Yongnian Zheng and Liang Fook Lye (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2016), xiv.

to government level projects such as the famous Suzhou Industrial Park.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, China's learning from the "Singapore Model" has been a remarkable phenomenon. Tens of thousands of cadres have been sent to Singapore for training since the 1990s; and most of them hold top executive positions in their local or functional areas, having plenty of opportunities to put into practices what they have learnt in Singapore.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, Singapore takes extra caution against China's expanding maritime influence, but the South China Sea episode did not last very long and was soon followed by Singapore's open support for the BRI.

Given the historical and geopolitical context of Sino-Southeast Asian relations, Confucius Institutes are facing a completely different socio-cultural environment in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand than that in the West. For example, the often controversial three "T" words (Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen) at the centre of the CI debate in the West were not really an important issue to the local society<sup>169</sup> and hardly mentioned in the local media. A simple search of Confucius Institute on the websites of the Straits Times & Lianhe Zaobao (major English and Chinese newspapers in Singapore), the Star & Nanyang Siang Pau (English and Chinese newspapers representing Malaysian Chinese Association), New Straits Times (English newspaper representing the United Malays National Organization, UMNO), and Bangkok Post and the Nation (English newspapers

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<sup>167</sup> Tommy Koh, "Singapore's Friendship with China," *The Straits Times*, last modified May 2, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/singapores-friendship-with-china>.

<sup>168</sup> Hong Liu and Ting-yan Wang, "China and the 'Singapore Model': Perspectives from Mid-Level Cadres and Implications for Transnational Knowledge Transfer," *The China Quarterly*, 2018 forthcoming.

<sup>169</sup> see Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 240–42; Gungwu Wang, "1989 and Chinese History," in *To Act Is To Know: Chinese Dilemmas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002), 30.

in Thailand)<sup>170</sup> shows that critiques directed at the CIs are rare; and when it is mentioned, it is usually in the form of reporting what is going on in the Western countries, adding a counter voice from the Chinese side for a balanced presentation in most cases.

The relatively quiet media forms yet two more interesting contrast with what is happening in practice. Firstly, the scale and presence of Hanban's resources is in fact quite significant; and secondly, the establishment of CIs had direct support from the hosting governments.

In Thailand, promoting Chinese language education has been a national policy as shown in the five year (2006-2010) "Strategic Plan" issued by the Thai Ministry of Education.<sup>171</sup> According to the cultural counsellor in the Chinese embassy in Thailand, more than 12,000 volunteer Chinese teachers dispatched by Hanban have served across all levels of education during the past 15 years, making Thailand the number one receiving country in the world. In 2015 alone, it received more than 1,500 volunteer teachers, accounting for about 17 percent of all volunteer teachers Hanban dispatched worldwide that year.<sup>172</sup> The high level of support is best manifested by the Thai Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. She was the first member from the Thai Royal family to visit China in the 1980s. Since then, she visited China for more than 40 times and even spent a month in

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<sup>170</sup> My Thai language proficiency is not enough for me to read News in Thai; and my interviewees, when asked about the media report on CIs, simply responded that there's seldom any news on this subject that attracted people's attention.

<sup>171</sup> See Chapter Three Section 3.2 for more information.

<sup>172</sup> Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, "Confucius Institute Annual Development Report" (Beijing, 2015), <http://www.hanban.edu.cn/report/2015.pdf>; "Zhongguo Zhutai Dashi Ningfukui Chuxi Dishisipi Hanyu Jiaoshi Zhiyuanzhe Daoren Dahui 中国驻泰大使宁赋魁出席第十四批汉语教师志愿者到任大会 [Chinese Ambassador to Thailand Attended the 14th Patch of Chinese Volunteer Teachers' Meeting on Arrival]," *The Representative Office of Hanban in Thailand*, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://www.hanbanthai.org/news/hanbanxinwen/2015-05-16/4349.html>.

Peking University studying Chinese language and culture in 2000. She speaks mandarin and practices calligraphy; and has translated ancient Chinese poets for publication in Thailand. It was through her direct support that the Confucius Institute in Chulalongkorn University came into being.<sup>173</sup>

In Singapore, the official opening of CI in 2007<sup>174</sup> was attended by the late minister mentor Mr Lee Kuan Yew as well as the then Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee, National People's Congress of PRC, Professor Xu Jia Lu. In the speech given by Mr Lee, he emphasised the Chinese language heritage of Nanyang University – the predecessor of Nanyang Technological University where the CI is hosted – as well as the importance of mother tongue and the Confucianist values for the Singapore society.<sup>175</sup> In a similar manner, the unveiling ceremony for the Kong Zi Institute in the University of Malay was attended by vice Minister of Education of both countries. During the opening ceremony, the Malaysian vice Minister of Education said that the Kong Zi Institute provides a brand-new platform for Malaysians, especially the non-Chinese, to learn the Chinese language and know more about China, which is definitely a good thing to Malaysia-China relations.<sup>176</sup>

Despite having state back up, it is not to say that the CIs in Southeast Asia are controversy-free. In fact, the Chinese language education can be easily politicised

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<sup>173</sup> These stories are well known in both China and Thailand, see a summary here:

<http://www.thailianwang.com/taihua/m16405/1>

<sup>174</sup> The CI-Singapore actually started in 2005, by then it was already operating for two years.

<sup>175</sup> “Speech by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Mentor, at the Official Opening of Confucius Institute, 14 July 2007, 5.15pm at Nanyang Technological University,” *National Archives of Singapore*, accessed April 12, 2018, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=20070714995.htm>.

<sup>176</sup> Xinhua Net, “Malaixiya Jiang Jian Shoujia Kongzi Xueyuan, Hao Ping Chuxi Qianyue Yishi 马来西亚将建首家孔子学院，郝平出席签约仪式 [the First Confucius Institute to Be Established in Malaysia],” *CHSI*, last modified July 9, 2009, <http://www.chsi.com.cn/jyzx/200907/20090709/27697567.html>.

in this region. Being associated with communist movements and political loyalty towards China in the early post-colonial years, Chinese language was deemed an obstacle to nation-building.<sup>177</sup> And it was government intervention that gradually deprived of the living space for Chinese language in Thailand and marginalise it in Singapore and Malaysia in an effort to mould national identity and political allegiance. But now, Chinese language regained not only a legitimate presence in social life, but also certain level of popularity – with government backup – in light of the growing economic power of China. Thus, rather than the Chinese authoritarian regime and all sorts of problems associated with that, it is the Chinese language itself that tells us more about the changing tides and socio-political dynamics in Southeast Asia, where the CIs are situated.

Consequently, Confucius Institutes here may be confronted with some unique problems. Comparing with Thailand and Singapore, CIs in Malaysia and Indonesia appeared relatively late, partly because of the difficulty for the concept of “Confucius” to fit in. The CI in the University of Malaya bears a special name in English, using Kong Zi instead of Confucius. This is mainly due to the special status of “Confucianism” in Malaysia and Indonesia as an officially recognised religion, which will make the name “Confucius Institute” sounds politically sensitive and misleading. The institutionalisation of Chinese culture into the state system is an issue worth an entirely separate thesis. What should be emphasised here is that although the Chinese government was reluctant at first to give up on the global brand of “Confucius Institute”, local politics was finally proven decisive.<sup>178</sup> For all CIs in Indonesia, they are called *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin*

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<sup>177</sup> See Chapter Three Section 3.2 for more analysis

<sup>178</sup> Rika Theo and Maggi W.H. Leung, “China’s Confucius Institute in Indonesia: Mobility, Frictions and Local Surprises,” *Sustainability* 10, no. 2 (2018): 530–44.

(Mandarin Language Centre) in *Bahasa Indonesia*, while Confucius Institute was kept for the English version. For the CI in the University of Malaya, in addition to the special “Kong Zi Institute”, even its Chinese name is different – “*Hanyu*” is inserted in between “*Kongzi*” and “*Xueyuan*” to emphasise the nature and mission of this institute. In order to have a presence, the Chinese government had to make necessary adaptations to special contexts.

In short, when it comes to dealing with China’s cultural initiative, what appear to be prominent issues in the West are not featured in Southeast Asia. Instead, the local governments demonstrated a realist and pragmatic attitude and chose to embrace the Chinese offer – according to their own needs of course. Thailand is the most receptive among the three because it faces a serious lack of pedagogical resources that could support its ambitious plan to capitalise on the rising economic value of Chinese language. Malaysia and Singapore, having their own domestic Chinese language education systems, has made CIs a high-profile gesture showing the willingness to cooperate with China on various fronts.

Choosing the three countries in Southeast Asia thus forms an interesting contrast with the dominant perspectives in the CI literature, yet I am not assuming that geopolitics and diplomatic relations will bear a direct influence on, let alone destine, the CIs – bilateral relation is only one of many factors influencing how a CI cooperation may turn out, as will be discussed in the following chapters. Bearing in mind the research questions raised, to understand the dynamics and logic of transnational multi-stakeholder engagement, we need to direct our focus back to the grounded theory approach.

Using cases in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, I will first put the Chinese language education, Hanban and the rise of Confucius Institute network in a historical context and analyse the power implication behind. It will help us to better understand the basis of CI as a joint venture. Then I will zoom in onto the institutional level dynamics, depicting how relations are maintained through negotiation and creation of common grounds in spite of the divergent ideas and interests. It offers a preliminary framework to analyse the transnational multi-stakeholder engagement. Lastly, I will also look at the people involved, their meaning-making and embeddedness, because they are both the means and ends of the cross-cultural contact. It will help to illustrate on a micro and personal level CIs' logic of existence.

#### 4. A Summary: Strength and Limitation of Theorisation from Bottom Up

In order to bridge the gap in the literature and offer a new framework for an undertheorised subject, this chapter proposes to adopt the grounded theory approach to answer the research questions raised. A bottom-up perspective using ethnographical methods is more suitable for capturing the complexity on the ground. Bringing in the Southeast Asian perspectives adds to the literature by illustrating the different concerns that CIs may face in different geopolitical and cultural contexts. This is not to assume that state relations and politics are the only decisive factors in the development of CIs. Following the grounded theory approach, the analysis of CIs' operation should incorporate the macro, meso and micro level conditions for a contextualised answer to the research questions that are of general relevance to CIs worldwide.

Before answering the research questions, however, it is necessary to make some clarifications on the limitation of the methodology chosen and the speciality of the empirical cases selected. Firstly, being a qualitative study, some conclusions drawn from the empirical cases are not directly generalisable. But they still have general relevance because there are certain structural similarities presented across CIs worldwide, and the empirical data are a contextualised reflection of a general problem. The framework proposed in this thesis could be tested against more cases elsewhere for a higher level of theorisation, just as the grounded theory approach indicates.

Secondly, being a constructivist interpretation, the findings do not claim objectivity in a positivist sense. Instead, I aim at producing findings that are “real” as in they have real-life consequences and significance, which is inevitably influenced by my own positionality as the researcher. In a sense, I have to accept the fact that the findings, just as CIs, are a multi-actor co-production. But at the same time, adopting techniques such as triangulation to overcome one-sided accounts, I hope to reflect to the best of my knowledge what is important in the field yet neglected in the literature.

Thirdly, the cases selected do not reflect an attempt to control variables for a comparative conclusion. Following the research questions and purpose, the conclusions will be first and foremost interpretative, not comparative. But given the framing power of national conditions, in addition to the what has been outlined in this chapter, I will continue to highlight them in the empirical chapters.

Last but not least, the cases selected are special as all three countries have a significant percentage of ethnic Chinese population. My general comment on this

point is that firstly, CIs do not target the ethnic Chinese, if they ever need to define a target, that would be the non-Chinese; and secondly, it is the market of Chinese language education, rather than the presence of ethnic community, that has a direct influence on the CIs. In Malaysia and Singapore where there is a relatively established local system of Chinese language education, CIs will have to find its unique market position. But in Thailand, because of the successful Thaification of the ethnic Chinese, there is no local establishments that CIs are confronted with – except for some areas in northern Thailand where Taiwan has been supporting the Chinese-medium schools. Nevertheless, it seems that CIs are not bothered by their presence neither. With the Thai government entering a comprehensive partnership with the Mainland in this regard, and with the withering Taiwan resources and influence, this last exception is not posing any serious challenge to the CIs, which do not have the mandate to target the ethnic Chinese anyway. The issue of ethnicity will be addressed in Chapter Five in more details.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Building the Power of Language**

On what ground is Confucius Institute’s joint venture based? A commonly heard answer is an exchange of interest. China pays for room to display a positive image and official discourses, while the university gets the much-needed funding. The consequences of this exchange have been subjected to severe criticisms. Yet others may see it differently, underlining the benefits to language education that Chinese participation could bring about.<sup>179</sup> The debate seems to have reached a deadlock, with different evidence pointing to contradictory directions. Much of the debate in fact revolved around the discrepancies between the logic of Chinese government and the liberal values of some US elites, which may not be a central issue to CIs in other parts of the world. This chapter will offer a new explanation to the basis of the joint venture, so that the power implications of CIs could be accounted for across different geopolitical contexts. It examines diachronically the nationalisation of Chinese language and its international spread; and identifies the power of language as the key to bridge the gap between the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives in CI literature. It is the *network power* of Chinese language that acted as the common denominator of Confucius Institute worldwide – being the instrumental goal pursued by various actors in the joint venture, and rendering the Chinese government a structural advantage.

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<sup>179</sup> For an example of the public debate between scholars, see “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes”; “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes PART II,” *ChinaFile*, accessed July 1, 2014, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/debate-over-confucius-institutes-part-ii>.

## 1. One Man's Meat is Another Man's Poison: Navigating the Divided Opinions

Confucius Institutes' joint venture structure is at the heart of a prolonged debate. It has even been suggested that to reduce suspicion and criticism, China should consider making CIs stand-alone institutions like those of the European countries.<sup>180</sup> While China insisted on the joint-venture structure, it is important to consider on what ground is this structure based? One professor of Sino-Thai relations commented that as long as there is a “convergence of interest (*liyi qihe dian*)”, the joint venture can be realised.<sup>181</sup> Nevertheless, it seems to be very problematic for government and universities to have a convergence of interest – government holds political aims; while university shall be the heart and mind for humanity. Professor Marshall Sahlins of the University of Chicago, one of the leading critics of Confucius Institutes, views CIs as an “academic malware”.<sup>182</sup> Even where interference from Beijing has not been experienced, the problem of self-censorship still presents.<sup>183</sup>

Their concerns have been substantiated in several events. According to Bloomberg, in 2011, Dalai Lama's visit to the North Carolina State University was cancelled partly due to the pressure from the CI director, who claimed that such event would disrupt "some of the strong relationships we were developing with China."<sup>184</sup> McMaster University ended the operation of CI in 2013 as a teacher of the CI brought to the Ontario Human Rights Commission a complaint

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<sup>180</sup> Joe Tin-yau Lo and Suyan Pan, “Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power: Practices and Paradoxes,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 46, no. 4 (2016): 526.

<sup>181</sup> Interview in Bangkok, May 4, 2016

<sup>182</sup> Sahlins, “Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware.”

<sup>183</sup> “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes.”

<sup>184</sup> Daniel Golden, “China Says No Talking Tibet as Confucius Funds US Universities,” *Bloomberg*, last modified November 1, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-11-01/china-says-no-talking-tibet-as-confucius-funds-u-s-universities>.

against the university regarding the discrimination of Falun Gong practitioners in the hiring process.<sup>185</sup> In 2014, when attending the 20<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS) where the Hanban/CIH's Confucius China Studies Program (CCSP) was one of the sponsors, the then Director General of Hanban, Mdm. Xu Lin, seized the conference materials because some abstracts were considered "against Chinese regulation" and demanded the removal of the CCSP sponsorship page, in addition to asking for amending the presentation pages of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (CCKF). Given the pressing need to distribute the conference materials as soon as possible, the organisers had to make a concession, which resulted in the removal of CCKF pages and some pages on the Taiwan National Central Library as well. This event was "the first time in the history of the EACS that its conference materials had been censored".<sup>186</sup>

However, it appeared that CIs' experience can be vastly different. Some scholars emphasised the practical educational value of the CI programme; others gave examples where all topics can be openly discussed in the CI as anywhere else on campus.<sup>187</sup> To explain the different attitudes held by universities towards the CIs, it has been identified that universities nowadays have two not-always-compatible missions. One is "pragmatic", prioritising training people as useful workforce for the society; and the other "classical", pursuing truth and evaluating culture by questioning "anything and everything".<sup>188</sup> The tension between the classical and

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<sup>185</sup> "Update - Confucius Institute," *McMaster University*, last modified May 2, 2013, <http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/worth-mentioning/update-confucius-institute/>.

<sup>186</sup> Roger Greatrex, "Report: The Deletion of Pages from EACS Conference Materials in Braga," *European Association of Chinese Studies*, 2014, <http://chinesestudies.eu/?p=584>.

<sup>187</sup> "The Debate Over Confucius Institutes PART II."

<sup>188</sup> Hughes, "Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural," 48.

practical mission of the university appears more salient against the background of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where universities “explicitly market themselves and their missions ... for the purpose of generating their own profit”.<sup>189</sup> In other words, not only the training of students looks toward the market, the administration of the university follows its principles as well. Consequently, the CIs are thus less a “Trojan Horse” in the US education system than an “eduplomaticy” that reinforces higher education as an institution of class reproduction in the political economy of philanthrocapitalism, where the core issue is neither the students nor the visiting scholars from China, but the logic of market and capital.<sup>190</sup> Yet, the logic of market only goes so far as the university’s determination to adhere to other principles in its operation, such as the equality in partnership, convergence of goals, or the distinction between community service and academic activities. The ending of CIs at the University of Chicago, Pennsylvania State University and the Lyon Confucius Institute were cases in point.<sup>191</sup>

Universities nowadays have many roles and functions, be it pursuing truth, training employable people, or achieving self-sustainable development; and the tension between those roles and functions created space for CIs to manoeuvre. CIs have brought the tension to the surface, but also served as a solution to it – they may not be the ideal instrument for Chinese language education in US universities, yet they are the result of the professors and administrators “doing

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<sup>189</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 5.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5, 118–19.

<sup>191</sup> “Statement on the Confucius Institute at the University of Chicago,” *University of Chicago*, last modified September 25, 2014, <http://news.uchicago.edu/article/2014/09/25/statement-confucius-institute-university-chicago>; Elizabeth Redden, “Another Confucius Institute to Close,” *Inside Higher Ed*, last modified October 1, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/10/01/another-confucius-institute-close>; “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes PART II.”

their best to help US students understand [China]”.<sup>192</sup> So long as the tension persists, which surely will in the foreseeable future, it is not surprising for CIs to find their places. Meanwhile, it should be noted that this debate over the indispensable benefit versus the unaffordable risk of hosting a Confucius Institute is context specific. What makes headlines in the US and Australia may never enter public attention in Thailand or Kenya. These debates are therefore more a reflection of the primary concerns in the hosting society than the primary tasks of Confucius Institutes. Viewing China as a major opponent and competitor of the liberal democratic values, people and information from China are received with a defensive attitude and “boundary patrolling” actions.<sup>193</sup> Not only were the academics appealing through collective actions, the US government also tried twice to control and investigate the status of the CIs. In 2012, the Department of State issued Directives restating the regulations on J-1 exchange programme visa holders, targeting CI teachers; and in 2014, a public hearing was held by the US House Foreign Affairs Committee reviewing the influence of CIs. Although no measures were taken to end the relationship, these attitudes and events have demonstrated that China’s cultural diplomacy, in many cases, has induced criticisms rather than countering them, and has reiterated the boundaries instead of crossing them. The CI debate thus concentrates the disparities between the logic of Chinese government and the liberal values of some US elites.

But CIs’ implication goes well beyond a particular society. It is in places where much less objection is heard that the Confucius Institutes and related programmes are having a much broader impact, for example in Southeast Asia. Here, China is

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Albrow, “The Disjunction of Image and Word in US and Chinese Soft Power Projection,” 393.

not considered an enemy in terms of the political values held, and the tension between the classical and pragmatic roles of the university is also a lesser issue. Therefore, the moral dilemma associated with hosting Confucius Institutes is not universally relevant or equally pressing from the perspective of the hosting institutes worldwide. There are other concerns and priorities in different parts of the world. The dominant narratives about the Confucius Institutes are yet to incorporate those concerns into the discussion; and the basis of CI's joint venture structure needs a re-evaluation.

## 2. From Soft Power to Network Power: Finding the Common Denominator

Admittedly, there are plenty of reasons to focus on China's soft power ambition and its projection into the CI project. The discrepancy between Chinese hard and soft power is an important context in which the Confucius Institutes were born. The current literature generally implies that CIs have failed their mission in this regard; and critics equate hosting a CI with joining the bandwagon of Chinese political propaganda for the sake of some "parochial welfare".<sup>194</sup> These views are often justified with reference to China's other behaviours on the international stage. Shambaugh observed that Chinese diplomacy is "remarkably risk-averse and guided by narrow national interests". It is only "formally involved" in the international community, but not "normatively integrated". It often "makes known what it is *against*, but rarely what it is *for*".<sup>195</sup> That is to say, its diplomacy priorities specific interests such as its own economic development, Taiwan, Tibet, human rights, and maritime territorial claims. Following this logic, Chinese soft power efforts, including the establishment of Confucius Institutes, also focus on

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<sup>194</sup> Sahlins, "China U.," 40.

<sup>195</sup> Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, 7,9.

self-interests, often by producing “negative soft power” to denounce others.<sup>196</sup> For example, Professor Sahlins cited the words of the former Head of Publicity Department of CPC to show the function of Confucius Institutes in the eyes of the Chinese government – “[w]ith regard to key issues that influence our sovereignty and safety, we should actively carry out international public opinion struggle over issues such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Human Rights, and Falun Gong. Our strategy is to proactively take our culture abroad... We should do well in establishing and operating overseas cultural centres and Confucius Institutes.”<sup>197</sup> The EACS incident was an example where negative soft power got demonstrated, a “success in Beijing” was chosen at the cost of “trouble in Europe”.<sup>198</sup>

The speech cited above and the EACS incident revealed the logic of power in China’s political system, but it is not the same as the logic of power in Confucius Institutes. As a transnational joint venture, the latter is not situated in a Gramscian “hegemony” of the nation-state, but based on a transnationally formed “relation of sociability” – where there is no clear agent to construct and implement a political will, and the structure of which is constituted by an “accumulation of decentralised, individual decisions that, taken together, nonetheless conduce to a circumstance that affects the entire group”.<sup>199</sup> As a primary actor, the logic and problems of Chinese government sometimes find their way into the social

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<sup>196</sup> Callahan, “Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream,” 225–26.

<sup>197</sup> Liu, “Zhashi Zuohao Jinnian Xuanchuang Sixiang Wenhua Gongzuo 扎实做好今年宣传思想工作 [On Doing Well This Year’s Publicity Work]”; Sahlins, “Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware.”

<sup>198</sup> Callahan, “Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream,” 226.

<sup>199</sup> David Singh Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalisation* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), 8–9, 44–52.

relations formed through CIs and make the latter strained. However, to equate the dynamics of the global CIs to China's coercive domination would result in an oversimplification based on selected evidence – this is not how power works in transnational context.

Whether interference has been felt or not, all Confucius Institutes and the activities they organise are part of a process whereby China proactively sets the agenda in global communication and interaction – creating a transnational social space mediated by Chinese language where people, goods and information gets circulated, and where not only soft power, but all sorts of interests could be furthered. That is to say, rather than being risk-averse and focusing exclusively on certain controversial political issues, China is seeking to strengthen the “network power” of its language – increasing the value of Chinese language by promoting it as the medium through which communications are carried out, and around which human and material resources concentrate.<sup>200</sup>

“Network power” is originally proposed by Grewal to explain globalisation in terms of power in social relations. He viewed globalisation as a process of finding “shared forms of social coordination”, i.e. “standards”. The rise to dominance of international standards can thus enable human coordination on a global scale.<sup>201</sup> Those standards possess “network power” – they are “more valuable when greater number of people use them”, exhibiting the “economies of scale”; and over time, certain standards will become dominant, edging out “alternative standards that might have been freely chosen”.<sup>202</sup> This could explain the process

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 20–28.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 3–4.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 26.

whereby power is structured through “the accretion of decentralised choices” outside the state’s sovereignty control.<sup>203</sup> But before the threshold of inevitability, how are standards selected? Grewal proposed “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” reason to explain the choice of standards. The former means that certain standard gets adopted simply because it suits the purpose of coordination better; and the latter means that the standard is chosen because it gives access to desired resources and networks.<sup>204</sup> It should be noted that the choices are not always made “voluntarily”. When there is no acceptable alternative, choosing a particular standard could be considered only formally free but in effect forced.<sup>205</sup>

Language is a typical “mediating standard” in globalisation.<sup>206</sup> The strong network power of a particular language would lend structural advantages to its speakers. Take English for example, today, it demonstrates significant network power. It is situated at the centre of various kinds of global information networks, measured by books translated, twitters sent, and Wikipedia entries, which has contributed to “the visibility of its speakers and the global popularity of the cultural content they produce”.<sup>207</sup> As a “mediating standard”, it is already universal in certain domains of social activity, such as international business and programming; and is well on the way to penetrate even further.<sup>208</sup> In comparison, less “valuable” mediating standards are getting eliminated. Around 95% of the world’s languages, spoken by less than 4% of the population, are going to vanish

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 108–11.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>207</sup> Shahar Ronen et al., “Links That Speak: The Global Language Network and Its Association with Global Fame,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 52 (2014): E5616–22, doi:10.1073/pnas.1410931111.

<sup>208</sup> Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalisation*, 21,73.

in the next century.<sup>209</sup> If one's mother tongue is not English, to get access to all the information and resources mediated by this language, he/she would want to learn it. But learning a second language requires time and energy as well as considerable social resources in support. That is to say, switching the mediating standard has a cost. Those who were born into the English speaking community thus enjoy a structural advantage of being part of a network that others desire to enter. In addition, to maximise the utility of the cost in acquiring a second language, English would be preferred over other languages, as it enables us to access the largest possible amount of resources. In this sense, one's learning of English can be considered free and forced at the same time – we do “choose” to learn this language (or our educational system did the choice for us), yet there lacks an alternative that is functionally equivalent. And most of us choose it for extrinsic reasons. It is less because of the intrinsic features of the English language (e.g. grammar, lexicon, or phonetics) than the long-distance, wide-scale international communication it promises that we decide to devote our time and energy into learning it. The network power of English reinforces itself. With more people choosing to be part of the English network, it is in other people's interest to join as well. Power has been exerted by shaping how personal interests are perceived in the first place. By empowering the learners, English further strengthens its central status in international communication, and consolidates the influence of its products.

However, the network power of English does not benefit all English speakers to an equal extent. Hierarchies also exist within the English network; accent and proficiency will have a direct influence on how the speaker is positioned.

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 82.

Authenticity will translate into authority, reflecting another power implication of language derived from the process of language standardisation and normalisation. Pierre Bourdieu criticised the structural linguistic theories for thinking of language in an abstract way that disregards the different linguistic competence among people, and asked how the “correct” linguistic practices are established, and how the competence in those practices is acquired.<sup>210</sup> He identified that the “standard” and “official” language is socially constructed. Language unification is a political project which goes hand in hand with the formation of state and “the making of a nation”.<sup>211</sup> This language unification and standardisation is necessary because the new community is going to be forged out of an “abstract group” without intensive daily communication, and ideas need to be transmitted between strangers to perform the “bureaucratic predictability and calculability” required by modernisation.<sup>212</sup> However, the normalising process not only creates the standard, but also assigns legitimacy to a certain type of language and privileges the social group who already speak that language. By turning one version of the language into the “norm”, other versions are rendered substandard, creating a hierarchical relation between linguistic habits, and subsequently, between people. Moreover, this linguistic norm is going to be imposed upon everyone through the educational system, so as to standardise the ways in which daily ideas and emotions are expressed and, consequently, also incline the thinking and feeling towards the same direction – a “common consciousness of the nation” can thus be built.<sup>213</sup> Meanwhile, the unified school/linguistic system

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<sup>210</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 43–44.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 45,48.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

and the unified labour market are linked through the nationwide validity of educational qualifications and the absolute necessity of obtaining them for getting a desirable job. This school-market relation is decisive in devaluing dialects and implementing new hierarchy.<sup>214</sup> In short, the national language is both a product and a tool of the nation-state. It is normalised and imposed upon the whole nation; it reflects and shapes the power relations between people, becoming a “field” for privilege and discrimination.<sup>215</sup> When a particular linguistic standard gets spread beyond its national borders and acquires network power, it still carries the implication of its normalisation, creating a hierarchy among its international speakers.

Having a strong network power is not an intrinsic feature of any language. The number of people using a certain language as mother tongue has no direct bearing on its globalisation either. Historically, the spread of language usually followed conquest, commerce or conversion, two of which had nothing to do with the accumulation of decentralised choices. In fact, if we look at the major European languages that enjoy relatively strong network power nowadays, it is the top-down political power rooted in the logic of sovereignty that was behind their nationalisation and internationalisation. To illustrate, after the Norman conquest of England, William the Conqueror brought French to the British court. French and Latin were the languages of government, church and aristocracy; and English only ranked third in its own mother land. From a language of under-class to a global lingua franca, the current status of English could not have been achieved without a bit of luck, such as the French invasion of Normandy in 1204 that cut

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 14.

off the connection of England rulers to their cultural and ancestral homeland, which provided the precondition for English to re-establish itself as a national language. But more importantly, it was the domination of the British Empire and later the United States, as well as all the post war efforts associated with the promotion of English as a second language worldwide that led to its current status. Without a series of government reports produced in the mid-1950s to advocate for the expansion of English teaching in the “Third World” countries and “the establishment of the academic and bureaucratic infrastructure” in its support, English would not have become Britain’s “real black gold”; and without the investment from government agencies and private organisations into teaching English as a second language, it could not have been the “most booming item” in United States’ public diplomacy.<sup>216</sup> Until the 1990s, the majority of British Council’s funding still came from the government. Income-generating English teaching activities earned the British Council £55 million in 1989-90, which was about 17% of the total budget that year. The current corporate plan shows an earned income of £932 million in 2016-17, which is about 83% of the expenditure projection.<sup>217</sup> That is to say, in addition to the imperial history, more than half a century of government investments dedicated to the promotion of English is indispensable to the network power it enjoys today.

The English case illustrated that the network power of language could be deliberately pursued. Nowadays, even when the link between English language and modernisation, technology and social development has been labelled as

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<sup>216</sup> Robert Phillipson, “English Language Spread Policy,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 107, no. 1 (1994): 7–24.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 16; British Council, “Corporate Plan 2017–20,” 2016, 30, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/corporate-plan-2017-20.pdf>.

“linguistic imperialism” and is still contested, it is also a *fait accompli* that the resources and networks the English language can give access to are simply too valuable to disregard. The rise of English in Cambodia and the debate between the “national-functional perspective” and the “international critical perspective” demonstrated the logic of network power – although it can be a mechanism of structural domination that further alienates the unprivileged class, it is still longed for by the Cambodian students and the government as an indispensable tool of empowerment for themselves as well as for their country on the international stage.<sup>218</sup> In addition, it is ASEAN and international business, not Britain or US that directly propelled the rising importance of English in Cambodia; in comparison, the power of French maintained through colonial heritage is “losing out”.<sup>219</sup>

To build on Grewal and Bourdieu’s theories, the network power of language has three features. Firstly, from a diachronic perspective, it has been deliberately pursued by European countries wielding political, military and economic power. With the centralised, top-down political coercion accompanying colonialism making a significant contribution to its accumulation, the network power of language has resulted in a hierarchal relation between languages and cultures.<sup>220</sup> Secondly, from a synchronic perspective, the network power of English nowadays is no longer imposed through a clearly defined agent such as a colonial government. It is wielded through the aggregation of decentralised choices which nonetheless forms the structural condition that shapes the interests of individual

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<sup>218</sup> Thomas Clayton, “Language Choice in a Nation Under Transition: The Struggle between English and French in Cambodia,” *Language Policy*, no. 1 (2002): 3–25.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–9.

<sup>220</sup> Frantz Fanon, “The Black Man and Language,” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 1–23.

actors and confines their actions.<sup>221</sup> Without colonial domination, the network power of a language still constitutes a structural advantage of the societies speaking that language – they do not have to pay the cost of switching linguistic standard to access the resources mediated by it. It also expands the market and audience of the cultural and intellectual products of that language, lending more potential “soft power” in Nye’s sense. Thirdly, the network power of language does not benefit all speakers of the same language to an equal extent. Those who define the linguistic rules, i.e. have the authority to legitimise a particular standard, enjoy the status as the “centre” of that network,<sup>222</sup> thus creating a power differentiation among people using the same language.

In the complex relation between language and power, Chinese is not an exception. Comparing with political debates, the power implication of spreading Chinese overseas is universally relevant to Confucius Institutes worldwide. Even the critics of CI would recognise the rising importance of Chinese language internationally. Regardless of the motivation of individual partners, be it for the economic prospect, the access it can give to the Chinese-speaking people and communities, or even the additional funding that sustains a language department, the teaching and learning of Chinese simultaneously helps to manifest and generate its network power, which benefits all who are part of the network, and at the same time gives Chinese government – who is increasingly centralised in this linguistic network and holding the power to standardise and normalise Chinese language – structural and systematic privileges. Thus, CIs’ perceived benefit to China is not a hard fight in propaganda war, but a general enhancement

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<sup>221</sup> Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalisation*, 120–21.

<sup>222</sup> Castells, *Communication Power*, 19.

of the socio-cultural environment for all kinds of activities; and CIs can find partners across different societies because they tap on and increase the network power of Chinese language, creating a common ground where all participants are working on and benefiting from.

Nevertheless, Confucius Institutes are not the only actor in Chinese language education worldwide. Just as the world has many Englishes, Chinese is far from a singular concept. There are various standards of this language kept in use in different parts of the world, some competing for wider influence, others may carry unique identity and cultural significance. To them, the growing network power of *Putonghua* with simplified characters could be an empowerment that makes their voices spread further, or a threat to their very existence. There are also different agencies holding the authority to set the linguistic standard in their respective regions, from the Ministry of Education to professional associations in different countries. To the Chinese government, they present both as potential partners and competitors. These are the central issues influencing the fundamental existence the global CI network. Looking at the history of Chinese language standardisation and the changing contexts of its global spread will offer us a useful perspective in re-examining the strategic mission of Hanban and the primary tasks of Confucius Institutes.

### 3. Wielding the Power of Language: Road Leading to the Confucius Institutes

#### 3.1 A language is a Dialect with an Army and Navy: Rise of National Languages

The waves of Chinese language standardisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the co-existence of two “national standards” still competing for legitimacy on the

international stage.<sup>223</sup> For both standards, it was the pressure to generate allegiance to the central government that underpinned their rise and consolidation. In other words, the current forms of Chinese language, be it traditional or simplified characters, *pinyin* or *zhuyin*, are a historical and political product, which could have turned out in a completely different form. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the bitter encounter with Western powers propelled Chinese intellectuals to reflect upon what went wrong with the society. It was believed that the complicated pictographic writing script and its detachment from the pronunciation were barriers to mass literacy and thus modernisation.<sup>224</sup> A phoneticisation movement (*qieyinzi yundong*) was attempted, i.e. using a phonetic system to capture and preserve the rich “acoustic variety” of the Chinese spoken languages, therefore raising literacy without “sacrificing native linguistic habits”.<sup>225</sup> This movement was partly inspired by the language nationalisation of European countries, and aimed at finding “a common denominator between indigenous and foreign tonalities” while possibly “reshaping the Chinese language into a world medium”.<sup>226</sup> However, those efforts were interrupted by the fall of the dynasty and the rise of nationalism. As a modernisation project, the movement put “dialectal literacy” prior to the “national standardisation”.<sup>227</sup> It

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<sup>223</sup> Mainland China (PRC) and Taiwan (RoC) has two different systems of Chinese language as national standards, which can be simply summarised as “simplified characters and *pinyin*” & “traditional characters and *zhuyin*”.

<sup>224</sup> Dongjie Wang, “Shengru Xintong: Qingmo Qieyinzi yundong he Guoyu Tongyi Sichao de jiujié ‘声入心通’: 清末切音字运动和‘国语统一’思潮的纠结 [‘Through the Ear into the Mind’: The Alphabetic Writing Movement in the Late Qing Period and Its Entanglement with the Movement for ‘Unifying National Language,’” *Modern Chinese History Studies*, no. 5 (2010): 82–106.

<sup>225</sup> Jing Y. Tsu, “Sinophones and the Nationalisation of Chinese,” in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Jing Y. Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 97; Jing Y. Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 45.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–45.

<sup>227</sup> Tsu, “Sinophones and the Nationalisation of Chinese,” 108–9.

came “too close to empowering the local tongues”, thus not helping with the construction of national consciousness, unity and political identity.<sup>228</sup> In 1902, when the Qing court sent Wu Rulun to Japan to learn about the modern education system, the Japanese educator Isawa Shūji persuaded Wu that having a national language was of utmost importance to nation-building. He said, “If nationalism is to be cultivated, there should something to unite the country. What can unite the country? Language it is. With diverse languages, commonalities cannot be formed, unification cannot be achieved, causing all kinds of harm.” He further used the example of Germany to show that a unified language means a strong nation, and without it, the country would be in chaos. Wu was worried that adding another subject to the modern schools would be too much to handle, but Isawa replied, “Would rather do without other subjects, national language must be added.”<sup>229</sup> Facing the looming threat of imperialism, the idea of national language became increasingly persuasive, rendering the standardisation and promotion of a national tongue based on the pictographic script the unquestionably important project for successive Chinese governments.<sup>230</sup>

By transferring allegiance from native dialects to a shared national language, the identity and loyalty of the people would also be redirected from their local communities and families to the “imagined community” of the nation-state and its central government. The government of the Republic of China (RoC) organised a Commission on the Unification of Pronunciation in 1913, which proposed a set of phonetic symbols known as “*Zhuyin*” for the standardised

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<sup>228</sup> Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*, 41–42.

<sup>229</sup> Wang, “‘声入心通’: 清末切音字运动和‘国语统一’思潮的纠结 [‘Through the Ear into the Mind’: The Alphabetic Writing Movement in the Late Qing Period and Its Entanglement with the Movement for ‘Unifying National Language,’]” 91.

<sup>230</sup> Tsu, “Sinophonics and the Nationalisation of Chinese,” 109.

pronunciation of “*Guoyu*” – China’s first version of “national language”. After the founding of PRC, a set of phonetic symbols known as *hanyu pinyin* and simplified characters were developed and published, followed by several revisions to reach its current form. While *Putonghua* was promoted in the mainland, the Nationalist government took pain to erase the linguistic trace of Japanese colonial rule – which, by the way, was a legacy of Isawa Shūji as the first governor of education in Taiwan under the Japanese rule – by promoting *Guoyu*. The traditional characters were also upheld as the only legitimate writing system in contrast with the simplified version used across the strait. With the consolidation of two versions of mandarin Chinese in mainland and Taiwan respectively, not only that the “national languages” united and dominated various local tongues, turning the latter into mere “dialects”; they themselves were also made into symbols of divergent political loyalty and endowed with unique identity and cultural significance by different groups of Chinese people worldwide. The history of language nationalisation resulted in a situation where there are in effect two sets of standard for mandarin Chinese, which have been competing for legitimacy and greater influence on the international stage since the mid-20th century.

### 3.2 Spread the Word: Chinese Education Overseas

As early as late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese language schools were operating overseas.<sup>231</sup> However, it did not become a tool of colonial domination, nor a “cultural foreign policy” until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the Qing

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<sup>231</sup> Biliang Bie, *Chengchuan Yu Chuangxin: Jindai Huaqiao Jiaoyu Yanjiu 承传与创新: 近代华侨教育研究 [Inheritance and Innovation: A Study of Overseas Chinese Education in Modern History]* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2001), 9–11.

court was busy banning foreigners from learning Chinese for almost a century until the 1844 Treaty of Wanghia. And when the court eventually recognised the overseas Chinese as its subjects and offered them assistance in education in order to “maintain the sympathy of overseas Chinese and eliminate the hidden danger [of rebellion] (维侨情而弥隐患)”,<sup>232</sup> it was too late for the crumbling dynasty to tap on the nationalistic feelings of the overseas Chinese expressed via the proliferating new schools. For the Republic of China (RoC), the successful unification of linguistic standard as well as its promotion overseas, especially in Southeast Asia where Chinese population concentrated, were an important part of the nation-building. Following the announcement of *Zhuyin* symbols by the Ministry of Education of RoC in 1918, standard pronunciation was promoted during the 1920s in the Chinese schools in Southeast Asia; and by 1929, *Guoyu* replaced dialects to be the main medium of instruction.<sup>233</sup> Using textbooks imported from RoC, the nationalistic identification with China, the pride in Chinese ethnicity, the appreciation of the cultural tradition and even the emotional bonds with the grand landscapes were all transmitted and expressed via the Chinese language.<sup>234</sup> While located overseas, “the emotional investment in the Chinese language, for those who have known it for all their lives, is synonymous with being Chinese”.<sup>235</sup> In comparison, language was not yet part of cultural diplomacy. The only thing that the nationalist party government did achieve in this regard before 1949 was sending six parcels of Chinese books to

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>234</sup> Kwai Keong Choi, “From ‘China-Oriented’ to ‘Malayanisation’: The Evolution of Singapore Chinese-Language Textbooks (1946-1965),” in *A Historical Survey of Chinese-School Textbooks in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia*, ed. Yeap Chong Leng and Tong Bao Wee (Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre, 2005), 68–69.

<sup>235</sup> Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*, 4.

the Library of Congress via the American embassy in 1944, apart from the unrealised plan to offer scholarships and travel grants to American students of Chinese language.<sup>236</sup>

Immediately after the Second World War, Chinese language schools experienced a dramatic coming back in many Southeast Asian countries, demonstrating again strong nationalism as the underpinning of this linguistic network. However, confronted with the tide of “high nationalism” in postcolonial Southeast Asia,<sup>237</sup> the consolidated link between the national language and political allegiance not only blurred the diversity of identification among the Chinese overseas, but also constituted the greatest liability associated indiscriminately with all of them. Chinese language was no longer the “national language” of the Chinese communities, in some cases, it even lost most of its social functions and was confined within the family doors to wait for an unavoidable death. The new born PRC also formally cut the allegiance of overseas Chinese since 1955 by ceasing to recognise dual nationality. As a result, Chinese language education stopped being a symbol of long-distance nationalism directed towards the ancestral homeland,<sup>238</sup> but was pursued as a civil right of the ethnic Chinese community in their hosting countries, which were gradually turning into their only motherland. In Singapore, Chinese language learning was incorporated into the formal national education system by a bilingual policy, which required students to learn

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<sup>236</sup> Hongshan Li, “Maintaining the Educational Front,” in *U.S.-China Educational Exchange: State, Society and Intercultural Relations, 1905-1950* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 146–47.

<sup>237</sup> Duara, “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900-1945,” 1031, 1049.

<sup>238</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, “Long-Distance Nationalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R Ember, and Ian Skoggard (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2005), 570–80.

both their “mother tongues” and English as a common and neutral language for different ethnic groups. Yet a combination of factors during the 1960s and 1970s rendered English structural privileges in Singapore society. Surrounded by Malay neighbours against the background of the Cold War, Singapore took extra caution not to be viewed as a “third China” and “fifth column”. The association of English language with modernity and industrialisation formed a policy discourse that favoured its utility and portrayed it as a “crucial part of human resource development and human capital”.<sup>239</sup> The switching to English by Nanyang University – the first and only university outside of China that was Chinese medium – in the 1970s and its later merge with the University of Singapore embodied the systematic decline of the social status of Chinese as an unavoidable result of government’s deliberate policy choice.

In Malaysia, the government based many of its national development policies on the division between “bumiputra” (son of soil) and “non-bumiputra”, the indigenous and non-indigenous dichotomy and the “special rights” enjoyed by the former are presented in various aspects of social life, from holding publicly quoted company shares to admission into the university.<sup>240</sup> When English gradually took an upper hand and became the dominant language in Singapore, Malaysia also pushed towards monoculturalism. In addition to interfering with the curricula, the government also attempted to push Chinese-speaking administrators out of Chinese-medium primary and secondary schools, which

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<sup>239</sup> Rita Elaine Silver, “The Discourse of Linguistic Capital: Language and Economic Policy Planning in Singapore,” *Language Policy* 4, no. 1 (2005): 47.

<sup>240</sup> Sharon Siddique and Leo Suryadinata, “Bumiputra and Pribumi: Economic Nationalism (Indiginism) in Malaysia and Indonesia,” *Pacific Affairs* 54, no. 4 (1981): 662–87.

were already financially stretched due to government policy discrimination.<sup>241</sup> These attempts were met with fierce objection and resist from the Chinese community. The struggle over the right to mother tongue education (i.e. Chinese as the medium of instruction) continued throughout the post war years until now, shaping the solidarity and identity of Chinese Malaysians as an ethnic minority struggling to gain equal civil rights.

In Thailand, the assimilation policy and the purge of Chinese schools under Phibun's administration during and after the Second World War in effect deprived the ethnic Chinese of their mother tongue education. During the Cold War, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s, “speaking Chinese in Thailand became a social marker of being the Other” and “‘Chinese-educated’ became synonymous with communist”.<sup>242</sup> The policy that only one foreign language, that is, any language other than Thai, could be taught at school, made English again the unquestionable choice. As early as the 1960s, it was already impossible for ethnic Chinese to receive primary and secondary education within the community using the mother-tongue, which was not observed in other Southeast Asia countries.<sup>243</sup> With no significant policy change during the following three decades, the Chinese schools lost all but name by the 1980s for lacking students.<sup>244</sup> The large number of ethnic Chinese were thus made into Thais culturally and linguistically.

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<sup>241</sup> Chunyan Hu, *Kangzheng Yu Tuoxie: Malaixiya Huashe Dui Huazu Muyu Jiaoyu Zhengce Zhiding de Yingxiang 抗争与妥协：马来西亚华社对华族母语教育政策制定的影响* [Struggling and Compromising: The Influence of Malaysian Chinese Community on the Development of Chinese Mother-Tongue Education Policy] (Guangzhou: Jinan University Press, 2012).

<sup>242</sup> Jiemin Bao, “Nationalisms and Soft Power Games: Chinese Language Programs in Thailand,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 13, no. 1 (2017): 11.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>244</sup> Meijun Zhang, “Taiguo Huawenjiaoyu Yu Hanyujiaoxue Quzhe Fazhan de Yuanyin Fenxi 泰国华文教育与汉语教学曲折发展的原因分析 [Flexural Development of Chinese Language Education and Chinese Teaching in Thailand]” (Peking University, 2012). PhD diss.

In places where Chinese language education did survive, from the 1950s to 1970s, Taiwan government took the leading role. The network was sustained by Taiwan-provided regulations, teachers, teaching materials, training and exchange opportunities, as well as academic and public platforms of communication.<sup>245</sup> From 1951 to 1971, 1,172 Chinese teachers were sent overseas, mainly to Southeast Asian countries.<sup>246</sup> In comparison, from 1952 to 1979, only 307 Chinese teachers were sent abroad by the PRC.<sup>247</sup> Teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSL) in mainland was directed at foreign students and diplomats located in PRC. Before the 1970s, only students from the socialist camp and “Third World” were coming to China; and teaching Chinese clearly served a political purpose – even the evaluation of language proficiency was focusing on being able to read the People’s Daily, understand news reports and take notes.<sup>248</sup> Under the domination of ideological struggle, TCSL was not perceived as an independent discipline nor an academic subject; in contrast to Taiwan, there was neither the intention to woo the overseas communities as the “second track” of diplomacy.<sup>249</sup> Consequently, Taiwan government enjoyed a monopoly on TCSL internationally by acting as the only provider and promoter of its own standards. In retrospect, it was from the late 1970s that the network power of the *Guoyu* and related standards began to lose ground. The major political and diplomatic

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<sup>245</sup> Lan Yao, “Liushinian Taiwan Haiwai Qiaomin Jiaoyu Zhi Yange 六十年台湾海外侨民教育之沿革 [Taiwan’s Overseas Chinese Education: History and Development (1949-2008)],” *Overseas Chinese Education*, no. 2 (2015): 195–98.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>247</sup> Yuzhen Cheng, *Xin Zhongguo Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue Fazhan Shi 新中国对外汉语教学发展史 [History of Teaching Chinese as Second Language in P.R.China]* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), 37.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–12, 18–19; see also Hsiaopong Phillip Liu, “Petty Annoyances?: Revisiting John Emmanuel Hevi’s An African Student in China after 50 Years,” *China: An International Journal* 11, no. 1 (2013): 131–45.

<sup>249</sup> Yao, “Liushinian Taiwan Haiwai Qiaomin Jiaoyu Zhi Yange 六十年台湾海外侨民教育之沿革 [Taiwan’s Overseas Chinese Education: History and Development (1949-2008)],” 214.

setbacks for Taiwan in the 1970s did not immediately eliminate its advantage in TCSL, as its economy was on the rise while the mainland was devastated by Cultural Revolution. Non-governmental organisations such as the “World Chinese Language Association” acted as the main facilitator that channelled the RoC government resources into the global TSCL network.<sup>250</sup> However, the mainland developed *hanyu pinyin* made its way forward as the “international standard” firstly in 1977 through the United Nations and then in 1982 by International Organization for Standardization (ISO).<sup>251</sup> Since 1997, the American Library of Congress also switched to *pinyin* in indexing Chinese materials. The power of controlling how Chinese language shall be represented internationally got back into the hands of the mainland Chinese government.<sup>252</sup> Taiwan’s *zhuyin fuhao* and other phonetic systems developed to mark the distinctiveness of its own “cultural subjectivity” are now in an awkward position facing the overwhelming network power of *pinyin* – even the Chinese textbooks produced by Taiwan for international use have to annotate *pinyin* alongside the Taiwanese phonetic systems.<sup>253</sup> The refusal to use *pinyin* was even criticised as a “self-isolation” from the rest of the world.<sup>254</sup>

Since the 1980s, with China’s reform and opening up, the global environment for Chinese language education experienced a fundamental change. Chinese

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 199–200.

<sup>251</sup> Li-Yun Wang, “Controversial Issues in Chinese Pin-Yin Policy -- Reflections on the Political Dimension of Curriculum,” *Bulletin of Educational Research* 48, no. 1 (2002): 105.

<sup>252</sup> Horng-luen Wang, “Globalisation and Institutional Isomorphism: Examining the Postmodern Condition of Taiwan’s National Question in the Debate over the Romanisation Policy of Chinese Characters,” *SOCIETAS: A Journal for Philosophical Study of Public Affairs*, no. 3 (2002): 150.

<sup>253</sup> Yao, “Liushinian Taiwan Haiwai Qiaomin Jiaoyu Zhi Yange 六十年台湾海外侨民教育之沿革 [Taiwan’s Overseas Chinese Education: History and Development (1949-2008)],” 208.

<sup>254</sup> Wang, “Globalisation and Institutional Isomorphism: Examining the Postmodern Condition of Taiwan’s National Question in the Debate over the Romanisation Policy of Chinese Characters,” 140.

language is no longer associated with communist influence in Southeast Asia, but business opportunities. Many Southeast Asian countries that previously cut the Chinese tie for normalising its own linguistic standard were trying to get connected back onto the Chinese network so as to share the resources it brings about. Singapore already switched to simplified characters and *pinyin* as the standards in schools and media in the 1970s; and Malaysia followed up in the 1980s. In Thailand, after the 1992 bill that relaxed the restrictions on Chinese education, it came back as a popular “foreign language”. The Thai Ministry of Education even introduced a five year (2006-2010) “Strategic Plan” to promote Chinese as an essential measure to improve “national competitiveness”. The vision of this Strategic Plan was to “provide all Thai people with the opportunity to learn Chinese, enable them to communicate in Chinese and broaden their employment choices”; the task was to “promote Chinese language learning in all levels of education across Thailand”, from professional to vocational, primary to tertiary.<sup>255</sup> Specifically, until 2010, at least 30% of the graduates from secondary, tertiary and vocational schools respectively should have learned some Chinese, with 500,000 working-age people able to use Chinese in work, and 4000 middle school graduates with an excellent command of the language for further training to become experts.<sup>256</sup> It was anticipated that more cooperation would be realised

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<sup>255</sup> Chinese translation of the “Strategic Plan”, in Yinghui Wu et al., “Taiguo Cujin Hanyu Jiaoxue, Tigao Guojia Jingzhengli Zhanlve Guihua 泰国促进汉语教学，提高国家竞争力战略规划 [Thailand’s Strategic Plan on Promoting Chinese Language Education, Improving National Competitiveness],” *International Chinese Language Education*, no. 1 (2009): 44.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*; Siriwan Worrachaiyut, “The Research of the Policy and Management of Chinese Studying in Thailand (泰国汉语教育政策及其实施研究)” (East China Normal University, 2012), 115. PhD diss.

with China and ASEAN in terms of TCSL, helping Thailand's international relations, business and tourist industry.<sup>257</sup>

This ambitious plan needed a tremendous amount of resource to realise; and the Chinese government came to fulfil the demand. In the same year when the five-year Strategic Plan was introduced, Hanban and the Thai Ministry of Education signed a Framework of Cooperation in Chinese Language Teaching. According to this framework, not only teaching materials and curricula shall be developed specifically for Thai learners, a series of teacher training projects were to be implemented, providing scholarships to Thai Chinese teachers, and sending Chinese teachers to Thailand.<sup>258</sup> In 2003, Hanban sent the first batch of volunteer Chinese teachers to Thailand as a trial. Since then, more than 12,000 volunteers have served in Thailand across all levels of education in accumulative total, making Thailand the number one receiving country in the world. In 2016 alone, there were more than 1,700 China-sent language teachers (including professional teachers and volunteers) working in Thailand, accounting for about 18% of all teachers Hanban dispatched worldwide that year.<sup>259</sup> Together with professional teachers from China and local teachers in Thailand, they served more than one million Chinese learning population.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Wu et al., "Taiguo Cujin Hanyu Jiaoxue, Tigao Guojia Jingzhengli Zhanlve Guihua 泰国促进汉语教学, 提高国家竞争力战略规划 [Thailand's Strategic Plan on Promoting Chinese Language Education, Improving National Competitiveness]," 47.

<sup>258</sup> Hanban, "The Office of Chinese Language Council International Annual Report" (Beijing, 2006), 31.

<sup>259</sup> Chen Jiang, Cultural Counsellor, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand, fieldwork in Thailand, 25 June, 2016; Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, "Confucius Institute Annual Development Report" (Beijing, 2016), 4, <http://www.hanban.edu.cn/report/2016.pdf>.

<sup>260</sup> As of 2014. Statistics shown as the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> episode of a television programme first broadcasted on China Central Television Documentary Channel in April 2016. Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, *Xi Qu Dong Lai (Goes West, Comes East) – Weilai de Huhuan (Future Is Calling)* (China: CCTV, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYY3ZVRoRik>.

Thailand's situation is a reflection of the changing context of TCSL internationally. Not only the network power of Chinese is on the rise, the mainland has also replaced Taiwan to be the main provider of resources in Chinese education, who is also taking the lead in setting standards. Mainland China is now Thailand's primary collaborator, whose linguistic standards are accepted and implemented through the authority of Thai government, despite the continuing existence of Taiwan sponsored Chinese language schools in the northern part of the country, some of which are still struggling to hold on to the political and cultural significance of *Guoyu* and RoC in Taiwan.<sup>261</sup> A similar trend can be observed in the US. In 2003, as a product of Sino-US cooperation, Chinese language was listed among other foreign languages, including French, German, Spanish and Italian, in the Advanced Placement Programme organised by the College Board. The then President of College Board and Chinese Ambassador to the US announced this programme together in Capitol Hill.<sup>262</sup> When the AP class official opened in 2006, Hanban and the College Board signed the first five-year Chinese Language and Culture Initiative, inviting 600 American secondary school administrators to China, sending 50 Chinese teachers to the US, and providing 100 scholarships to US university students majoring in Chinese teaching.<sup>263</sup> Facing the taking over of mainland linguistic standards, Taiwan tried not to be pushed out. With the joint effort of RoC's Overseas Community Affairs Council (OCAC), MOE, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the cultural committee of the Executive Yuan, it enabled *zhuyin* and traditional

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<sup>261</sup> Fieldwork in Thailand, June 2016; also see Will Weng-Jeng Chen, *Tangle* (泰北中國“結”) (Taiwan, 2010), <http://www.moviecharger.com.tw/preplay.asp?id=110>.

<sup>262</sup> Shushan Zhen, ed., *China Education Yearbook 2004 (Data on 2003)* (Beijing: People's Education Press, 2004), 343.

<sup>263</sup> Hanban, "The Office of Chinese Language Council International Annual Report," 27.

characters to be used together with pinyin and simplified characters in AP classes.<sup>264</sup>

These events illustrated the historical and international context where the Confucius Institutes were born. The economic development of PRC is the major engine behind the growing network power of Chinese language, in which the Chinese government is not the only stakeholder willing to invest. Meanwhile, compared with the linguistic standard of Taiwan, that of the mainland is now enjoying a more central status. Facing the quickly expanding market of TCSL overseas, the Chinese government came prepared this time. The following sections will review Hanban's formation and the emergence of Confucius Institute, demonstrating that expanding the network power of Chinese language is at the core of their mission.

### 3.3 Building the “Chinese Bridge”: From Hanban to Confucius Institutes

From the 1980s until the founding of Confucius Institutes in 2004, TCSL was first professionalised to lay the technical groundwork for the international promotion of Chinese language, and then nationalised as “a cause of the state and the nation” to get the resources needed for a great leap forward.<sup>265</sup> Apart from making *hanyu pinyin* the international standard, the 1980s saw a series of institutional change to support the development of TCSL as a “specialised discipline”.<sup>266</sup> The first mainland initiated international conference on TCSL was held; two academic associations were founded, namely the Chinese Society for

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<sup>264</sup> Yao, “Liushinian Taiwan Haiwai Qiaomin Jiaoyu Zhi Yangge 六十年台湾海外侨民教育之沿革 [Taiwan's Overseas Chinese Education: History and Development (1949-2008)],” 208.

<sup>265</sup> Cheng, *Xin Zhongguo Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue Fazhan Shi 新中国对外汉语教学发展史 [History of Teaching Chinese as Second Language in P.R.China]*, 89.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–83.

Chinese Language Teaching and the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching, the latter with an international Board of Directors and membership.<sup>267</sup> Around the same time, Beijing Language Institute (the predecessor of Beijing Language and Culture University, BLCU) began to develop the first Chinese proficiency test, i.e. Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, HSK. It would take more than a decade for Taiwan to come up with its own Chinese Proficiency Test, Taiwan (CPTT).

In addition to all the efforts devoted to the professionalisation of TCSL, government participation gave it the engine to “go global”. It was acknowledged that not only educational department should be involved, various bureaus of the State Council also had their roles to play. The “National Leading Group of Teaching Chinese as Second Language” was formed in 1987 as a result.<sup>268</sup> An office was set up to undertake its daily tasks, which was called “*guojia duiwai hanyu lindao xiaozu ban gongshi*”, thus Hanban. The “leading group”, also called “leadership small group”, is a special phenomenon in Chinese administration system. Being a deliberation and coordination agency in name, it in effect functions as a formal collective decision making institution embedded in the administrative system of the party/state, responsible for a “specific designated items” as a type of “responsive governance”.<sup>269</sup> In the case of Hanban, it was originally headed by the Deputy Director of the National Education Commission

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>268</sup> Lü, *Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue Fazhan Gaiyao* 对外汉语教学发展概要 [A Synopsis of the Progress of Teaching Chinese as Second Language], 31.

<sup>269</sup> Ling Chen, “Zhongguo Gaoceng Lingdao Xiaozu de Yunzuo Jizhi Jiqi Yanhua 中国高层领导小组的运作机制及其演化 [The Operational Mechanism and Evolution of China’s Top Level Leadership Groups],” in *Zhonggong de Zhili Yu Shiying: Bijiao de Shiye* 中共的治理与适应: 比较的视野 [Governance and Adaptation of the Chinese Communist Party: A Comparative Perspective], ed. Keping Yu, Thomas Heberer, and Xiaobo An (Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe, 2015), 43–69.

(i.e. the Ministry of Education after 1998), and was composed of personnel from eight bureaus under the State Council together with professionals from the Beijing Language Institute.<sup>270</sup> After 1998, three more bureaus were added in,<sup>271</sup> with Beijing Language Institute no longer part of it, constituting the basic structure of Hanban for the next decade. The Ministry of Education was the main contact with foreign governments in education related matters and take the responsibility in governing TCSL nationwide; the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was responsible for liaison with overseas Chinese education organisations; Ministry of Foreign Affairs guided the Chinese embassies and consulates abroad in promoting TCSL; Ministry of Culture in charge of the Chinese Culture Centres abroad, which also conducted TCSL activities; and Ministry of Finance provided the funding.<sup>272</sup>

With the establishment of Hanban, the 1990s saw TCSL changing into a national cause. Universities got subordinated to government agent in leading its direction of development. This process was not without controversies, especially in the case of the HSK exams, where its developer, the Beijing Language and Culture University, and Hanban had different visions for its function and future, as well as conflict of interests in the right to conduct these profitable exams.<sup>273</sup> In 2001,

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<sup>270</sup> Including the National Education Commission, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, State Council Foreign Affairs Office (later changed to the State Council Information Office), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, General Administration of Press and Publication, State Language Commission

<sup>271</sup> Including Ministry of Finance, State Development Planning Commission (now National Development and Reform Commission), National Development Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Co-operation (now Ministry of Commerce)

<sup>272</sup> “Guojia Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue Lingdao Xiaozu Jianjie 国家对外汉语教学领导小组简介 [Brief Introduction to the National Leading Group of Teaching Chinese as Second Language],” *Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, MOE, PRC*, accessed May 31, 2017, [http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_852/200506/8590.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_852/200506/8590.html).

<sup>273</sup> Interview in Singapore, 28 October, 2015; see also Xiangchao Meng, “‘Hanyu Tuofu’ kaoshi Jiang Tongyi Wei Xin HSK ‘汉语托福’考试将统一为新 HSK [‘Chinese TOEFL’ will Be United under the New HSK],” *The Beijing News*, last modified January 20, 2011, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2011/01/20/99436.html>.

the annual meeting of the Leading Group confirmed the establishment of “Hanban Project Funding”, which greatly increased the investment in TCSL.<sup>274</sup> Indeed, the mechanisms of power behind the global promotion of a language is not the same as its nationalisation. Without resorting to colonialism, the government does not have the sovereign power to create a unified school/linguistic system and a unified labour market to establish language domination. The structural advantage can only be achieved through accumulating the decentralised choices made by individual actors. To realise the potential network power of Chinese, the international society shall be provided with the incentive and instrument to join the Chinese language network. And with the developing Chinese economy being the incentive, the government came in to offer the instruments. Confucius Institute was born as part of a series of programmes aimed at lending Chinese government the biggest leverage possible to boost the global presence of its linguistic standards. Together, they are called the “Chinese Bridge” Project, *Hanyuqiao Gongcheng*.

This Project was proposed by Hanban and announced by the MOE in 2003. The introduction to its Work Plan (2003-2007) stated that,

With the development of Chinese society and economy during the past two decades of reform and opening up, China has turned into a global market of investment and commodity that draws world’s attention. China’s role as a major power is also the focus of international diplomacy and politics. China is engaging in increasingly extensive communication with other countries, and

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<sup>274</sup> Shushan Zhen, ed., *China Education Yearbook 2002 (Data on 2001)* (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 2002), 342.

the demand for learning Chinese is growing rapidly. History has demonstrated that when a nation is strong, its language prevails. ... International comments have it that “the surging comprehensive power of China and its huge market and global influence have caused a new wave of Chinese language fever”; “In early 21st century, Chinese will become a new strong language”. The cause of teaching Chinese as a second language ushered in a rare opportunity for development.

Facing this new situation and opportunity, we should strengthen the exchange and cooperation with countries worldwide in language and culture education, take measures to provide them with quality support in teaching Chinese, and respond to the desire of the world to know more about China as a result of China’s economic take off, thus promoting the mutual understanding between Chinese and world cultures, contributing to world peace and development.

To this end, the National Leading Group of Teaching Chinese as Second Language made this five-year plan of the “Chinese Bridge” Project, according to which actions shall be taken to further the world “Chinese fever”.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Government information disclosed on request, document index: 教公开告[2016]第 5887 号. Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, “‘Hanyuqiao’ Gongcheng: 2003-2007 Gongzuo Guihua ‘汉语桥’工程: 2003 年至 2007 年工作规划 [‘Chinese Bridge’ Project: 2003-2007 Work Plan]” (Beijing: Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2004), 1.

The purpose of this Project is to “promote Chinese language worldwide, further the understanding and friendship between China and other countries, and expand China’s influence worldwide”. It aims at “making Chinese language global, pushing its dissemination further and deeper in major countries and regions, especially as a major foreign language course in schools’ curricula, making the number of Chinese learners reach 100 million in five years, making Chinese a strong international language.”<sup>276</sup> There are nine major items in the Chinese Bridge Project, including:

1. setting up Confucius Institutes;
2. developing the US-China E-Language Learning System (online language learning system and teaching materials developed based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the ministries of education of US and China signed in 2002);
3. developing textbooks and audio-video multimedia production;
4. training Chinese teachers from home and abroad (including the implementation of the “Volunteer Chinese Teachers Program” in 2004, and a system to evaluate the teacher’s ability of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, TCSOL);
5. establishing TCSOL education bases in Chinese universities (identifying ten universities with strong academic ability in TCSOL; and ten in the border and coastal regions of China for their geographical advantage);
6. developing Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK);

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 1–2.

7. organising the World Chinese Conference and the “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition;
8. using the Chinese Bridge Fund to support overseas Chinese education and culture activities, and giving assistance to foreign Chinese libraries;
9. organisational and infrastructural support: the integration of institutions and resources from both the central and local, government and society, domestic and foreign, schooling and non-school education to support the “Chinese Bridge” Project.<sup>277</sup>

The strategic mission of Hanban and the primary task of CIs appear clearer in the “Chinese Bridge” Project. Facing a “rare opportunity of development” created by China’s economic achievements, the potential network power of Chinese language is increasing. To realise this potential, however, requires a timely and systematic support in language education, including teachers, textbooks, evaluation of proficiency and so on; otherwise, this potential network power might be wasted. Therefore, the nine items above are directed at providing necessary resources to TCSOL,<sup>278</sup> by means of which the government could take the central position in standard setting.

Following the guideline of “Integration, Innovation, and Leap”, the “Chinese Bridge” Project needs to achieve “a leap-forward in teaching Chinese as a second language” by “integrating all positive factors” and “taking innovative

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 2–4.

<sup>278</sup> With the participation of international forces, “Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL)”, *duiwai hanyu jiaoxue* (对外汉语教学), is more accurately referred to as “Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL)”, *guoji hanyu jiaoyu* (国际汉语教育), taking out the perspective of China.

measures”.<sup>279</sup> The joint venture structure of CIs is representative of the “innovative measures” taken towards resource integration. In relation to other programmes in the “Chinese Bridge” Project, CIs are the physical portals of contact distributed all over the world to provide immediate access to Chinese language education and related resources. Borrowing the institutional establishments of the hosting partners, this could be achieved with relatively less cost on China’s side. And with China’s resources, the hosting partners can take advantage of the growing network power of Chinese quickly, with the cost of switching linguistic networks partly covered by the Chinese government.

In addition to the CIs, the professional standards in TCSOL, be it for evaluating teachers’ pedagogical ability or students’ language proficiency, will also demonstrate network power.<sup>280</sup> With Chinese government being the uncontested major standard setter, it is in the interest of other professional bodies to cooperate with it, so as to have their own preferences incorporated into the Chinese framework and in turn recognised as part of an international standard. Thus, a growing network power of Chinese language is the rationale and purpose of this transnational partnership, and also the primary task of Hanban and Confucius Institutes.

After the birth of the first Confucius Institute in 2004, Hanban experienced a series of reorganisation. Its Chinese name was changed to “*guojia hanyu guoji tuiguang lingdao xiaozu* (Chinese Language Council International)” in 2006, with more human and financial resources instilled into it;<sup>281</sup> and in 2007, the

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>280</sup> See also Chapter Four Section 2.1

<sup>281</sup> Yangchun Mou, ed., *China Education Yearbook 2007 (Data on 2006)* (Beijing: People’s Education Press, 2007), 350; Hanban, “The Office of Chinese Language Council International Annual Report,” 6.

Confucius Institute Headquarters (CIH) was founded to manage the global CIs in coordination with the TCSL Development Centre in the Ministry of Education.<sup>282</sup> In 2008, the Chinese Language Council International stopped functioning as a “leading group”; its tasks were absorbed by MOE, with the name Hanban and personnel kept and combined with CIH as a public institute directly under the MOE.<sup>283</sup> Therefore, now CIH and Hanban are the two faces of the same organisation. With an international Council, CIH represents the collaborative element in the global CI network; inheriting the functions of the former “Leading Group”, Hanban coordinates the works and recourses from the Chinese side. The physical location of CIH/Hanban may signify a message of independence. Having its own building located to the north of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ring Road in Beijing, it is separated from its birth place (BLCU) and its current belonging (MOE). However, since the Chair of the CIH Council, Mdm. Liu Yandong, is also Vice Premier of the Chinese State Council, it is commonly perceived that Hanban is a “vice-ministerial level unit directly reports to the State Council”,<sup>284</sup> leaving the status of CIH Council and its relation with MOE rather blurred. The ambiguous

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<sup>282</sup> Government information disclosed on request: Ministry of Education (教人函[2007]12号), 教育部关于印发《孔子学院总部机构设置以及教育部对外汉语教学发展中心机构调整方案》的通知 [Notice of the Ministry of Education on Printing and Distributing “the Plan on Establishing CIH and Adjusting MOE TCSL Development Centre”], 2007. No details on the founding of TCSL Development Centre could be verified.

<sup>283</sup> State Council (国发[2008]13号), 国务院关于议事协调机构设置的通知 [Notice of the State Council on the Establishment of Deliberation and Coordination Agencies] (State Council of PRC, 2008), [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-06/14/content\\_5082270.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-06/14/content_5082270.htm). This document is marked as no longer valid for administration according to State Council (国发[2015]68号), 国务院关于宣布失效一批国务院文件的决定 [Decision of the State Council on Invalidating Some State Council Documents] (State Council of PRC, 2015), <http://www.waizi.org.cn/law/12089.html>. But 国发[2008]13号 cannot directly be found in the appendix of 国发[2015]68号 due to secrecy or other reasons. CIH/Hanban is now registered as a public institute under MOE, with the Social Credit Code 12100000400017813Y.

<sup>284</sup> Interview in Singapore, 20 November, 2015

entanglement between CIH and Chinese central administrative system often becomes a target of criticism directed at Confucius Institutes overseas.

Nevertheless, the incorporation of international elements in CIH Council as well as the joint venture structure of Confucius Institutes abroad are not merely a decorative tokenism that covers up the government manipulation. For one thing, it signifies an attempt to leverage the resources worldwide for maximising the network power of Chinese language, while consolidating the status of Chinese government as the centre of this network. For another, it should be noted that Chinese government does not “own” this network; neither is it the sole beneficiary. Its relation with other actors is based on sociability rather than sovereignty, nor can it dominate the linguistic standards as in language nationalisation, because in an international context, no legitimacy backed up by political power can be claimed. Rather, simply sharing the same linguistic network will render its users in a mutually complementary position in strengthening its network power, whether they like it or not. As mentioned before, China may have provided the main motivation and done the pioneering work in making Chinese one of the AP classes, but it also made it possible for Taiwan standards to enter the US education system. Meanwhile, as my fieldwork shows, the popularity of Taiwanese pop culture and Malaysian Chinese singers also helped Confucius Institutes to find students in Thailand. In other words, integrated resources and strengthened network power will benefit all users of the linguistic network, regardless of their political belongings.

Once loaded with ideological implications, learning Chinese now means better employment opportunities and a cosmopolitan orientation, despite that

researches have shown that these hopes are not always getting realised.<sup>285</sup> By putting the history of Hanban and Confucius Institute into the changing context of Chinese language education abroad, new lights can be shed on the basis of the global CI network. It is the growing network power of Chinese language that underpins CI's joint venture structure, which serves as the common instrumental interest binding partners together in this transnational collaboration. The network power is a common pursuit because it promises benefits to all Chinese speakers and learners; it is also instrumental because the participants may have their distinctive purposes fulfilled by joining the network. Acting as the main provider of standards and resources, the Chinese government has many channels to further its own interests; yet it is still but one actor in this network without supreme authority, whose influence can only be earned through others' choices. The process of this constant engagement and negotiation will be discussed in the next chapter. For now, the point should have been made clear that CIs shall not be examined only from the perspective of soft power and the state-centric mode of public diplomacy – these theoretic frameworks do not account for the existence of the variety of global partners, let alone the mechanism of power between them. It is the network power of Chinese language that serves as the precondition for CIs to exist in its current form, and also the instrument whereby the participants realise their respective interests.

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<sup>285</sup> see Wheeler, "Cultural Diplomacy, Language Planning, and the Case of the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute"; Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*.

#### 4. A Summary: Network Power in the Making

Not fully addressed by the academic literature yet at the heart of the public debate, it is not clear on what ground CI's joint venture is based. This chapter has suggested that to understand the logic of this joint venture, we need to jump out of the box created by thinking of CIs' mission in terms of soft power while thinking of soft power as political legitimacy and moral/cultural appeal. The power of language itself is the key to explain the basis of the global CI network. It constitutes the common instrumental interest pursued by all partners across the globe, it promises the speakers and learners a brighter future, and it lends the Chinese government – the main resources provider – a structural advantage in realising its own interests.

Having a strong network power is not an intrinsic feature of any language, yet it can be cultivated and pursued. In the case of Chinese, the history of language nationalisation and international dissemination in the 20<sup>th</sup> century provides the context for us to understand the formation of Hanban and the introduction of the “Chinese Bridge” Project, where Confucius Institutes are but one item on the list. China's economic development provided the incentive for the international society to be part of the Chinese network; and Hanban, with its “Chinese Bridge” Project, came to provide the means. TCSL in China evolved from a preliminary work in ideological struggle to a professional field, and then from a national cause to an international collaborative pursuit under the new label of TCSOL. That is to say, making Chinese a stronger language is the common interest shared by all actors on the Chinese linguistic network, and also the common denominator of Confucius Institutes worldwide.

Realised through the decentralised choices freely made by governments and learners in various countries, the growing network power of Chinese language still renders the Chinese government a structural advantage. Firstly, it shapes how people perceive their interests in learning a second language, as demonstrated by the fact that the Thai MOE felt the need to have the Strategic Plan, and US College Board was willing to introduce the Chinese AP; meanwhile, it gives Chinese government an edge in setting the linguistic standards – even the textbooks produced by RoC’s OCAC now have simplified characters printed alongside the traditional ones for wider distribution and better learning results.<sup>286</sup> Secondly, the network power of the language can potentially benefit China’s soft power. The process of language education is a process of cultural demonstration, which can be embedded with all sort of messages. In addition, it has been identified that the centrality of a language would influence the visibility of its cultural products as well. But teaching *Putonghua* and simplified characters, even by Confucius Institutes, cannot be equated with a victory of Chinese propaganda. By empowering the learners with the ability to understand Chinese, it may create a receptive environment for the government discourses to be heard and accepted; however, it simultaneously opens up space for competing discourses to spread. After all, Chinese government simply does not have the authority to monopolise this linguistic network in both its form and content.

The network power of language can also conceptually bridge the gap between the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives in viewing CIs. Being

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<sup>286</sup> Yao, “Liushinian Taiwan Haiwai Qiaomin Jiaoyu Zhi Yange 六十年台湾海外侨民教育之沿革 [Taiwan’s Overseas Chinese Education: History and Development (1949-2008)],” 209; “OCAC Textbooks Sample Page,” *HuayuWorld*, accessed June 3, 2017, <http://www.huayuworld.org/upload/epaper/106/index.html>.

an instrumental benefit that provides the common ground for all to work on, the network power of Chinese makes it possible to reconcile different authorities in transnational collaboration. It renders the CI hosts and Chinese learners more capability to further their respective interests, constituting an empowerment hard to forgo; while it also gives China an advantage in shaping those interests and how to realise them, lending it a structural domination. It also contributes to China's public diplomacy by changing "the odds of specific outcomes occurring", but not through a monopoly on the discourses spread via this linguistic network.<sup>287</sup> Of course, finding common ground does not mean the end of competition and disputes, the next chapter will look into the process of negotiation in this transnational engagement.

There were 3.34 million Chinese learners worldwide in 2003, which was reported to have passed 100 million in 2014 with all the investment from Chinese government and the matching resources provided by CI partners worldwide.<sup>288</sup> In comparison, "English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide" in 2013; and by 2020, it is forecasted that "two billion people will be using it – or learning to use it."<sup>289</sup> The network power of Chinese language is still in the making.

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<sup>287</sup> Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher, "Introduction: The Connective Mindshift," 1.

<sup>288</sup> Zhen, *China Education Yearbook 2004 (Data on 2003)*, 343; "Quanqiu Hanyu Xuexizhe Renshu Guoyi 全球汉语学习者人数过亿 [the Number of Chinese Learners Worldwide Passed One Hundred Million]," *People's Daily*, August 30, 2014.

<sup>289</sup> British Council, "The English Effect," 2013, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/the-english-effect>.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Keeping the Dynamic Equilibrium**

Chapter three identified that the network power of language is the common denominator of Confucius Institutes worldwide, as well as a common interest shared by all actors on the Chinese linguistic network. Nevertheless, having a common ground does not mean having consistent expectations for the CI, nor does it guarantee a workable relation between the partners. What mechanisms are in place for differences to be addressed and conflicts resolved, if at all, so that the multi-stakeholders remain engaged in this transnational collaboration? Meanwhile, the network power of language is not the same as the soft power of China; yet while working with others to strengthen the network power of its language, the Chinese government does seek to expand its own influence. How are the two goals combined, and what reactions have been produced? In this chapter, I propose the concept of “dynamic equilibrium” to explain the process of this transnational engagement. As a dynamic process, it allows room for short term imbalance and disturbance to be corrected, constituting an important mechanism of tension release; while pursuing equilibrium, it builds a *de facto* consensus revolving around Hanban’s expectations for the CIs, without going against the fundamental beliefs and core expectations of the hosting side.

#### 1. Striking a Balance Over Time: the Dynamic Equilibrium

The joint venture of Confucius Institute is built on relations of sociability, rather than a hierarchy based on sovereignty. That is to say, although the Confucius Institute Headquarters “owns the proprietorship of the name, logo and brand of the Confucius Institutes”, and “is the regulatory body that provides guidelines to

the Confucius Institutes worldwide”,<sup>290</sup> Hanban does not have executive power over its international partners, who are providing material and symbolic resources sustaining the global Chinese education network. This transnational partnership spanning over such a great scale is not merely a give-and-take relation, strengthening the network power of Chinese language constitutes the common interest binding the partners together, giving them a shared goal to undertake the often strained cooperation. However, how to turn a common ground into a workable relation? This question not only pertains to understanding the process whereby transnational collaboration is realised, but also how influences and power can be exerted outside of the realm of state sovereignty and beyond the reach of bureaucratic hierarchy, a question that is at heart of all transnationally maintained social relations.

Existing empirical researches illustrated that CIs have various localised expressions,<sup>291</sup> which, whether deliberately cultivated by the Chinese government (as in Japan) or vigorously defended by the local hosts (as in the US),<sup>292</sup> have helped the CIs to achieve a more effective penetration. Nevertheless, what shapes these expressions demonstrating case by case variations even within a country? Why in some cases the CI is more closely tied to the host institute, but in others it seems to be running as an autonomous entity? If entering the CI partnership constitutes an acknowledgement of and a contribution to the network power of Chinese language, will that common interest be strong enough to overcome differences? If not, how to deal with them? The first thing coming to

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<sup>290</sup> “Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes.”

<sup>291</sup> Rya Butterfield, “Reviving the ‘Confucius’ in Confucius Institute Diplomacy,” *China Media Research* 10, no. 1 (2014): 13.

<sup>292</sup> Peng, “Confucius Institutes in Japan: The Chinese Practice of Cultural Persuasive Strategy”; Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*.

mind may be signing a contract that states the rights and obligations of each party. Normally, two sets of agreements will be laid out to establish a CI – a general contract signed between Hanban and the host institute spelling out the basic framework of cooperation, including the name, purpose, financial and administrative structure of the institute and so on;<sup>293</sup> and an agreement of cooperation between the host institute and its Chinese partner, pertaining to more specific arrangements in its daily operation.<sup>294</sup> However, CI contracts are more of a vision than a manual. It will not list all programmes and activities to be implemented throughout the collaboration, let alone how to realise them. Neither will it contain resolutions to discord – everything is going to be decided through “consultation” and “negotiation”. Yet what shapes the direction and result of those processes?

Following the grounded theory approach, a phenomenon that I term “dynamic equilibrium” could be observed. Equilibrium means a condition of balance, and to keep the CI going, a balance needs to be maintained on two levels. Firstly, on what the cooperating parties expect of the Confucius Institute, i.e., balancing their respective goals; and secondly, on what they expect of each other, i.e., balancing the means of achieving the goals. This equilibrium is realised through a dynamic process, meaning that there needs not to be a perfect match of expectation and result every time, rather, the balance is struck through a continuous adjustment of expectation and action over time. However, if the expectation of any side fails to be met continuously, or any side loses confidence in having its expectations accommodated in the future, the partnership may consequently be in crisis, if not

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<sup>293</sup> Agreement on the Establishment of Confucius Institute (Template) can be downloaded here: [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_7879.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_7879.htm)

<sup>294</sup> Interview in Bangkok, April 30, 2016

coming to an end. In short, a dynamic equilibrium is the process whereby the CI partners define their interests and realise their expectations through continuous negotiation and boundary pushing, so that middle grounds are created and the collaboration sustained. Having actors with various goals and interest yet without a higher administrative authority to regulate their respective behaviours, it is dynamic equilibrium that gives the global CI network its resilience.

There are three domains of activity in Confucius Institutes where an equilibrium between the cooperating parties is entailed, namely, the professional authority in Chinese language teaching, the administrative authority in institution management, and the discursive authority in academic and cultural events. Being the primary mandate of most Confucius Institutes, teaching is central to CI's daily task; and who can make the professional decisions in language education is an important issue where a balance has to be struck between Hanban, the hosting institute and its Chinese partner. Similarly, since CIs are sustained with the personnel and financial support from three parties, all claiming administrative power over its operation, a balance in making management decisions, such as setting the developmental goals, allocation of tasks and managing personnel, is crucial to CI's very existence. Apart from strengthening the network power of Chinese language, CIs are also endowed with the mandate to spread knowledge about Chinese history, culture and contemporary society. Nevertheless, who can define what Chinese culture means, and what constitutes knowledge about China? In the academic and cultural events organised or participated by Confucius Institutes, who has the discursive power to shape China's image is also a contested area where a balance needs to be carefully maintained.

To specify what activities are included in each domain, the following table has listed the main examples (items) that demonstrate the professional, administrative and discursive authorities respectively.

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Item</i>
<i>Professional Authority in Language Education</i>	Choosing/compiling teaching materials
	Teacher training and evaluation
	Evaluating language proficiency and learning outcomes
	Cooperating with university departments and professional institutions
<i>Administrative Authority in Institution Management</i>	Setting the primary goal for the CI
	Setting key performance index
	Personnel training and management
	Providing financial and material support
	Organising regional and global CI conferences
<i>Discursive Authority in Academic and Cultural events</i>	Representation of China in CI classes
	That in CI-initiated academic and cultural activities
	That in CI-participated academic and cultural activities
	That in Hanban's key cultural projects

The attribution of items to different domains is relative. For example, in deciding what classes to open, both administrative authority and professional authority are demonstrated. Personnel management and training also involve all three types of authority.<sup>295</sup> Both directors, China-dispatched teachers and volunteers will all experience an intensive period of training organised by Hanban before starting their work. That for teachers and volunteers mainly pertains to Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, TCSOL (professional authority) and Chinese

<sup>295</sup> Personnel in Confucius Institutes mainly include the hosting director and the Chinese co-director, China-dispatched teachers and volunteers, locally-hired teachers, and executive staff.

culture (discursive authority); for Chinese directors, mainly about running the CIs (administrative authority); and for hosting directors, basic information about China (discursive power). Yet the organisation of training by Hanban and the management of personnel in each CI is in itself an administrative task, and is thus listed under administrative authority as a general indication. The same can be said of organising regional and global CI conferences. This classification, therefore, is neither absolute nor an ideal-type, but relative and empirical.

Of course, Confucius Institute functions as a whole and these domains of authority can hardly be separated in practice. Rather, any significant imbalance in one aspect of the cooperation may lead to changing behaviours and expectations in other realms, tipping the balance and damaging the collaboration; and a satisfying outcome in a certain field will also be likely to generate positive adjustments in others and help the collaboration to go further. No single field is necessarily more important than others, it depends on the expectation of the collaborating parties. However, there are also some general trends across different cases. Firstly, if the hosting institute lacks educational resources, such as teachers, textbooks, complete syllabus etc., a structural reliance on China is likely to result in an equilibrium in professional authority based on Chinese input; otherwise, when the two sides have to share professional authority in TCSOL, a compromise could be reached when good teaching results are produced. Secondly, balancing administrative authority requires reconciling two systems of management; therefore, the sites of negotiation in effect go well beyond the CIs. Thirdly, directly related to China's image shaping and soft power ambition, the equilibrium in discursive authority is based on the exclusion of sharply critical views on China, and the concentration of those more favourable ones.

Therefore, the dynamic equilibrium is easier to achieve when the language education is producing satisfactory results, so that the current arrangements in wielding professional authority can be justified; when the CI fulfils a clearly defined purpose, making it easier to balance administrative authority; and when the hosting society does not have a dominant “China Frame”,<sup>296</sup> i.e., there is lesser conflict regarding how the Chinese image is to be represented. Nevertheless, such a perfect combination may not be very common. Oftentimes, authorities are contested; and all parties keep adjusting their expectations and actions in the hope of finding an equilibrium – one that can only be achieved via a dynamics process, and one that can always be hoped for even during periods of discord. By promising space for adjustment, it is not necessary for all parties to be perfectly satisfied at all times to keep them engaged; and by making the engagement a constant process of negotiation, it constitutes an important mechanism of tension release, allowing the conflicting authorities to find compromises.

## 2. Dynamic Equilibrium in Action: Keeping Multiple Stakeholders Engaged

### 2.1 Claiming Professional Authority in Language Education

Wielding professional authority in language education is at the core of CI’s daily tasks. A dynamic equilibrium in this domain means that the ways in which pedagogical decisions are made and the results they produced meet the expectations of the host institute, its Chinese partner and Hanban over time. Therefore, who sets the curricula and chooses the textbooks is not important per se, it is the compatible expectations for how things should be done and what goals

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<sup>296</sup> Lueck, Pippis, and Lin, “China’s Soft Power: A New York Times Introduction of the Confucius Institute,” 327–28.

should be achieved that will determine if this collaboration works well and has a future. In this particular domain, good learning outcomes and benefits for students are generally accepted as a benchmark for certain arrangements to be accepted as a status of equilibrium. Yet each side does have their own focuses in exerting professional authority. Generally speaking, Hanban pays more attention to establishing and promoting professional standards in the TCSOL industry; the hosting sides are devoted to ensuring that the teaching activities meet the local requirements and demands; and the Chinese counterparts are preoccupied with making themselves and CIs more professionally influential in the host region.

Setting professional standards for TCSOL is part and parcel of Hanban's strategic mission to make Chinese a global language. The nine items in the "Chinese Bridge" Project are either about developing standards or the resources needed in its support. By compiling textbooks, introducing systems for teachers' training and evaluation, expanding the applicability of HSK exams and the popularity of the language competition, standards on what constitutes "authentic" language and on who has the "authority" to judge will be established.<sup>297</sup> These standards can be categorised as "mediating standard" and "membership standard".<sup>298</sup> The former means the common instrument that "mediates" human interaction, and in this case, mandarin Chinese; and the latter means a gateway guarding the admission to a certain group, such as a certificate that manifests the Chinese teacher's competence, or an HSK result that enable the student to be admitted into Chinese universities. Both kinds demonstrate network power – China will benefit from being the centre of an expanding Chinese speaking world, setting

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<sup>297</sup> For the list of items in "Chinese Bridge" Project, see Chapter Three, section 3.3

<sup>298</sup> Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalisation*, 20–22.

the rules by which others have to abide and shaping how others perceive their own interests. To Hanban, Confucius Institutes are thus both the means whereby these standards get disseminated and the manifestation of their impact.

But Hanban's vision for globalising its standards cannot be achieved all by itself. Meeting the local demand and requirements in language education is the precondition for the transnational cooperation to exist in its current form. Joining the CI partnership indeed acknowledges and contributes towards the network power of mandarin Chinese, yet it does not mean a waiver of the professional authority in regulating language education by the hosting side. What constitute "authentic expressions", qualified teachers and satisfactory learning outcomes are subjected to local expectations. Therefore, if the host institute expects that the Confucius Institute shall be part of the local society, which indeed is also what Hanban wishes for – the theme of the 7<sup>th</sup> Confucius Institute Conference held in 2012 was "Facilitate the Integration of the Confucius Institute into the University and Local Community" – then letting the host institute retain professional authority is an accommodation that the Chinese side has to make.

Standing in between Hanban and the host institute, the Chinese partners often find themselves trying to reconcile the expectation of Hanban and that of the host institutes. In order to shape the development of CI and even the TCSOL industry of the host region, the Chinese partners have to establish their professional authority by delivering effective learning results. But the situations they face vary greatly. In cases where the host institutes have a strong intention and ability to retain professional authority, they may be marginalised in pedagogical decision-making and activities, without much opportunity to demonstrate their professional authority; yet if the hosting side lacks key educational resources, the

Chinese side will have much more influence on language education in the CI, and sometimes the entire institute, region, or even the whole country. A case in point would be the Confucius Institute at Angeles University Foundation, Philippines.<sup>299</sup> If the Chinese partners are successful in doing so, more resources will be drawn towards them as the front line centres in the TCSOL field.

When the cooperating parties are able to work in accordance with what they have expected, and are not seeking to change the status quo in the pedagogical activities, an equilibrium in professional authority could be said to have established. Otherwise, if an imbalance persists, we may well see the collaboration needing a reboot, if not coming to an end. By comparing cases across different countries, various forms of collaboration could be identified, with some cases closer to an equilibrium while others still struggling to find one. And despite the clear wish for more influence, the Chinese side taking a dominant position is not a decisive factor in whether an equilibrium could be found. In other words, the balance is not guaranteed in places where Chinese influence prevails; and could also be maintained without direct Chinese participation.

Thailand features prominently in Hanban's global map of influence. It has been hosting around one fifth of all volunteers Hanban dispatched worldwide during the past few years.<sup>300</sup> The ambitious five-year Strategic Plan announced in 2006

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<sup>299</sup> Confucius Institute at Angeles University Foundation, "About Us," accessed June 27, 2017, <http://confucius.auf.edu.ph/aboutus.php>. See also the Chinese Director's speech at the 10<sup>th</sup> Confucius Institute Conference, Shifang Zhang, "Directors' Forum I: Test for International Chinese Language Teacher Certificate and the Cultivation of Local Teachers (Session II)," *Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters*, 2015, <http://conference.hanban.org/2015/?q=node/623>.

<sup>300</sup> In 2016, 1,694 out of 6,071 Hanban dispatched volunteers served in Thailand; in 2015, 1,530 out of 9,038; in 2014, and more than 1,800 out of 9,200. On average, more than 5,024 out of 24,309, i.e. 20%. Data from CI annual reports (<http://www.hanban.edu.cn/report/>) and the website of Hanban's representative office in Thailand. "Ben Xuenian Zuihou Yipi Hanyu Jiaoshi Zhiyuanzhe Daoren Dahui Zai Mangu Juxing 本学年最后一批汉语教师志愿者到任大会在曼谷举行 [the Arriving Assembly of the Last Batch of Chinese Volunteer Teachers for

by the Thai Ministry of Education<sup>301</sup> incentivised the educational institutions across the country to open Chinese language courses, resulting in a shortage of teachers nationwide. Turning to China for supply then became a very economical choice; and Hanban was also willing to take the opportunity to expand its influence and make Thailand an exemplary case of cooperation. Hanban dispatched teachers and volunteers are trusted with teaching from primary to tertiary levels, and from academic to vocational institutions; and it is not only Confucius Institutes and Classrooms that they are working for. Be it degree courses or regular curricula, wherever the host institutes lack teachers, they are asked to fill up the vacancies – even in the top universities – as long as their credentials meet the requirements. Like in other countries, the local institutions in need of teachers would send their requirements to Hanban, who announces these job opportunities on its website and accepts the application by eligible candidates across China. Examinations will be held, those who passed the tests will be sent for intensive training and then dispatched. However, it is rare to see volunteers being sent to a single country on such a large scale. Every year around May and June, “Allocation Assemblies (*fenpei dahui*)” will be held by Hanban’s Representative Office in Thailand, where the commissions for basic education, vocational education, private education and higher education of the Thai MOE receive their own batch of volunteers, ranging from three to five hundred each.

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This Academic Year Was Held in Bangkok],” *The Representative Office of Hanban in Thailand*, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.hanbanthai.org/news/meitijujiao/2014-07-23/3313.html>; “Zhongguo Zhutai Dashi Ningfukui Chuxi Dishisipi Hanyu Jiaoshi Zhiyuanzhe Daoren Dahui 中国驻泰大使宁赋魁出席第十四批汉语教师志愿者到任大会 [Chinese Ambassador to Thailand Attended the 14th Patch of Chinese Volunteer Teachers’ Meeting on Arrival]”; “2016 Nian Zai Tai Zhiyuanzhe Fuwu Guanli Tuandui Gongzuo Huiyi Chenggong Zhaokai 2016 年在泰志愿者服务管理团队工作会议成功召开 [the 2016 Thailand Volunteer Service Management Team Working Conference Was Successfully Held],” *The Representative Office of Hanban in Thailand*, accessed July 11, 2016, <http://www.hanbanthai.org/news/meitijujiao/2016-07-11/5640.html>.

<sup>301</sup> See Chapter Three, Section 3.2

These young volunteers will be sent to different provinces and teach in different types of schools across Thailand, where the hosts would normally decide on the workload, syllabus and textbooks. In addition to sending teachers, Chinese government has also provided scholarships to hundreds of Thai local teachers to receive training in China.<sup>302</sup>

The structural reliance on Chinese resources as well as the compatible expectations of the two governments created a conducive environment for the equilibrium in professional authority to be realised. In most cases, other than naming the vacancies, the authority in candidate selection, training and allocation is wielded by Hanban, while the local schools and universities retained professional authority in choosing textbooks and administrative authority over the Chinese manpower. It is also common for one volunteer to take up the entire school's Chinese classes in remote areas, where he/she will be the only person wielding professional authority in delivering the classes. Nevertheless, this conducive environment will not automatically translate into a balance of authority in each collaboration, especially in the long run.

In a regionally important university in northern Thailand, a relatively young Department of Chinese Studies was growing quickly in recent years, thanks to Thailand's policy and Hanban's recourses. It constituted a typical product of Sino-Thai cooperation, with a CI on campus well-received by the university administration, and the university's local faculty members either graduated from China or received further training with Chinese resources. There were about 15

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<sup>302</sup> Worrachaiyut, "The Research of the Policy and Management of Chinese Studying in Thailand (泰国汉语教育政策及其实施研究)," 98; Hanban, "The Office of Chinese Language Council International Annual Report," 31.

Chinese volunteers working at the university, 10 for the Department and 5 for the CI. Chinese language was a booming item in the region, and the Department not only taught students majoring in Chinese, but also conducted elective language courses for the entire university. When the growing number of students became too much for the Department to handle, the CI stepped up and took over some language classes for non-Chinese majors. One year after the new arrangement, the Chinese co-director of the CI was very happy to announce that the teaching result had been greatly improved. Students previously taught by the Department of Chinese Studies all passed HSK level 3, and were able to communicate in daily life, but unable to understand degree courses delivered in Chinese. After the CI's taking over, 98% of the students passed HSK level 4 with flying colours and were even able to learn degree courses delivered in Chinese. The director was hoping to apply CI's teaching methods to all language courses in the university.

It put a lot of pressure on the Department of Chinese Studies. Despite receiving Hanban dispatched volunteers, the majority of the faculty were locally hired; and even many of them studied in China, the Department still represented the professional authority of the hosting university – it was run by the “local teachers”, having access to both the Thai and Chinese linguistic network, and drawing authority from their insiders' status. Confronted with CI's challenge, the local teachers in the Department became more sensitive to asserting boundaries and claiming credits. When preparing for the “Chinese Bridge” Competition<sup>303</sup> in the same year, the best candidate quitted at the last minute for personal reasons. A substitute had to be found in emergency, and there was a Chinese major student thought to be eligible by the faculty of the Department. However, to their surprise,

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<sup>303</sup> A language competition held annually by Hanban, see Section 2.3 for more information

a non-Chinese major student taught by the CI was finally chosen to represent the university, which meant that the credit would mainly go to CI once again.<sup>304</sup> One local teacher, graduated from China herself, confessed that she was so frustrated by this arrangement that for a minute she even thought of not booking the student's van ticket to Bangkok. Finally, she did help the student in every possible way for the competition, as she knew that the student was hardworking and innocent, and should not be sacrificed for disagreements between teachers.

In this case, an equilibrium in professional authority was firstly based on the reliance on Chinese resource, with the CI maintaining a close professional collaboration with the hosting university and contributing to the development of its Chinese department. Yet the growing capacity of the hosting university in TCSOL meant that the previous equilibrium would be challenged. When both the China-dispatched and locally-hired teachers were seeking to enhance their professional standing in the university, they may turn from collaborators to competitors. Training local teachers and taking over some for-credit courses were a manifestation of the professional authority willingly wielded by the Chinese side, and happily accepted by the host when it lacked the capacity to deliver classes. However, as the hosting university and its personnel got gradually empowered with Chinese resources, it diversified the sources of authority in TCSOL on campus. In other words, an initial structural reliance on Chinese resources will not guarantee a lasting equilibrium in professional authority, and

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<sup>304</sup> The teacher who made the decision was assigned specifically to prepare students for the competition by the university administration. Officially hired by the Department, this person had close personal relations with CI, and was considered an outsider by other faculty members in the Department.

continuous adjustments to changing needs and expectations are indispensable – an equilibrium has to be dynamic so as to be sustainable.

Not all collaboration in Thailand is based on a structural reliance on Chinese resources. In a well-established university in Bangkok, the centre for Chinese studies was doing TCSOL related researches in Thai language without Chinese participation – even when they have a CI on campus. The CI was more a symbolic gesture than a pedagogical support in that university, and its influence on campus was limited. Most of its tasks were to organise cultural activities and teach non-degree enrichment courses catered to the society, especially the local government officials. Before the CI got established, the university was already an academic base for Chinese studies in Thailand; and the centre continued to conduct research projects on Thailand's Chinese education to provide professionally informed policy advice for the Thai government. The publications produced thereof were all in Thai language. By the time I was leaving the field, the CI had proposed to translate these publications into Chinese.

An equilibrium between the Chinese and hosting side in this case had been based on a clear division of authority while sharing symbolic capital. Hanban's resources were not used for educating university students, but for maintaining relation with the local government. The Chinese side was also happy to focus on teaching government officials while having a renowned university as its local base. Meanwhile, the network power of Thai language was utilised not as a mediating standard to facilitate communication, but a membership standard to demarcate the boundary of academic authority. The proposal to translate the publications then constituted an attempt of the Chinese partner to share such authority and integrate the two linguistic networks. A low level equilibrium that

satisfied the basic expectations of all sides had already been achieved, and it seemed that the Chinese side was hoping to establish a new equilibrium of deeper integration.

In fact, attempts by the Chinese partner to push the collaboration further have been an important impetus for CIs' development around the world. In the United States, a comfortable equilibrium in professional authority is famously (or infamously, for the Chinese side) difficult to achieve, as the hosts generally expect to get the funding from China while retaining full authority in pedagogical decision-making, leaving the Chinese partners with no effective control over CI's core business. Stambach's description of Chinese teachers' experience constituted a telling example. Hanban dispatched teachers arrived at the CI in high hopes of close cooperation with their US counterparts, only to find themselves in a predicament, as neither their higher education degrees nor the further training received was recognised by the hosting side, rendering them little professional authority on campus. Left in a marginalised position yet under pressure of bringing in more students to the CI, the Chinese teachers proposed to open new for-credit courses. This proposal was accepted. As a result, Hanban's money went directly into the for-credit programmes of the university. Nevertheless, the Chinese teachers were still marginalised in this new arrangement, as everything from the syllabus to textbooks was decided by the hosting side. They can only appear in class as dispensable "assistants".<sup>305</sup>

This case was used by Stambach to reflect on the wider structural consequences of the extended social relations between US and China channelled through

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<sup>305</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 105–7.

education. Yet it also demonstrates dynamic equilibrium in action, from a situation of imbalance to a temporary reconciliation. Facing unmet expectations, the Chinese partners tried to claim more authority in CI's operation by proposing for-credit courses. The host partially accepted this proposal, demonstrating an accommodating gesture, satisfied their own goal of getting funds while not compromising on professional authority. In Stambach's words, this arrangement met the "various constituents' interests simultaneously, albeit unevenly."<sup>306</sup> This round of negotiation and the adjustments thus followed did not fully satisfy the Chinese side, yet Hanban's willingness to fund this for-credit programme signified that a temporary balance was found. It could be anticipated that if the Chinese side keeps hoping for more authority, further adjustments to this partnership is unavoidable; yet a temporary reconciliation is sufficient to reassure that progress can still be anticipated, and equilibrium can still be envisaged.

In the above cases, the Chinese partner played a crucial role in expanding China's influence in TCSOL, and their interaction with the hosts determined whether an equilibrium was possible. Yet the Chinese partners may not always be active. As a former Chinese co-director admitted, it depends on whether the individual director has the ambition in greater achievement. "If he/she decided to be conservative and simply carried the predecessor's heritage, nobody would object."<sup>307</sup> Moreover, the influence of Chinese partner may not even be present, such as the CI in Singapore. However, it is not to say that the authority of the Chinese side is absent.

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>307</sup> Interview in Bangkok, May 15, 2016

The CI-Singapore had a “Business Chinese (*shangwu hanyu*)” programme that was endorsed by the human resource department of the Singapore government as a certified training course. This endorsement was sought by the CI as a marketing strategy to attract more students. As part of the endorsement, the human resource department asked for a detailed qualification check on all language instructors, asking for proof of their mandarin proficiency, linguistic knowledge of modern Chinese, and pedagogical training. The CI then had to vet through the credentials of the teachers currently hired for this programme, asking them to either obtain the missing certificates or give up the post. The teaching materials of this programme were compiled by the CI and endorsed by the human resource department, who was also monitoring the learning outcomes by comparing the test scores of the students before and after training.

At first glance, only the hosting side was exerting the professional authority. From hiring teachers to evaluating learning outcomes, the Chinese side was absent from the scene. However, as part of the requirements listed by the Singaporean human resource department, the test for evaluating the mandarin proficiency of the teachers was *Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi* (Putonghua Proficiency Test), PSC; and that for assessing the language ability of students was Business Chinese Test, BCT. The former is a test developed by China’s National Language Commission in the 1990s (which was participating in the Leading Group of TCSL)<sup>308</sup>; and the latter by Hanban in 2006. Although no Chinese personnel was exerting professional authority in the CI, China’s linguistic standards – and the tests developed to assess them – were the designated assessment tool of language proficiency in regulating not only the

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<sup>308</sup> See Chapter Three, Section 3.3

teaching activities in CI, but all other training centres registered under the human resource department. This is exactly the kind of professional authority that Hanban expects to wield internationally. In this case, the equilibrium is based on an integration of standards in language education, without relying on a Chinese partner to mediate.

This case also demonstrated the network power of China's national linguistic standards. Nowadays, "it is in the interest of the learners to teach them *pinyin* and simplified characters", so commented a Taiwanese teacher working in Thailand.<sup>309</sup> However, even in this regard, an equilibrium still needs to be found. It is one thing to stipulate that language instruction in Confucius Institutes shall be conducted "in Mandarin, using Standard Chinese Characters",<sup>310</sup> but another to dismiss traditional characters, dialects and lexical variations simply as "wrong". Researchers and practitioners have pointed out that calling alternative linguistic habits "wrong" has created a "devastating *othering* effect on ethnic Chinese learners",<sup>311</sup> and the unwitting demonstration of "linguistic chauvinism" by volunteer teachers from China "hurts the learners' feelings".<sup>312</sup> In other words, asserting the mainland standards as the only "right" way of using the Chinese language carries the normalised authority of a national language beyond its borders. In a transnational context where there is no unified schooling system and labour market backed up by a sovereign political power, this wielding of authority can be perceived as undue and unjustified, especially in places like Singapore and Malaysia where mandarin has always been a living language of

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<sup>309</sup> Interview in Bangkok, May 1, 2016

<sup>310</sup> "Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes."

<sup>311</sup> Zhu and Li, "Geopolitics and the Changing Hierarchies of the Chinese Language: Implications for Policy and Practice of Chinese Language Teaching in Britain," 336.

<sup>312</sup> Panel discussions during the CI annual Conference in Shanghai, December 9, 2015.

the local community. A CI manager in Singapore explicitly expressed the preference of teachers who can use localised expressions to teach their youngsters' programme, "It is crucial for the teacher to understand how we speak Chinese here in Singapore so that he or she can educate our next generation. We ride pedal cycles (*jiao che*) and take the bus (*ba shi*), not bikes (*zixing che*) or public transport (*gong jiao*)". It may sound like trivial matters, yet facing the power implication of standardised language, a little carelessness in addressing different linguistic habits can result in "hurting feelings" and oblivious discrimination in class, which will tip the balance between collaborating parties.

To summarise, an equilibrium in professional authority can be achieved under various circumstances, but will also be constantly challenged. In places where Chinese resources are indispensable, an equilibrium is in general easier to realise. But a structural reliance on China does not guarantee an unchallenged domination in professional authority. Collaborators can also turn into competitors; and only an equilibrium able to adjust to the changing expectations can last in the long run. In places where Chinese resources are not crucial, a low level equilibrium in professional authority can also be established by a clear division of tasks while sharing other institutional goals or interests. If either side expects changes, a new equilibrium could be attempted through a negotiation process of trial and error – temporary imbalance will not constitute a fatal blow to the collaboration, as long as striking an equilibrium still seems possible in the future. In places where the presence of Chinese personnel is less significant, Hanban's professional authority can be demonstrated through the network power of its language and tests. Yet if the normalising power of a standard language is imposed on overseas Chinese

communities, it will effectively turn the collaboration into a hierarchy, which can hardly be accepted by the hosting society.

The dynamic process of finding an equilibrium does allow some space for the imbalance to be corrected; however, the process of negotiation may be perceived as a burden itself, and discourages potential collaborators. A professor from the Chinese Department in a renowned university in Bangkok region, which decided not to host a CI, gave their reasons. “We’ve given it serious consideration, and the discussed with the College Dean. Some professors have reservations because their workload will rise, competition will be intensified, but the credits for the outcome produced will have to be shared. Having a CI for teaching language courses will not give the university a boost anyway. We were for some time concerned that our students’ chances of getting scholarships might be reduced without a CI on campus, but then realised that it is not crucial to our students, as only the TCSOL major is relevant.”<sup>313</sup> This anticipation accurately reflected the pains entailed in searching of equilibrium in professional authority. It also alluded to that only by producing better educational results and providing more resources to the students would these pains be adequately justified. The same logic can be observed in the first case discussed above where the local teacher of Chinese department chose to help the student taught by CI, and unwillingly contributed to the latter’s achievement. When all sides are trying to assert their own professional authority, the negotiation may be endless; and a good learning outcome thus often serves as the evidence for a situation to be accepted as equilibrium by both sides.

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<sup>313</sup> Interview in Bangkok, April 8, 2016

## 2.2 Contesting Administrative Authority in Institution Management

Governed by a Board of Directors consisting of members from the host institution and its Chinese partner, a CI usually has a hosting director and a Chinese co-director overseeing its daily operation. Similar to that of professional authority, the Chinese side will take a dominant position if the hosting director does not have enough time and energy to devote to the CI, leaving the institute an out-sourced training centre for most of the time. Yet unlike professional authority, even the clear division in operation will not necessarily ensure a low level equilibrium in administrative authority. As an institute situated on the host's campus, CI simply cannot be exempted from local regulations and expectations, which may not necessarily be in line with those of Hanban. Meanwhile, there lacks a clear benchmark – such as learning outcome in TCSOL – that can be agreed upon by both sides as a neutral sign of satisfactory coordination. Therefore, although an equilibrium in administrative authority can still be defined as a status where the expectations of the cooperating parties (i.e. the host, Chinese partner and Hanban) for the CI and for each other are satisfied, it actually requires a reconciliation between two systems of management, rendering the dynamic process of negotiation all the more important.

Nevertheless, this process often happens behind the scene and is thus difficult to capture. What can be observed though, are four sites where interactions take place and influences are exerted, shaping the administrative decisions made in and for CIs. Firstly, that between two governments serving as the background; secondly, between the partner universities serving as the foreground; thirdly, among various actors on the Chinese side, including the partner universities, Hanban's representative office and Hanban, coordinating actions on the Chinese side; and

fourthly, between Hanban and the host institutes, coordinating visions and actions through institutionalised and informal deliberations.<sup>314</sup> This mapping of interactive sites can be compared with Hsiao and Yang's four-layered interactive network surrounding the politics of *guanxi* ("*guanxi zhengzhi wangluo*").<sup>315</sup> There are some overlaps in terms of how influences are exerted; however, whereas Hsiao and Yang aimed at explaining the functioning of CIs in bilateral relations between China and Southeast Asian countries, I intend to illustrate the forces and processes that constitute the multi-stakeholder engagement in public diplomacy. Instead of asking how CIs expand Chinese influence in bilateral relations, I ask how decisions are made in and for CIs in the first place.

The site of interaction between two governments serves as the background, as it determines the general environment where the CI collaboration takes place. A strong intention to cooperation may create a receptive soil for CIs, as in Thailand; but a vigilantly defensive attitude would slow down the emergence of CI, as in Vietnam.<sup>316</sup> It will also determine in which social group a receptive soil can be found. For example, in Cambodia, it was in the government agencies, demonstrating an intergovernmental cooperation; and in Myanmar, the ethnic communities, keeping a relatively low profile as civil exchange.<sup>317</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Two and Three, in Singapore, placing CI in the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has a symbolic significance. It was specifically

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<sup>314</sup> The last aspect can be compared with Zaharna, "Network Purposes, Network Design: Dimensions of Network and Collaborative Public Diplomacy," 182–87.

<sup>315</sup> Hsiao and Yang, "Kongzi Xueyuan Zai Zhongguo-Dongnanya Guanxizhengzhi Zhong de Juese 孔子學院在中國-東南亞關係政治中的角色 [The Role of Confucius Institutes in the Politics of Guanxi between China and Southeast Asia]."

<sup>316</sup> Van Chinh Nguyen, "Confucius Institutes in the Mekong Region: China's Soft Power or Soft Border?," *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 108–9.

<sup>317</sup> Hsiao and Yang, "Differentiating the Politics of Dependency: Confucius Institutes in Cambodia and Myanmar."

mentioned by the late Minister Mentor Mr Lee Kuan Yew during the official opening of CI that “Nanyang University, the predecessor of NTU, was a Chinese language university established in 1955 by contributions from all strata of society.”<sup>318</sup> Put CI in NTU then was to “restore the Chinese heritage of Nantah”, so commented a manager of CI. Given Singapore’s language policy during the 1970s and the unhappy ending for the Nanyang University, putting CI in NTU underscored the rising status of mandarin on government’s agenda. In Malaysia, the naming of the Kong Zi Institute in the University of Malaya embodied the pragmatic attitude of the Chinese government in accommodating to the hosting country’s political landscape; meanwhile, it also demonstrated the cautious attitude of the Malaysian government in cutting any potential association with ethnic policies. With the two governments reaching a common ground, the presence of CI is then legitimised in Malaysian society. It gives room for social actors to enter. SEGi University, a private university near Kuala Lumpur, approached Hanban for its own CI. Being a private enterprise, this university was not burdened by policy implications, thus the name “Confucius Institute” was also kept.<sup>319</sup>

However, it should be noted that even when the local government is supportive, it does not mean that Hanban will get all it wants with CIs in that country. It is obviously not Hanban’s choice that the CI in Singapore does not have a Chinese director. That is to say, the interaction at the government level will not directly determine the formation of equilibrium in each collaboration. Signing a

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<sup>318</sup> “Speech by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Mentor, at the Official Opening of Confucius Institute, 14 July 2007, 5.15pm at Nanyang Technological University.”

<sup>319</sup> “Inauguration Ceremony of Confucius Institute at SEGi University, Malaysia”, accessed April 14, 2018, <https://www.segi.edu.my/news/inauguration-ceremony-of-confucius-institute-at-segi-university-malaysia>

Framework of Cooperation will not overcome the tension in managing CIs on the ground in Thailand;<sup>320</sup> and having a cooperative relation with the College Board will not help Chinese personnel to gain more influence on US campuses. Equilibrium could be realised in individual CIs even when the government level relation is not conducive; and could still be tipped when the latter is favourable. In different political regimes, the extent to which the government can influence the hosting institutes varies greatly. But even when the CI presents as a diplomatic gesture, an equilibrium still needs to be reached through a dynamic process so as to make it work.

What appears to be directly influencing the collaboration is the foreground interaction between the partner institutions. Similar to the situation in professional authority, there is a spectrum of Chinese influence in CI's daily management. On the extreme ends, there are cases where even the hosting director is specifically hired from China by the hosting university to establish a CI;<sup>321</sup> and cases where there is no constant presence of a Chinese director.<sup>322</sup> But more often in the middle of the spectrum, the Chinese personnel will be dealing with Hanban, and the hosting side dealing with the university administration and other regulatory and professional bodies in the local society. Theoretically, equilibrium in administrative authority can be achieved in all these scenarios. Yet it usually takes a long and hard period of boundary pushing to find a temporary balance, as many perceptions and expectations will only become clear during the process of interaction.

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<sup>320</sup> See Chapter Three, Section 3.2

<sup>321</sup> As in one CI in northern Thailand

<sup>322</sup> As in Singapore

Back in the 2000s, many universities in Thailand were planning to develop their Chinese departments, and there was one in Bangkok where my informant was previously employed. This university hosted a CI for the expansion and immediate functioning of their Chinese department. When their Chinese partners first arrived, many unexpected problems arose, and even the allocation of office space became an issue of discord. The teachers from China refused to work in the same office with a Falun Gong practitioner locally hired by the department; meanwhile, the Chinese director complained about his office being too small, especially compared with that of the Thai director. The Thai side decided to accommodate the former demand by giving the Chinese teachers a separate office, but not the latter, as they insisted that the Thai director should be the main person in charge and did have more paper work to do, while the Chinese director should be in an auxiliary position. The discord was exacerbated by the two sides' different visions for the CI. While the hosting university wanted the CI to be teaching oriented, the Chinese director wanted to expand its influence in the region by setting up more cooperative relations with other schools and associations. The Thai side was not happy to see the Chinese director devoting so much time and energy into forging social relations beyond the university, and got even less willing to accommodate to the latter's requests. When I visited that CI, the founding directors were no longer working there. The Chinese and Thai teachers still had separate offices, with the administrative personnel and Hanban dispatched volunteers working together in the room near the entrance. The Thai director had a better-oriented office, and that for the Chinese director was at the end of the corridor, not a big office indeed. The story behind the layout of the working space in CI constituted an example of the boundary pushing in searching

for reconciliation in administrative authority. The expectations that the host had for the CI (teaching first) and for itself (taking the dominant position) were much harder to be compromised, even symbolically in terms of working space allocation; yet those issues less central to these expectations, such as separating the Chinese teachers from the Falun Gong practitioner, got accommodated quite easily, although without necessarily being a more justifiable request.

If the allocation of working space can still find a temporary equilibrium through boundary pushing, other problems may not be easily resolved by the CI itself. For example, Thailand lacked Chinese teachers, yet importing large numbers of teachers from China also changed the supply and demand in the market of Chinese education. Facing competition from more “authentic” speakers, not only the for-profit language schools lost a large share of the market, the university teachers were also under pressure and “did not dare to ask for a pay rise”,<sup>323</sup> as it would cost the schools and universities very little to get dispatches from China instead. This underlying worry had partly contributed to the alienation between the Hanban dispatched and hosting teachers in some cases; and the volunteers were carefully avoiding discussing payment issues in front of the local teachers, even when they were in fact lower paid but did no less work. Similar discords existed even among the dispatched volunteers. There are different schemes under which they are managed, namely, the “CI volunteers” serving through the CI collaboration, and the “ordinary volunteers” allocated through the different commissions in the Thai MOE, as mentioned in the previous section. Although both types are selected, trained and dispatched by Hanban, they are paid under

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<sup>323</sup> To quote a Thai teacher who used to work for a CI, May 20, 2016, Bangkok

two schemes<sup>324</sup> and are required to fulfil different working hours. One university that I visited originally chose to obtain volunteers from both its CI and the Higher Education Commission to keep a contact with its own government. However, the different working hours became an issue of controversy when the volunteers got to work together. Eventually, the university stopped getting volunteers through the Commission altogether.

Small fractions in the workplace are unavoidable; yet those related to the transnational collaboration appear more frustrating, as they are considered unnecessary, i.e. not an intrinsic problem of one's own system and should be blamed on the presence of the other side. However, many conflicts in the foreground of the collaboration and between the colleagues may be rooted elsewhere. The logic and rules of different management systems will influence the expectations of people in cooperation. With each side looking towards its own administrative authority for recognition and credit, there is little reason for them to care for each other's key performance index and rewards; yet they have to work together on a daily basis. Although the issues mentioned above are context specific, the question thus raised – i.e., how to reconcile different systems of management – is relevant across CIs and has different expressions. For example, Hanban's budget system follows the calendar year, and the host institute may have a different financial cycle, which means doubled workloads; or Hanban emphasises the “Chinese Bridge” Language Competition and the Confucius Institute Open Day as the key projects, but the hosting institute may regard them

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<sup>324</sup> CI volunteers will be fully paid by Hanban, and ordinary volunteers (also called volunteer Chinese teachers) will be jointly paid by Hanban and Thailand's MOE.

as spending its time and resource for China's publicity – it would rather focus on improving the language classes.

One former volunteer dispatched by Hanban complained about the dilemma he was in when trying to balance the expectations of two side. Hanban welcomes news feeds from CIs around the world for publicity, but it also requires that the content should be endorsed officially by the institute before sending to Beijing. The volunteer, under the pressure to show his own university back in China what he had accomplished overseas, was very willing to do all the writing; and the CI he was working for was actually quite active in organising lectures and seminars. However, the local director had no interest and incentive in reading and approving the news feed for Hanban at all. Without official endorsement, it resulted in no submission altogether. The volunteer was very worried because he had already heard about complaints from his own university, which was also under pressure to demonstrate what the CIs they were co-organising had achieved. Over time, this became an evidence of this particular CI not being productive and cooperative; and the accumulated discontent contributed to the organisation of an unusual senior management level meeting.<sup>325</sup>

It is not only a problem in Southeast Asia. During the break of the Confucius Institute Conference in 2015, I asked the directors what difficulties they had encountered in managing the CIs. One director commented that “the bureaucratic details alone are troublesome enough. Hanban is like a second Ministry of Education for us, but it is a foreign government.” And another offered a metaphor, “It is not only the two directors are cooperating, but also a relation between two

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<sup>325</sup> Incident I encountered during fieldwork. To protect the informant, the CI is not identified.

institutions and even two countries – very much like a marriage, behind the couples there are two families. It is easy to resolve problems on our [the Chinese] side, but we need to approach them [the host side] tactfully.”<sup>326</sup>

How these problems could be possibly tackled brings us to the remaining two sites of interaction, i.e. among the various actors on China’s side, and between Hanban and the host institutes. The former moulds and supports the work of the Chinese side, and the latter tries to forge commonalities between the two sides so as to make the former task easier. There are formal and informal channels to realise such interaction. The formal ones include the institutionalised training Hanban organises for volunteers, teachers, Chinese directors and hosting directors, as well as the annually held Confucius Institute Conference and the International Conference on Chinese Language Teaching. The informal ones often rely on problem-based responsive communication, aiming at resolving specific discords.

The training for volunteers is held in universities where TCSOL education bases have been established.<sup>327</sup> I obtained the class schedule of a training session organised in 2015 for volunteers to be sent to Asian and European countries in 2016. During the weekdays from 8.30 am to 9.00 pm, various classes, conferences, seminars and teaching demonstrations were held; and most of the time was devoted to teaching, cultural events organisation, utilising Hanban resources such as the guideline for compiling teaching materials, and basic techniques in traditional Chinese arts and craftsmanship. Foreign language is also

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<sup>326</sup> Quotes from personal conversations at the CI annual conference, Shanghai, December 6 to 8, 2015

<sup>327</sup> Also part of the “Chinese Bridge” Project, See Chapter Three, Section 3.3

a constant item throughout the training, so that the volunteers could know a little bit of the local language. In addition, safety instructions, current affairs home and abroad, as well as how to deal with sensitive questions were also discussed specifically, plus some other supplementary items such as photography, cross-cultural communication and psychological well-being. Some volunteers may find the training necessary, as they would feel at a loss if not given these heads-ups; others who are more advanced in their professional training may find the process a waste of time and money – Hanban’s money, as the trainees are provided with food and accommodation throughout the training, which, said a volunteer working in Thailand, she would “rather have as allowances” paid to her.

Nevertheless, the function of these training programmes goes beyond preparing volunteers for their jobs. It also propagates the “Chinese Volunteer Teacher Spirit”, which is a way of thinking that can act as the lubricant between two management systems. In China, the “spirit of volunteers” in general is defined as “dedication, friendship, mutual help and progress”; and for the language teachers dispatched overseas in particular, they should have “passion, enthusiasm and devotion” (*san qing*, “three emotions”) and “a sense of honour, mandate, and responsibility” (*san gan*, “three senses”) to their work. Among the volunteers, there is a general understanding that Hanban asks them not to compare working environment, payment,<sup>328</sup> and workload. In other words, it is hoped that the spirit of altruism and voluntarism could bridge the gap between two management systems and help to overcome most of the management related disappointments in the workplace, eliminating at least one aspect where imbalance may rise. This training process is also closely related to how “Chinese culture” is defined and

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<sup>328</sup> Some university may pay the volunteers as well, in addition to the Hanban allowance

what constitutes a legitimate understanding of China, which will be discussed in the next section.

Not only volunteers, professional teachers, Chinese directors will also experience a training programme around 40 days before going abroad. The Chinese directors will be familiarised with all administrative procedures on China's side, even the detailed requirements in accounting, so that the budgets they submit can meet the requirements.<sup>329</sup> The Chinese directors-to-be need to pass an assessment after training before getting dispatched.<sup>330</sup> Sometimes there will be another series of intensive classes held for those who passed the assessment, where outstanding and established professionals in the field of cultural diplomacy will be giving lectures, such as the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the director of *Alliance Française* and so on. These training sessions not only equip the Chinese personnel with the necessary knowledge and techniques in running the institute overseas, but also help them to understand Hanban's vision and expectations for their work, so that their plans and efforts could be coordinated on a strategic level, pushing forward Hanban's vision for the global CIs.

There is also a feedback mechanism in this site of interaction. All personnel on the Chinese side need to produce due documents to report their works to Hanban. In addition to the regular reports submitted to Hanban on working experience, awards will be given to outstanding CIs, CCs, Chinese partners and individuals. Since 2007, Hanban has been rewarding at least 20 "Confucius Institute of the Year" worldwide; similar awards soon got extended to CCs, Chinese partner

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<sup>329</sup> Interview in Kuala Lumpur, August 8, 2016.

<sup>330</sup> In theory, the volunteers shall also undergo another round of assessment and only those who pass can be dispatched, but no case is yet known to me that anybody failed to pass the training for reasons other than health.

institutes, and individuals. And the year 2014 and 2015 saw two special awards dedicated to the “pioneering CIs” and “long serving CIs” (more than 5 years). Now these awards are increasingly institutionalised, with the selection criteria and application procedure put on paper.<sup>331</sup> The awards will be issued during the opening ceremony of the annual Confucius Institute Conference, witnessed by CI directors, college deans and university presidents around the world. Although it may not necessarily incentivise the hosting side, it will surely serve as an important stimulation to the Chinese partner universities, propelling them to ensure a good “implementation of the Headquarters’ key projects”.<sup>332</sup>

In comparison, there is no effective loop of administrative control between Hanban and the hosting side, but some institutionalised and informal channels of communication constituting a site of interaction, which, nonetheless, plays a significant role in balancing administrative authorities. Two main channels are institutionalised, namely, the training of hosting directors, and the CI conferences. The training of hosting director is much shorter than that of their Chinese counterparts, around 10 days altogether, and mostly consists of lectures on Chinese culture, contemporary development, and sharing sessions on how to work together with the Chinese side by previous directors. There will also be tours organised to industrial parks and development zones. Yet this training programme seems not to be very efficient in forging a common vision, partly due to the lack of focus in content. One director candidly commented that, “to those who already know quite a lot about China, some of the lectures have little point. Some information also sounds like propaganda to my ears. Indeed others may

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<sup>331</sup> Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, “CI Award 2016,” accessed July 5, 2017, <http://conference.hanban.org/confucius/adv-criteria-en.html>.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

find the ‘China 101’ useful, but I personally would like to hear more about Hanban, how it works, how we shall work together and so on – those practical matters. There are some, but diluted by the introductory lectures. In addition, I know that the Chinese directors will experience a much longer training, I wonder what has been taught to them, but not to us.”<sup>333</sup> This director was pleased to see an internationally composed Council for CIH, but still have reservations about the way Hanban runs the global CI network.

Apparently, an international council for CIH is not sufficient to provide a sense of participation and ownership to the host universities; and the daily negotiations in CIs may also feel like a confrontation between the aggressive Chinese forces and the defensive local ones. The annual CI conference then becomes a good opportunity to showcase collaboration and shared administrative authority. The CI conference is held annually since 2006, and in addition to the forums and parallel panels, various drafts of project plans and regulations, such as the “action plan for CI development”, “statistical index system for CIs”, and “Confucius China Study Plan” etc., may be distributed to all delegates for comments, which will be recollected afterwards by Hanban. Indeed, this collection of opinions is still far from producing the legitimacy as in deliberative democracy, but it helps Hanban to identify the most significant problems and concerns among the hosts, which then could be addressed accordingly. In addition to the annual CI conferences, there are also regional joint conferences serving as an additional platform of communication that helps Hanban to identify problems and create a sense of community among CIs in the same region. Communications made through these conferences may not necessarily produce the best (or the most

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<sup>333</sup> Interview in Shanghai, December 6, 2015

professional and scientific) decision for all, but it will produce a decision safe enough to be implemented without causing serious and widespread objections. The International Conference on Chinese Language Teaching is often held right after the CI annual conference and has a similar function, but is more relevant to balancing professional and discursive authority. Nevertheless, considering the interconnectedness of these aspects in collaboration, a good experience in the teaching conference will also help to reduce tension in CI's management.

The conferences provide not only formal and institutionalised channels of communication, but also face-to-face interactions between hosting universities' management and Hanban staff, where personal relations are built and informal channels of influence are created. Specific discord between CI and Hanban may be addressed by a private conversation between the chairman of the CI board and a Hanban representative; or steam could be let off by the hosting director filing a complaint directly to Xu Lin – this was what happened at the CI annual Conference in 2015. During the opening ceremony of the International Conference on Chinese Language Teaching which was held right after the CI annual conference, Madam Xu, in her quite down-to-earth style speech, mentioned that she received a letter of complaint from a foreign CI director saying that the other panel members, especially the Chinese directors, in his discussion group of the CI conference were not well prepared for the session. Rather than focusing on the theme of their panel, which was on the future developments of CIs, they spent a lot of time summarising what had been achieved. Madam Xu explained that this is not a sign of not well prepared, but only a matter of difference in custom, as the Chinese side would always summarise the past before talking about the future; and the Chinese directors,

rather than not well prepared, actually prepared too much so that the time was up before they could finish. Whether this is a convincing explanation aside, this mechanism of communication is interesting. A public response to a complaint shows her care about the feedback of Hanban's partners, and addresses similar problems encountered by others who did not choose to speak up. There are no institutionalised procedures to these interaction, yet they constitute a crucial mechanism through which a sense of participation and cooperation could be strengthened.

Informal channels of interaction exist beyond the conference settings as well; and the Chinese embassy and consulate often play the mediating role between CIs and Chinese government – not only Hanban, but also the China scholarship Council, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and so on. They do provide formal accesses to Chinese resources, such as scholarship application; yet it is the informal mechanisms that is more important in pushing the development of CIs and in reconciling the host institutes and Hanban – for example, a Lunar New Year reception that connects the local Chinese businesses to CIs, so that the latter could have more students and projects; or an education exhibition that helps the local university to find a partner in China; or a lunch invitation aimed at finding out why Hanban's key projects are getting neglected by the hosting institute.<sup>334</sup> These informal and often personal relations have become a more flexible alternative that can bypass the more rigid formal mechanisms of communication in sending goodwill and exerting pressure, making up for the lack of contact between conferences.

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<sup>334</sup> These are all incidents that I heard about during interviews, which are not my first-hand experience. Kuala Lumpur, August 8, 2016; Shanghai, December 5, 2015

To summarise, in terms of administrative authority, the dynamic process of boundary pushing and negotiation appears more salient than the status of equilibrium – both the Chinese and hosting sides will most likely have unmet expectations and frustrations in CI's management, but never stopped seeking satisfactions and resolutions. One hosting director, while complaining about Hanban's bureaucratic way of management, admitted the fundamental value of this cooperation, "I recognise the merits of Hanban's timely movement to establish CIs worldwide. China's economic growth and rising importance made it necessary to have people around the world who know some Chinese; and without government investment, it would be impossible to have the current scale of educational resources available, especially in places with no foundation in teaching Chinese. This truly is a great achievement in the field of TCSOL."<sup>335</sup> Being a professor in Chinese literature himself, he had no objection to having CIs, but only how to manage them.

There are four sites of interaction and negotiation shaping the administrative decisions made in and for CIs. The government level cooperation in TCSOL, or the absence thereof, serves as a background where the transnational collaboration unfolds; and authorities will be directly contested in the foreground, i.e. between the partners in CI's daily operation. It is not only due to the fact that core expectations are difficult to compromise; moreover, many discords are expressions of a systematic inconsistency between two management systems. On the Chinese side, training, assessments and awards form a complete loop of administrative control, serving to coordinate the visions and actions of Chinese personnel around the world to shape CIs' development; and the volunteer spirit

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<sup>335</sup> Interview in Shanghai, December 6, 2015

is also propagated as a solution to the systematic discrepancies in management – differences shall be ignored by embracing altruistic and voluntary spirit. Between Hanban and the hosting institutes, both institutionalised and informal channels of communication are routinely used, not necessarily to produce the best practice, but to prevent the worst. These four sites of interaction, taken together, constitute the dynamic process of finding an equilibrium in administrative authority.

Although in many places, Chinese government’s administrative authority over the CIs has been carefully watched and consciously curbed, these four sites of interaction still constituted an effective way of shaping CIs’ development by Hanban in general. The government level negotiation will clear the way for CIs to emerge, and the loop of training and reward on China’s side ensured that the direction of efforts by Chinese personnel is in line with the strategic goals of Hanban – the items given the highest weighting (20% each) in selecting “CI of the Year” were “education quality and scale”, “cooperation between the Chinese and local sides” and “implementation of the Headquarters’ key projects”, highlighting Hanban’s vision for the CI in terms of professional and administrative authority.<sup>336</sup> The site of interaction between Hanban and the CI hosts does not work against those strategic aims, but helps to make them acceptable and relevant to the hosts. Although in the foreground, administrative authorities will still be contested, the dynamic process of boundary pushing and error correction helps to keep the multi-stakeholders engaged, arriving at one temporary balance after another.

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<sup>336</sup> Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, “CI Award 2016.”

### 2.3 Demonstrating Discursive Authority in Academic and Cultural Events

In addition to teaching language, CIs also have the mandate to demonstrate Chinese culture and society. But who is to decide what constitutes a legitimate representation of China? Hanban indeed wants to propagate a positive image in line with the diplomatic strategies of Chinese government, yet the hosting societies may have their own dominant narrations on China as well. Equilibrium in discursive authority then means a non-confrontational coexistence, exchange or even integration of narratives on China being presented in CI's classes, and through its cultural and academic events. There are three major occasions where discursive authority is exerted. Firstly, in CI's regular classes; secondly, in academic events organised or participated by the CIs, and thirdly, in cultural activities, from celebrating a local festival to organising the annual "Chinese Bridge" Chinese Proficiency Competition held worldwide.

Unlike in administrative authority where equilibrium is found through the participating parties pushing the boundaries and limits of each other, balance in discursive authority is seldom found through direct confrontations and debates. The general absence of criticisms, especially those directed at China's political regime, in these activities has been perceived as evidence of censorship, which may render the rest of the messages propaganda as well. Yet it should be noted that narratives in CIs are far from either truth or propaganda. Oftentimes, the dispatched teachers need not lie to support the government's perspective, but simply be honest, telling the reality as they see it. It is not to discount the functioning of political power in exerting discursive authority; on the contrary, it is exactly political power that shaped the realities for the Chinese people in the first place. Yet a more detailed account of the logic of representation in CIs'

activities is necessary, so that the process whereby the images of China are produced can be understood.

In the first occasion, i.e. discourses demonstrated in CI's classes, some studies have focused on Hanban produced textbooks, pointing out the deliberate or unintentional domination of government ideologies and perceptions.<sup>337</sup> Others conducted fieldwork in classes, revealing that the way "Chinese culture" is represented in CI classes is indeed an "incarnation of an official Hanban policy", but is at the same time shaped by the local context.<sup>338</sup> Simply focusing on textbook analysis is not enough to show the operation of discursive authority, as it is not clear how these messages are delivered and received; in addition, the textbooks are far from the only source of information on China accessible to students in a foreign country. Without control over the "ideological state apparatus" in the host country,<sup>339</sup> the extent to which textbooks per se can delimit the views of the students is questionable. In comparison, fieldwork illustrates better the interactive process of discourse production. For example, it is within the context of China as "a Communist Other" that the Chinese teachers felt strongly about demonstrating a depoliticised self and social life distant from the government.<sup>340</sup> This image of China and Chinese social life then is simultaneously "real" as a personal living experience and "propagandist" as a

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<sup>337</sup> Peng, "Confucius Institutes in Japan: The Chinese Practice of Cultural Persuasive Strategy," 57–58; Huaqing Hong and Xianzhong He, "Ideologies of Monoculturalism in Confucius Institute Textbooks," in *Language, Ideology and Education: The Politics of Textbooks in Language Education*, 2015, 90–108.

<sup>338</sup> Amy Stambach, "Confucius Institute Programming in the United States: Language Ideology, Hegemony, and the Making of Chinese Culture in University Classes," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2015): 68; Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*.

<sup>339</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 243–75.

<sup>340</sup> Lueck, Pippas, and Lin, "China's Soft Power: A New York Times Introduction of the Confucius Institute," 327; Hubbert, "Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom," 343.

result of the political control in China which rendered the teachers unaware of or incompetent to discuss the so-called sensitive topics.<sup>341</sup> In other words, the exertion of discursive authority by the Chinese side does not always take the form of propaganda, but nevertheless will not go against the interests of the Chinese government. Consequently, the representation of China in CI classes could be candid on the one hand, constituting a meaningful transnational exchange on the personal level, especially vis-à-vis the often biased local lenses; but on the other hand sanitised, constituting an “ideological extension of the Chinese state” as qualified by Stambach.<sup>342</sup>

As an extreme and negative example of the second occasion, the EACS incident was where Hanban unilaterally destroying the balance.<sup>343</sup> However, a more common practice is actually to leave spaces for the hosting sides to take the initiative in wielding discursive authority. Various forms of self-censorship is a problem not to be disregarded, but again, it does not mainly work by refraining from criticising China, and certainly not speaking deliberately for the Chinese government. Oftentimes, these academic events help to give more exposure to the pro-China and neutral opinions in academia, while excluding the sharply critical ones. That is to say, comparing with distorting scholarship directly, it is primarily the control over channels of publicity that is strengthening certain types of discourse and marginalising others in the market of opinions.

During my fieldwork in Malaysia and Singapore, I participated in one seminar on China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The seminar was organised “upon the

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<sup>341</sup> for example, *ibid.*, 335.

<sup>342</sup> Stambach, “Confucius Institute Programming in the United States: Language Ideology, Hegemony, and the Making of Chinese Culture in University Classes,” 55.

<sup>343</sup> See Chapter Three Section 1.

request of Hanban”, and pulled together by the CI in joint efforts with a locally-based transnational Society of Chinese culture, and a senior lecturer in a local university. The CI provided venue and funding (coming from Hanban); the Society was invited for its devotion to the study of the Silk Road; and the lecturer brought together the panellists and highlighted the academic relevance of the seminar. The audience were of various backgrounds, including scholars, people working in the cultural industry, or general public that were interested in such topic. The presentations were also what one would normally expect, not only focusing on the current Chinese Initiative and its implications for the global economy and international relations, but also the history of the Maritime Silk Road – a typical Southeast Asian perspective. One particular figure was highlighted, i.e., Zheng He, the Muslim admiral of Ming Dynasty who led the famous seven expeditionary voyages in early 15<sup>th</sup> century. He is also worshipped as a deity in many parts of Southeast Asia. In China’s official narrative, Zheng He is the iconic figure representing a powerful and prosperous China, devoted to being the guardian of peace and bearer of friendship. The Society had always been supportive of this view. At the closing speech, the director of the Society expressed the wish to carry on Zheng He’s heritage with the help of the Belt and Road Initiative to further develop infrastructure and tourism in the region; and the director of the CI thanked Hanban for supporting this event, as well as the other organisers.

My experience with other scholars and students in the region showed that this peaceful image of Zheng He and Ming China was far from the only one existed among the locals – a formidable fleet with combat personnel on board may not necessarily pose as a signal of friendship, and may give the current Belt and Road

Initiative a totally different shade when the latter is related to Zheng He's spirit. From an academic perspective, more caution should be taken when using a historical figure as the icon for a current event. However, the remarks given by the director of the Society was cordially supportive to the Belt and Road Initiative, which set the tone for the whole event, even when the panellists were not necessarily demonstrating similar tendencies. Moreover, there would not be a seminar to begin with if Hanban had not asked. Therefore, this event brought together a selected part of the local opinions, constructed around the discursive authority of Hanban, but realised through that of the local academics and association. They did not change their views specifically for this event, but as a result of this concentration of opinions, what had been presented to the audience was a generally positive image on Chinese history and current diplomatic strategy. A dynamic equilibrium in discursive authority was then realised – both the Society and the panellists were presenting their own ideas, which were either in accordance with or not against Hanban's intention; while Hanban realised its goal in wielding discursive authority indirectly by bringing together and giving exposure to those favourable and non-confrontational discourses.

In addition to bringing together selected discourses produced by others, in the third occasion, Hanban either wields its discursive authority directly through initiating and organising the cultural events, or indirectly through training the Chinese personnel who are instrumental in their realisation. As these are not academic events, seldom would the host institutes be concerned with their contents; sometimes contributing to the multicultural rhetoric, the local governments would even find them useful, willing to co-organise and have their own discourses represented as well.

The “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition is a case in point.<sup>344</sup> Organised annually for foreign college students since 2002, and for secondary school students since 2008, it has become one of the “Branded Projects” of Hanban, participated by 160,000 students from 115 countries in 2016 alone.<sup>345</sup> The theme of the Chinese Bridge Competition for college students in general reflects the dominant event or discourse in China. For example, in 2008, it was “passion in Olympics, happy learning Chinese”; in 2010, it was “charming Chinese language, exciting World Expo”. “My China Dream” was the theme for 4 consecutive years (2012-2015), and for 2016 and 2017, it has been rephrased as “Dream Enlightens the Future”. Although for the middle school students, the themes are mostly about personal development, youth, and friendship – such as “learn Chinese, double your world” in 2016 – the country level competitions can have localised themes. Last year in Thailand, the theme was “the Chinese and the Thais are brothers (*zhongtai yijia qin*)” – a description of the bilateral relation supported by both governments. Setting the theme for the competition means determining the discourses that will dominate the event, as the participants are asked to give speeches in accordance with the theme. For example, last year in Thailand, the stage speeches given by middle school students often constituted a rosy narration of the historical experience of Chinese communities in Thailand, free from persecutions and always loved by the kings indiscriminately, ignoring how Chinese became a foreign language in the first place. Such discourses are not completely unfounded, and can be constructive to national solidarity and in

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<sup>344</sup> There are three parts to this competition. In addition to the ones mentioned here, there is another organised for foreigners in China, which does not have much to do with the CIs and is thus left out.

<sup>345</sup> Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, “Confucius Institute Annual Development Report,” 2016, 5.

bilateral relations. Yet the image of Sino-Thai relation depicted in the competition was based on highlighting some historical memories but marginalising others, constituting a “complicity” of two governments in propagating a particular version of history at the expense of the unrepresented.

The discursive authority of Hanban is also wielded through the volunteers. They are instrumental in defining Chinese culture and the state. In the “Chinese Bridge” competition, candidates are asked to perform a Chinese culture talent show in addition to giving speeches; and it is usually the classic Han Chinese cultural icons that are demonstrated, such as calligraphy, martial arts, and operas. Yet in Thailand in 2016, many students played *Hulusi*, cucurbit flute, instead of the more typical Chinese *dizi*. *Hulusi* is a musical instrument of the Dai minority in Southeast China, who are of the same ethnic origin as the Thais. How did *Hulusi* become a representation of “Chinese culture” in this particular context? A volunteer offered his answer. “The volunteer teachers shall take the credit, because this is what was taught to us during our intensive training before coming to Thailand.” As mentioned in the last section, this meant that a large number of volunteers going to Asian and European countries should have all learnt *Hulusi*, and were very likely to teach their students when preparing for the contest held in other countries. *Hulusi* emerged as an icon of Chinese culture in that particular year simply because the volunteer training programme had it as a less cliché and easily learnt alternative to other more complicated musical instruments.

By the same token, the training programme also moulds how the volunteers are going to respond to sensitive questions raised by students. They are expected to defend the Chinese stance convincingly, ideally using evidence produced by the hosting country itself, such as a map that included Taiwan as part of China, or a

speech by the local leader in support of the Chinese stance. If the volunteer had absolutely no idea of the answer to the question, then he/she should admit that he/she does not know, or only has personal opinions.<sup>346</sup> Answering these questions is different from countering a stereotype by explaining what a normal Chinese life looks like, as discussed in the first occasion above. Most volunteers have neither enough information nor empirical knowledge of these issues, and only when teaching abroad will they be confronted with such challenges and have to respond as a teacher. To most volunteers, the Hanban training was thus to offer some “practical techniques” that can help them to get out of an awkward situation successfully, instead of pressure on them to speak against their will. Nonetheless, this training process indeed constituted a crucial link in the logic of representation of China’s image in CIs, defining what a legitimate understanding of China shall be.

To summarise, the equilibrium in discursive authority is realised through a selective representation of compatible – at least non-confrontational – opinions, marginalising those harmful to any of the collaborating parties. In other words, the discursive authority of the collaborating parties is upheld at the expense of those not participating and not represented. And Hanban either exerted its discursive authority directly by setting themes for competitions and selecting topics for seminars, or indirectly by training teachers, and more generally, through the making of Chinese citizens. As a result, the representation of China’s image in and through the CIs is consciously candid yet unconsciously sanitised, individually sound yet in general biased, and not always carefully designed yet

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<sup>346</sup> Information given by a trainee during our informal conversation in Shanghai, December 2015.

more or less bearing the influence of top-down political power. In time, Hanban and CIs will forge a field of relatively moderate public and academic opinions on China, leaving those critical ones unengaged.

However, who are the audience of these concentrated favourable opinions? Without much foreign media exposure, the audience of these discourses are in fact quite limited. A volunteer working in Thailand told me that for every event the CI organised, she had to submit a news feed to Hanban to put onto its websites. “The events are always a success in my report, although for the two years I spent here, it is always the same batch of students in Chinese Department who are ‘asked’ to attend our events”.<sup>347</sup> That is to say, the most important imagined audience of these activities is actually the Chinese side itself, firstly for the government and the CI related professionals, and then through Chinese media to the general public, constituting a soft power effort directed at the home front.<sup>348</sup>

### 3. A Summary: Keeping Engaged for Whose Benefit?

In a transnational context, how is the collaboration between actors from different countries realised? This chapter has proposed the concept of dynamic equilibrium to explain the process of multi-stakeholder engagement in the CI project. It is a condition of balance, but one that is realised through a dynamic process of negotiation, where the goals and priorities of oneself are discovered and defined through interacting with others. It is also how authorities with varying, shifting and even opposing interests are kept engaged, as long as a balance is still foreseeable in the future. Sharing the instrumental goal in strengthening the

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<sup>347</sup> Interview in Bangkok, May 13, 2016

<sup>348</sup> Callahan, “Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream,” 217; Kingsley Edney, “Building National Cohesion and Domestic Legitimacy: A Regime Security Approach to Soft Power in China,” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 259–72.

network power of Chinese language yet without being subjected to a higher authority, nor having the political power of control over each other, the collaborating parties in CIs are kept engaged by a constant search for equilibrium in exerting professional, administrative and discursive authority.

The equilibrium in professional authority is generally easier to establish if the host institutes have only limited resources in TCSOL, and rely on the Chinese side to keep the classes going. Nevertheless, even a national level structural reliance as in Thailand is not a safeguard to equilibrium in professional authority in each case. Whether it is because that the local teachers are expecting more authority, or that the Chinese teachers are expecting a deeper integration, the need to accommodate the changing anticipations will push the collaboration towards finding new balances. A good learning outcome is often the benchmark for a satisfactory reconciliation.

The equilibrium in administrative authority requires accommodating different management systems. There are four sites of interaction that influence the search for equilibrium in managing CIs – that between two governments as the background, determining whether CIs are to be curbed, tolerated, or promoted; between two partner institutes as the foreground, reconciling the expectations of not only the two institutes, but also their respective management systems by pushing boundaries; between Hanban and the Chinese partner universities and personnel, providing training, regulation and awards as a complete loop of administrative control that promotes Hanban's vision for the CIs; and between Hanban and the hosting institutes, presenting institutionalised and informal mechanisms of negotiation that lets off steam, provides hopes and prevents the worst imbalance from happening, although not always successfully.

The equilibrium in discursive authority is based on alienating the more critical opinions on China, but mostly not through outright propaganda and censorship. Hanban does not control the production of all discourses, nor is it able to eliminate unwanted ones, but it gives more exposure to and helps to bring together those neutral and more favourable discourses; it does not necessarily put pressure on the teachers to say good things about China, but relies more on their already formed subjectivities as Chinese citizens; it does not only present discourses in China's interests, but can jointly present those preferred by the hosting side as well, be it "cultivating multicultural global citizens" or "forging Sino-Thai brotherhood".

These domains of authority are interrelated; and what is constant in searching for equilibrium across these domains is the creation of middle grounds. In the words of an experienced CI manager on the Chinese side, "we would do everything that is *in* your [the hosting side] interest, and not *against* ours."<sup>349</sup> With this principle in mind, we can understand the various forms of cooperation demonstrated across the CIs even within a country; and how multi-stakeholder collaboration is realised in transnational settings. The past decade of CI expansion in general has relied on a relatively low level equilibrium in balancing authority, and the Chinese side is well aware of this situation. It has been proposed by some professionals that the CI should aim for a further integration with the hosts, changing from "oil in water" to "fish in water", from "self-entertainment" to "co-exist and co-develop".<sup>350</sup> In other words, new equilibriums have to be found

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<sup>349</sup> Interview in Beijing, July 11, 2016

<sup>350</sup> Panel discussions during the annual CI conference in Shanghai, December 2015

based on deeper integration. And whether or not it can be realised, the dynamic equilibrium will still be relevant as long as the CIs persist as joint ventures.

Yet what is not explained by the process of transnational engagement is its products – while the cooperating partners are striving to get their interests defined and expectations met through constant negotiation, what has been produced as a result? In keeping the collaboration going, who gets the benefits? The next chapter will explore the functioning of human agency in the reproduction of the transnational social space created by Hanban's global language education initiative, and reify its impacts. After all, people are the means and ends of cross-culture communication; and it is vis-à-vis the meaning created by people that the real-life significance of CIs can be understood and evaluated.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Crossing the “Chinese Bridge”**

Chapter four showed the process of multi-stakeholder engagement in transnational settings. Since the cooperating parties are institutionally embedded and have distinct goals and interests despite sharing the instrumental pursuit for the network power of Chinese language, finding a dynamic equilibrium is crucial to the survival and development of CIs as joint ventures. However, the dynamic process of reconciling expectations and balancing authorities features how the transnational engagement has been sustained, without attending to its implications. Specifically, what has been produced as a result of having this social space created? Human agency is at the centre of this question. It is through their meaning-making that social relations got reproduced and CIs’ significance can be understood. This chapter identifies both the embeddedness and meaning-making reflected in two levels of expressions by participants in a particularly important cultural event organised by almost all CIs worldwide, i.e. the “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition. Analysing the real-life significance of this event from the perspective of the participants, this chapter will demonstrate how the two levels of expression have, on the one hand, contributed to the reproduction of transnational cooperation by formally satisfying the intention of both sides; and on the other hand, empowered the students with more choices in life while contributing to the network power of Chinese language. By going into the subjectivity of CIs’ main targeted audience – the foreign students – this chapter substantiates the theoretical conclusions of the previous two chapters on a personal level, thus bringing in the so far missing link in the structuring of the global CI network.

## 1. Evaluating Impact from Bottom-Up

After analysing the basis (Chapter Three) and the process (Chapter Four) of the CI transnational engagement, we now turn to its implications. The first article of the CI constitution and by-laws reads:

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 multi-culturalism, and to construct a harmonious world.<sup>351</sup>

The declared purposes of “understanding”, “friendship”, “multiculturalism” and “harmony” have not changed much since the 2006 first CI Conference where the provisional version of the constitution and by-laws was approved.<sup>352</sup> In the dominant state-oriented framework that views CIs as a tool of Chinese government, this declaration of purpose has been easily neglected, if not dismissed as merely rhetorical. Nevertheless, based on the previous chapters, these statements then acquire new meanings. Strengthening the network power of Chinese language will give China a structural advantage, thus “satisfying the demands” of others is also serving the interest of oneself; building friendly relations and promoting multiculturalism highlights the middle ground of all

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<sup>351</sup> “Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes.”

<sup>352</sup> Hanban, “The Office of Chinese Language Council International Annual Report,” 56.

collaborators, upon which a dynamic equilibrium can then be pursued, thus the rhetorical also plays a real function.

In fact, this alleged devotion to exchange, understanding and multiculturalism is so important that the rationale of hosting a CI can hardly be explained without it. When the Confucius Institute in Singapore celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Chairman of the CI Board of Directors said that the mission and vision of the Confucius Institute was to “raise the level of appreciation and understanding of Chinese language and culture in Singapore”, “reach out to the community” and “serve the society”. In addition, the CI would also like to “share experience with our neighbours ... with the end objective [being] creating better understanding among cultures.”<sup>353</sup> US universities also embraced “understanding” and “multiculturalism” as the benefits of hosting CIs, although in a slightly different manner. It was not only the students learning an additional language and getting the chance to be global citizens and “make global partners” that embodied these ideals; in the meantime, Hanban dispatched teachers were also expected to benefit from being exposed to the diversity and liberal politics on US campuses.<sup>354</sup> These localised interpretations allowed Singapore to anchor itself among the Southeast Asian neighbours and the US to emphasise its liberal politics while sharing the same rhetoric with the Chinese government, illustrating how middle grounds were found for maintaining an equilibrium in transnational cooperation.

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<sup>353</sup> Confucius Institute NTU, “Confucius Institute, NTU 10th Anniversary Corporate Video,” last modified September 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOH6v69ETBc>.

<sup>354</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 64–65.

However, under the banner of the shared rhetoric, what results have been produced? While the partners are kept engaged in a dynamic equilibrium, whose vision and purpose for this engagement are getting realised? Answering this question entails understanding the functioning of human agency. Institutionally embedded as they are, people are not passive bearers of structural forces and receivers of official messages. They are “soft actors” whose subjectivities are simultaneously structured by and structuring other actors and institutions surrounding them.<sup>355</sup> In other words, it is through meaning-making that the social structure and institutions get created and reproduced, without which the description of transnational social engagement will be incomplete. Therefore, understanding the human agency is an indispensable step in accounting for the structuration in Hanban’s global education initiative; and is also how the impact of this project can be evaluated from bottom-up.<sup>356</sup>

This chapter uses the “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition as a portal to study in depth the production of discourses and meanings. This annual event features prominently in Hanban’s overall strategy, and is thus a major project that almost all CIs regularly organise.<sup>357</sup> Comparing with other activities such as language classes and localised cultural events, the content and format of this Competition are similar across the world and subjected primarily to Hanban’s authority, thus constituting a point of reference relevant across different countries. This chapter also features Thailand, not only because this country witnesses the largest scale of “Chinese Bridge” Competition every year among the countries

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<sup>355</sup> Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, “Introduction: A World of Governance: The Rise of Transnational Regulation,” 11–12.

<sup>356</sup> see also the introduction of Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*.

<sup>357</sup> See also Chapter Four, Section 2.3

where I did fieldwork. Thailand relies on China for TCSOL resources and does not have a dominant and hostile “China Frame” in its own national narratives. Identified by Hanban as an exemplar of Chinese language promotion, it provides a more receptive soil to Chinese influence. Featuring a case favourable to China, it helps to illustrate better the nuances in meaning making and the complexity of reality on the ground, even when there appears to be a prevalent Chinese influence.

Two levels of expressions and meaning-making by students participating in this competition shall be distinguished. Namely, the narratives that were publicly expressed and circulated, and the meanings actually tied into people’s life choices. The former is produced by and contributing to Hanban’s discursive domination; and the latter shows that personal objectives are retained and realised by consciously utilising such domination – the individuals can get empowered if they play the game well. The two levels of meaning-making are interrelated, with the first level being particular – and often instrumental – expressions of the second in the competition settings. Consequently, although the discursive authority of Hanban was reinforced, its influence had hardly penetrated beyond those settings. Shaping expressions is not the same as shaping subjectivities; and discursive authority will not necessarily lead to soft power. For whatever purpose the transnational social spaces are created, in them, people will find their own significance.

As the production of meaning is closely related to the subjectivity of individuals, the specific observations in case studies cannot be directly generalised methodologically. However, the in-depth case study will deconstruct the metanarrative on Chinese soft power, and substantiate the conclusions of

previous chapters on a personal level. That is, the CIs and related projects leave room for various actors to endow their respective interests and goals in them, keeping the authorities in a dynamic equilibrium; it strengthens the network power of Chinese language, benefiting all members of the Chinese speaking world in general, and the Chinese government in particular, by centralising its status in the network.

## 2. Between the Rhetorical and the Real: The Making of Meanings

### 2.1 “Chinese Bridge” Competition: The Discursive Domination

It was May 2016 in Bangkok, in the auditorium of a hotel downtown, around 16 Thai college students were preparing for their upcoming challenge – participating in the country level “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition. On the huge backdrop of the stage, the theme of the competition “Dream Enlightens the Future” was featured at the centre; and the organisers, including the Higher Education Commission of the Thai Ministry of Education, the Chinese Embassy and Hanban’s Representative Office were listed at the corner. The emcee introduced the judges and VIPs, and invited the assistant to Secretary-General of the Higher Education Commission to give her opening speech. She delivered the speech in Thai, with consecutive interpretation in Chinese. Praising Thai students’ performance in last year’s “Chinese Bridge” Competition, she encouraged this year’s candidates to take this opportunity to “polish their language skills” and “bring honour to Thailand”. Then the emcee announced the schedule. There were two parts to this competition. In the first half, the candidates would give their prepared speeches, followed by answering a set of quiz questions on China, Chinese culture and language. An additional topic was then given to them, on

which they need to improvise another speech. After finishing the speeches, the candidates would proceed to demonstrate their “talents (*caiyi*)” during the second half of the contest. The top three winners would go to China, with the first two representing Thailand in the following rounds of competition held in China and broadcasted on TV to the entire nation, and the third observing at the scene.

This competition was juried by a team of professors and experienced teachers, mostly Hanban dispatched directors of Confucius Institutes. Off the stage, more than a hundred students, mostly majoring in Chinese, were watching the competition. Some had participated before; and some hoping to do so in the future. For the rest, it still seemed to be a good opportunity to put their learning to use. During the intermissions of the contest, there would be interactive quiz sessions for the audience. A prize – such as a stuffed toy panda, a Chinese knot, and a folding fan – would be awarded to whoever got the answer right. The co-organisers provided more than a symbolic gracing to the event. Some food and drinks were also provided. The Chinese embassy sponsored buffet lunch for the candidates, judges and working staff; while the Higher Education Commission prepared snacks for the audience.

Then the first candidate delivered her speech titled “My China Dream”; and I translated the body part as follows.

I like China, so I want to learn Chinese well. My China dream is to study hard, and represent Thailand to develop a friendly relation with China, helping Thai people to understand China, and Chinese people understand Thailand. The China I know is colourful. It is red, as it is the colour of China’s national flag,

representing the enthusiasm of the Chinese people. The traditional architectures in China are mostly red as well. The Forbidden City I saw on television is red; and Chinese people like the colour. China is yellow, as there are yellow stars on the national flag. The skin of Chinese people is also yellow; Huangtu Plateau is yellow; as well as the Emperor's clothing. China is blue, as China has vast blue seas. China is green, as there are many trees decorating China green. My China dream is firstly to visit China by myself and see how the life is like there – see the perfect combination of tradition and modernity in Beijing, see the confidence and charm of the Free Trade Zone in Shanghai; and secondly to make myself a competent person, contributing to the friendly relations between Thailand and China.<sup>358</sup>

Without any first-hand experience with the country, our first candidate described a China represented by the national flag, Forbidden City and emperor, Beijing and Shanghai, which constituted an abstract, yet positive Chinese image excerpted from the media. It was not entirely a reiteration of the Chinese official narrations, as the red colour represents “revolution” according to the official explanation.<sup>359</sup> Nevertheless, the “enthusiasm of the Chinese people” was not a deviation from the government's preference; and the “perfect combination of

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<sup>358</sup> Fieldwork in Bangkok, May 10, 2016

<sup>359</sup> “zhonghua renmin gongheguo guoqi 中华人民共和国国旗 [the national flag of the People's Republic of China]”, *The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*, accessed February 1, 2018, [http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-05/24/content\\_18247.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-05/24/content_18247.htm)

tradition and modernity” and the “charming Free Trade Zone” were indeed directly borrowed from the official self-portrait.

The wording of this speech revealed that it was co-produced by the candidate and her teacher from China. Normally, the students capable of writing their own scripts would draft one first for the Chinese volunteers to revise; otherwise, the volunteers may directly compose the whole script for students to recite. In either case, the speeches often appear ostentatious, sometimes alienated from the students’ actual experiences. For example, a student majoring in traditional Chinese medicine said that as a child, she was influenced by a “long-bearded sage-like elderly who used to heal people with Chinese medicine” to take her current path; but in fact, before college, she knew nothing about Chinese medicine except for having the impression of “an old man pouring black liquid”. Similarly, Chinese tourists asking for directions would hardly carry Chinese knots with them to distribute to the Thai student who was unable to understand their questions, but the speech simply conveyed this unrealistic stereotype. Speaking Chinese as a foreign language, the candidates would not necessarily feel the strangeness of this alienation between experience and expressions; in addition, the cultural and political clichés were so prevalent that the speech seemed inadequate without them – everybody “would like to be the envoy of Sino-Thai friendship”; some would like “to be a tour guide in China, taking my clients to see the beautiful landscapes and tasting the good foods”; others would “dream of studying in China, learning about the five thousand years of civilisation together with friends from across the world; dream of travelling all around China, enjoying the magnificent sceneries; and dream of speaking at the podium, telling the student my experiences in China.”

Landscapes, foods and long civilisation indeed are features of China. But there lacked personal perspectives in narrating these cultural symbols, let alone interpreting them – landscape was always “beautiful and magnificent”, food always “tasty”, and the civilisation undoubtedly attributed as “five thousand years”. As for Sino-Thai relations, a glorified historical memory of harmony, tolerance and integration was highlighted for future reference, neglecting how Chinese became a foreign language in the first place.<sup>360</sup> There are in fact various and multifaceted descriptions of Sino-Thai relations and perceptions of China held by Thai people. They may admire China’s economic development and domestic governance, and generally accept the Sino-Thai brotherhood metaphor, but still have reservations about China’s foreign policies, people’s behaviours and attitudes towards life.<sup>361</sup> Yet in the competition, all the expressions by Thai students automatically aligned with the Chinese official lexicon, losing any trace of the imprints from the Thai society.

It was not because that the teachers and students were specifically required to do so by either government. The tacit understanding between them was that as “insiders”, the Chinese volunteer teachers should know what was preferred by the judges and Hanban, be it on how to describe China or its relation with Thailand, and should help to polish the scripts accordingly so as to secure a good mark for the candidate. Consequently, the official discourses and cultural stereotypes became what all speeches had in common, produced by the volunteer

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<sup>360</sup> See Chapter Three, Section 3.2

<sup>361</sup> Xizhen Zhang, “Zhongtai Guanxi Jinkuang Yu Taiguo Shehui Yanhua Qingxu 中泰关系近况与泰国社会厌华情绪 [Sino-Thai Relationship Status and Negative Responses Towards China in Thai Society],” *Southeast Asian Studies*, no. 3 (2016): 22–27; Xizhen Zhang, “Dangqian Taiguoren de Zhongguo Guan 当前泰国人的中国观 [Thailander’s Outlook on China],” *Southeast Asian Studies*, no. 6 (2007): 58–62.

teachers for the Hanban judges; and the Thai students simply acted as the messengers by reciting the sanctioned scripts word by word – they were neither the main producer, nor, in effect, the intended audience of those discourses.

Only when the students were delivering the improvised speeches would their personal perspectives get exposed together with their real language proficiency. The topics of the improvised speeches focused more on concrete experiences, such as “a book that impressed me”, “a person that is important to me”, “a song that I like” and so on. Under pressure to deliver the speech without much time to prepare or any help from their teachers, students would resort to the stories and the lexicon that they were most familiar with. When talking about their favourite book, Thai students love to use the example of “สามก๊ก (*Sam Kok*)”,<sup>362</sup> i.e. the “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”, one of the “four great classical novels” of Chinese literature. Yet despite being a commonly used label of Chinese culture, the popularity of this novel in Thailand can hardly be attributed to Hanban and its culture promotion projects. First translated in Siam at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *Sam Kok* that the Thai students knew about was already a “thoroughly indigenised” Thai version passed on as part of the local literature since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>363</sup> In other words, they got to know it not because of learning Chinese language or having CIs on campus, but because they were Thais. In addition, ambiguous cultural symbols passed on as residuals of ethnic Chinese identity were also getting highlighted, such as stories of grandparents

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<sup>362</sup> In Chinese, it is 三國 *sanguo*, the Thai pronunciation is very close to that of Chinese. I use Thai here because that is the version the students are actually talking about.

<sup>363</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, “Tycoons and Warlords: Modern Thai Social Formations and Chinese Historical Romance,” in *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, ed. Anthony Reid and Kristine Alilunas-Rodgers, 2001st ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 116.

telling them about their Chineseness made them become interested Chinese language and culture. Yet my personal contact with them beyond the stage settings would reveal that the significance of those cultural traits was exaggerated, which will be discussed in more details later.

A disparity existed between the prepared speeches and the improvised ones, in terms of the language proficiency demonstrated, words used, and stories told. The former appeared all the more detached from students' lives compared with the latter. Although in the context of competition, the improvised speeches were not necessarily honest, it was still when the candidates started to produce their own discourses and “talked” about their own lives, rather than “reciting” what had been prepared for them.

What needed to be memorised was more than the prepared speech though. For the quiz questions, not a single right answer should be missed if the student aimed at the top three positions in the country level competition. There is an item bank of the questions made available on Hanban website before the contest, which means that the students could have recited all answers – many of them actually did. There were three types of questions, on language usage, Chinese culture and society respectively. Some examples of the last two categories were translated as follows.<sup>364</sup>

- 1) China has 34 provincial level administrative region,  
including 23 provinces, \_\_\_ autonomous regions, \_\_\_ Direct-  
controlled municipalities, \_\_\_ SARs (5,4,2)
- 2) China has a land area of \_\_\_ km<sup>2</sup> (9600,000)

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<sup>364</sup> The full item bank for 2016 is available at: Confucius Institute Online, “Chinese Bridge-Downloads,” accessed July 24, 2017, <http://bridge.chinese.cn/c15/70.html>.

- 3) "Belt and Road Initiative" is the abbreviation for "The Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st-century \_\_\_\_\_" (Maritime Silk Road)
- 4) The 29th Summer Olympic Games opened in \_\_\_\_, China on August 8, 2008. It was the first time that China hosted the Olympic Games. The slogan of the Olympic Games was "One World, One Dream". (Beijing)
- 5) "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" "Journey to the West", "Water Margin" and \_\_\_\_\_ are collectively known as the "four great classical novels". (Dream of the Red Chamber)
- 6) China is one of the ancient civilizations in the world, and the "four great inventions" show the splendid science and technological achievements of ancient China. Please name the four inventions. (Compass, Gunpowder, Papermaking, Printing)
- 7) Please name 5 ethnic minority autonomous regions in China (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region)
- 8) "Belt and Road Initiative" is "the Silk Road Economic Belt" and "the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road" for short. It fully relies on the existing bilateral and multilateral mechanism between China and relevant countries, proactively develops the economic partnership with them,

and creates together with them a community of common interest, common destiny and common responsibility that is politically mutually trusted, economically integrated and culturally inclusive. True or False? (True)

9) Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a multilateral financial institution initiated by China, with 57 Prospective Founding Members. Its headquarters is in Shanghai. True or False? (True)

10) China is the first country to help Africa fight against Ebola Virus. The Chinese Ebola Diagnostic and Treatment Centre is the only Ebola treatment centre in the epidemic area that is built and operated independently by a single country. True or False? (True)

Used in all competitions held overseas, these questions outlined an image of China that the government wanted the international community to receive, an economic powerhouse that is trustworthy, responsible and willing to contribute to world peace and development.<sup>365</sup> For example, the above Question 3, 4 and 8 to 10 not only conveyed such an image, but normalised it as a “fact” along with other “knowledge” about the ancient and modern China – the Taiwan issue is absorbed in Q1 and 2, Tibet and Xinjiang in Q7, and China’s ancient yet vibrant culture is depicted by questions on the classical literature (Q5), great inventions (Q6), traditional medicine and many others on operas, customs, urban lives, science and technological achievements not listed here.

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<sup>365</sup> See also d’Hooghe’s summary of China’s public diplomacy goals. D’Hooghe, “The Expansion of China’s Public Diplomacy System,” 24.

My point is not to dispute these narrations per se. Like many other stories believed to be true by the Chinese people and often told by Hanban dispatched teachers in class, they constitute “partial pictures of history and culture presented from a particular point of view.”<sup>366</sup> Every country needs a set of legitimised stories to function; and it is only natural for Chinese government to present an idealised image of itself whenever possible. What should be noted is that using quiz questions to present an official image may have more subtle implications than using other means, such as setting themes for the Competition. Despite legitimising those government endorsed narratives and shaping candidates’ expressions accordingly, the speeches normalised a gap between what was publicly said and what was actually perceived. In other words, it was not difficult for the students to distinguish the rhetoric from reality when delivering their speeches. However, with a single “correct” answer waiting to be identified in the quiz questions, discourses were thus made into knowledge, blurring the boundaries between narratives and facts. Meanwhile, unlike the classroom settings where the production of knowledge may be subjected to the administrative and professional authorities from different sources, Hanban was the sole actor defining and demonstrating knowledge about China here.

Nevertheless, in Thailand, the pervasive discursive domination had only an ambiguous influence on students’ thinking. Memorising all the answers to the quiz questions was not necessarily a process of deciphering and receiving the messages embedded in them, but could simply be associating particular numbers and words with particular questions – some students could give the answer the

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<sup>366</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 44.

very moment when a question flashed onto the screen, without even spending time to read the whole question. Off stage, I asked how they prepared for the quizzes and realised that little attention would be paid to, for example, what was actually said about the “Belt and Road Initiative” in Question 8 above; it was a process of remembering that this true or false question on the “Belt and Road Initiative” had “true” as the correct answer. Similarly, the students would hardly think of whether the figure in question 1 and 2 above actually included Taiwan, but simply remembered those numbers. There was an obvious detachment between knowing the answers and understanding their implications.

As for the interactive quiz sessions with the audience, this detachment was even more obvious. This section was a Thai special in my experience, as only in Thailand would there be a large group of audience watching the competition. Filling up the intervals and keeping the audience entertained, these questions were of the same kind as those for the candidates, but broader in content, constituting yet another intensive demonstration of an officially propagated Chinese image. Yet the focus was seldom on the questions, nor the messages embedded in them. The audience would always get the answer right, not because that they knew China so well or had spent any time reciting the answers – many Chinese volunteers were sitting among them, revealing the right answer to their students so that they could get the lovely prizes simply by raising their hands as high as possible and showing the greatest enthusiasm in participation.

Of course, compared with the small prizes for the audience, winning the competition and going to China appeared a much stronger impetus, especially for students from less well-off families. And after devoting years of learning and months of preparation, the competition then had an uncontested personal

significance for some candidates. There were relatively “objective” standards for judging their performances in speeches and quizzes; but marking the talent show could be quite subjective, rendering the competition less “fair” in the eyes of some candidates. Indeed, choosing winners from students wearing traditional Chinese costumes, dancing to the pop songs of typical “Chinese style”, singing various operas, demonstrating martial arts, traditional story-telling, calligraphy, or playing Chinese musical instruments was a tricky task. Unless with professional training, the distinction between candidates would usually be in the eye of the beholder. Yet it accounted for no less than one-third of the final scores; and losing behind in the talent show could result in missing the opportunity to go abroad. Given this context, the judging criteria for the talent show were a particularly sensitive issue to the participants, much more so than how China was depicted in speeches and quizzes.

Chris, one of the participants, demonstrated top-notch Chinese proficiency. Yet she got the second place of the second prize, missing the trip to China narrowly by one position in the ranking. Her teacher found the result hard to accept, and went to a Hanban staff for explanations. A breakdown of scores given by the judges was presented to the teacher. It turned out that Chris got a low score for the talent show, where she sang a Hokkien song without many add-ons such as fancy clothing and dancing. But her teacher thought that the ability to speak not only mandarin but some Hokkien should render her outstanding. The Hanban staff explained that mandarin performances were preferred, yet this explanation was not particularly convincing as another winner also did a *kuaiban* (a kind of oral storytelling) in Tianjin dialect. In addition, nobody ever told the teacher that dialect shows might be a disadvantage for the candidate, “We submitted our

performance title long before the contest. If you had an issue with using dialect, you should have told us so that we still had time to prepare for another show.” With no other obvious accounts for the situation, the Hanban staff finally came to admit that “what’s most important for the talent show is to create a splendid ambience (*renao*, in his original words), such as the guy singing Peking opera with full makeup and costume. Students can hardly be real professionals, but it shall still have a professional look, manifesting the devotion and attitude.” The teacher knew that the result would not be changed anyway, so she stressed that next time, they should be clearly informed of all requirements so that there would be no disputes. The staff responded with continuous nodding.

After observing several “Chinese Bridge” competitions at different levels, it became quite clear that the biggest liability in Chris’ talent show was the lack of splendour and decorative elements. Singing a Hokkien song which the judges might not fully understand in a Tai Chi style clothing was too “plain” among the “four beauties” dancing in magnificent robes and the “military generals” singing with painted faces. The preference of mandarin over dialects also presented as a factor, but it was more a handy excuse than a strict requirement. In 2017, the student who got the first place in the country level “Chinese Bridge” competition held in UK did a rap using mixed dialects.<sup>367</sup> Dialects only become a disadvantage when a tangible reference is needed for a quick marking to distinguish students demonstrating similar abilities. Unlike for quizzes and speeches, there was no specific image of China dominating the talent show, a

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<sup>367</sup> Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, “Di Shiliu Jie ‘hanyuqiao’ shijie Daxuesheng Zhongwen Bisai Quanying Daqasai Taiqian Muhou 第十六届‘汉语桥’世界大学生中文比赛全英大区赛台前幕后 [the 16th ‘Chinese Bridge’ language Proficiency Competition in UK],” last modified April 26, 2017, <http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/RR1mbtItV8M2rCIpxW49qQ>.

lively performance that was uniquely impressive would get the student an outstanding score. Yet like in quizzes and speeches, the formality appeared more important than reality. In quiz sessions, the students were not rewarded for thinking of Taiwan as part of China, but for successfully associating numbers with questions; similarly, the real appreciation of operas or a grasp of dialects was not necessarily relevant, but a dramatic appearance certainly was.

It is not only in Thailand nor just in the “Chinese Bridge” competition that the “appearance” of an event overtook what is going on beneath it. For events held in Canada, for example, Hanban would expect to see photos featuring “white” students, and also tend to use their pictures as the cover of the *Confucius Institute* magazine.<sup>368</sup> Schmidt identified that it reflected a racialised “Western Other” in China, and embodied the ideal of the Chinese side to have the foreign students “experiencing” Chinese culture emotionally. Yet by putting the Thai case and the Canadian case together, it shows that the students’ actual feelings and experience are not always relevant in Hanban’s preference for splendid attire and makeup, “creating a splendid ambience” for publicity mainly directed at the home front would be adequately satisfying for the Chinese event organisers.

At the end of the 2016 Thailand competition in Bangkok, the Culture Counsellor of the Chinese embassy gave the closing remarks. He congratulated the winners and presented the invitation letters to them for the following competitions, where a full scholarship could be won for doing degree courses in China if the students rank high among candidates from Asian countries. But for the time being, winning the country level competition was exciting enough. The winners were

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<sup>368</sup> Schmidt, “China’s Confucius Institutes and the ‘Necessary White Body,’” 654.

still taking photos on the stage after most audience left; one held her certificate and invitation letter high up while bouncing around in the auditorium, chanting “I will be going to China” – with nobody watching her, the expression of happiness and passion was more spontaneous and sincere comparing with her deliberately vivacious performance in the talent show.

Taken together, a constant gap was presented between the students’ real experiences and what was performed publicly as part of the competition. The prevalence of official narratives in the prepared speeches reflected more the views of the Chinese teachers than the thoughts of the Thai students; and what appeared to be an amazing familiarity with Chinese culture and society demonstrated by Thai students in the quiz sessions was also a reflection of their techniques to deal with tests and solicit prizes. In the talent show, the point was not about how the students understood Chinese culture, but whether they understood what was expected from their performances.

Nevertheless, the existence of this gap did not hinder the Competition to fulfil both the alleged purposes of Confucius Institutes as well as the diplomatic agendas of the Chinese government, although ostensibly. On the one hand, with Thai students demonstrating their Chinese language proficiency and cultural awareness, the competition could be interpreted as an embodiment of multiculturalism and the enhanced understanding of Chinese language and culture by foreign students, fulfilling the goals specified in the first article of CIs’ constitution; on the other hand, to the Chinese authority, it also appeared to be money well spent – not only that the foreign students had demonstrated a good grasp of government-produced knowledge about China, the domestic audience

could also be impressed by China's "soft power" influence overseas through watching TV shows featuring the winners.

This ostensible fulfilment of alleged purposes on both fronts simultaneously contributed to the maintenance of equilibrium between the Thai and Chinese authorities, as well as the reinforcement of China's discursive domination. The Thai authority saw the competition as an opportunity whereby both the personal benefits for students and the symbolic capital for Thailand could be harvested, as the opening speech given by the Thai official stated; and the Chinese side exerted authority in shaping the discursive content of the competition and defining what a winner should be like. In taking part in the competition, Thai students contributed to the reproduction of this transnational engagement by formally satisfying the intentions of both sides; and in telling stories and answering quiz questions as the Chinese side preferred, the public expressions of Thai students reinforced China's discursive domination.

Beyond Thailand in 2016, there are hundreds of thousands of high school and college students worldwide taking part in the competition every year. According to Hanban/CIH's annual report, around 160,000 students from 115 countries participated in 2016; more than 100,000 students from 115 countries in 2015; 100,000 from 106 countries in 2014; and 70,000 plus students from 103 countries in 2013.<sup>369</sup> All of them would give speeches of the same theme, be exposed to the same set of quiz questions, and perform Chinese culture in "familiar Orientalist tropes".<sup>370</sup> Not all candidates would bother memorising speeches and quizzes, those in Thailand's country level competition were the more determined.

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<sup>369</sup> For the reports, see <http://www.hanban.edu.cn/report/>

<sup>370</sup> Schmidt, "China's Confucius Institutes and the 'Necessary White Body'," 647

Yet their participation makes an indispensable contribution to the maintenance of dynamic equilibrium in CIs worldwide, as it is an uncompromisable expectation on the Chinese side to have this event implemented. In a CI where the annual “Chinese Bridge” Competition had never attracted more than ten participants, the volunteers found this event a huge pressure and a point of controversy with Hanban. “We have tried everything. Sending emails and newsletters to the entire university; putting advertisements on newspapers; asking previous participants to bring their friends; offering handsome cash prizes to the winners... yet we couldn’t attract many participants. And you know, Hanban would not listen to these explanations, they sponsored this ‘Branded Project’ and only asks for results.”<sup>371</sup> The popularity of this event may vary between countries, but the basic components of speeches, quizzes and talent shows are the same. So long as implemented, they in effect constitute a site for demonstrating Hanban’s discursive domination.

However, to what extent these formal achievements produced real impacts is questionable. Just like “song and dance multiculturalism” does not mean a real cross-cultural understanding,<sup>372</sup> the domination of Chinese discourses in the competition setting tells us little about what the Thai students are thinking. It would be an oversimplification and exaggeration to conclude a Chinese propaganda victory in Thailand and even worldwide based on what gets performed during the competition, not only for its limited visibility – in Thailand, no local media was at the scene and the only publicity this event was ever going to get would be the news reports written by Hanban personnel and posted online,

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<sup>371</sup> Interview in Shanghai, December 6, 2015

<sup>372</sup> Schmidt, “China’s Confucius Institutes and the ‘Necessary White Body’,” 664

without drawing attention from the general public. More importantly, the gap between students' performances and their experiences has already illustrated the nuances in their actions – participating in the competition was in fact not a process of getting exposed to the official discourses and accept them, but an instrumental action leading to something else, be it going abroad or getting a stuffed panda. The significance was never in the competition per se nor the messages, but what can be obtained from playing by the rules. Only instrumentally engaged in the process, it turned out that they were not the primary audience of the discourses produced anymore.

To summarise, by participating in the “Chinese Bridge” competition, students were contributing to the reproduction of transnational engagement between Hanban and its global partners. Through exerting discursive authority in the competition, Hanban did manage to shape the students' public expressions, which in turn contributed to China's discursive domination. Nevertheless, this domination was only effective within the competition settings, and is more an appearance created by and for the Chinese than a reflection of China's soft power achievements. Lo and Pan were quite right in pointing out that “China has emphasised resource provision rather than creating ... intended outcomes”, and that the “means (resource and strategies) tend to baffle the ends (intended outcomes)”.<sup>373</sup>

## 2.2 Behind the Scenes: The “China Dream”

The question then follows, why the Thai students seemed so devoted to the idea of going to China? Does it imply Hanban's success in influencing students'

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<sup>373</sup> Lo and Pan, “Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power: Practices and Paradoxes,” 525.

subjectivity after all? Back to May 2016 Bangkok, in the hotel where the country level “Chinese Bridge” competition just ended, candidates, teachers and working staff were having buffet lunch. Chris, the girl who missed the air tickets to China not because of her language proficiency, seemed a bit down, with only fruits on her plate. “I do not have much appetite”, she said. On another table across the hall, the winners were still taking photos holding certificates. Comparing with the high spirits meters away, our table was much quieter. Chris’ teacher, Ms Wei, tried to console Chris – and maybe herself as well – “No worries, we still have another opportunity! This year we are lucky to have an additional competition organised by the Chinese embassy; you still got into that. Just now the Hanban staff said the Embassy would provide even better prizes; and there will be media at the event. The ambassador is coming, unlike this one where the counsellor only showed up at the end – and his main purpose was to announce the Embassy’s event.” Chris already knew about the upcoming competition of course; she did not respond, simply nodded and ate her fruits.

Ms Wei comes from China and is employed by the Thai university. Not paid by Hanban yet finding her professional value in helping students getting good results in various competitions mostly organised by the Chinese side, she has a good record in sending students to China through the “Chinese Bridge” competition. This year was a disappointment. “We shall go with poetry declamation for the Embassy competition then ... should have done so this time if they have said that dialects won’t do. Southeast Asian [Chinese] communities loved Hokkien songs; they [the judges] were unable to appreciate it.” Ms Wei was mostly talking to herself. With Chris, the other Thai Chinese teacher, Ms Waan, and another

student, Wendy, sliding their mobile phones or eating quietly, I was the only one exchanging eye contact with her.

After spending so many years in Thailand and other countries, Ms Wei still follows closely the logic of Chinese administrative system and keeps a high sensitivity on their preferences, which gives her authority in training local students to achieve in the administrative system and cultural context of China. Partly trying to come to terms with the disappointment just now, she quickly identified that the upcoming competition was more important to the Embassy than the “Chinese Bridge”, as there would be media and the ambassador showing up, with better material prizes offered. Yet she seemed to be the only one making sense of these symbolic capitals. During the entire meal, nobody echoed her comments on the significance of the upcoming event. Chris showed determination in trying again, not surprisingly; and the other two would not come along – it was some 800 kilometres from their homes to Bangkok, and would take more than ten hours in a van to get here.

After lunch, they went for a half-day leisure trip in Bangkok. Chris got happier buying souvenirs for her younger sister and friends back home; and we chatted more about her life. Born to a father of Taiwanese descent and a Thai mother, she grew up in Malaysia, which made her multilingual. She speaks not only mandarin, Thai and Malay, but also fairly good English, some Hokkien and Japanese – she has a Japanese boyfriend in university. In her stage speech, it was her Chinese heritage that destined her interests in Chinese language and culture, but the reality was far more complicated. Her parents divorced when she was in middle school, with her mom going back to Thailand, leaving Chris and a younger sister with their dad in Malaysia. She wanted to go to college, but her

dad refused to fund her. “My dad was like, why a girl needs so much education, what for? But I was determined to go to college – really could not give up the thought of having a higher education degree. Then I called my mom; she said, ‘then come to Thailand, I will fund you, bring your sis as well.’ I was not sure how much money she actually had; but was so grateful that she offered. And my grandpa...he was so nice to me. He gave me all he had to cover my tuitions.”

With no idea what to study, her language ability led her into the Chinese medicine major. “I had not even heard of acupuncture before; but now I think this major suits me, although mom wants me to study accounting. People say that Chinese medicine is getting popular in the US, I want to go and see if I can make more money there.” Then she asked about my experiences, and started to ask me various questions about the “western world”. I wondered why the same level of interest was not devoted to China. I asked, “Have you been to China before?” “No”, she replied. “Do you want to?” “Of course!”, she said, “and I also want to go to Taiwan, US, Japan and Europe! I only went to Singapore once when I was very young.”

Our conversation in Siam Square One that afternoon was more like friends chatting about each other’s life. I talked as much as she did, telling her almost everything I know about Europe and US, and even Japan and Taiwan. She is so curious about the outside world, like many young people of her age; and her foreign friends on campus are her major source of information. She is lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the outside world through college education and the contacts this experience has brought about, but not lucky enough to have parents who can send her abroad for education or travel – she has to earn her own opportunity. The “Chinese Bridge” Competition then became a gateway towards

that imagined world. The door opens annually; and all she needs to do is racing to the top. It is not China in particular that she wants to go, only the Chinese government provides a channel visible to her on campus, and one that she is more capable of utilising comparing with other Thai students.

“Why did you choose to sing a Hokkien song over the poetry declamation this time?” I asked. “I spent most of my time preparing the speech and quiz. Hokkien song was not too hard, and I won’t feel too nervous on stage.” Mandarin, English and Thai are the languages she most frequently uses with family and friends. And although Hokkien is in her comfort zone, belonging to the Chinese linguistic family does not lead to any special feelings towards China – unlike what she has claimed on stage. Rather, she is eager to anchor herself in Thailand. She only got the Thai identity card not long ago, and was yet to change the passport, for which she needed to go back Malaysia briefly with her sister. “I am a bit worried that dad may not let us go back to Thailand.” I did not know what to say, except for offering all my best wishes, “I’m sure I will see you again in Bangkok when you come for the Embassy’s competition, I will be there cheering for you.”

They took a van leaving Bangkok for home that night, arriving next morning. In the following days, I watched Chris “checked-in” at the airport on Facebook; and a few days later, she posted the following status, in English.

In Malaysia, I never experienced worrying about where to get money for school, but I’ve always felt that something is missing in my heart. I was born there and lived for almost 20 years; yet I still feel nervous, alienated and suffocated. Something is pushing me out of balance. Everything looks

familiar, but also strange. Unfortunately, I never felt at home here.

In Thailand, I have problems paying for tuition fee, but I am not afraid. With my beloved family, I can confront any challenge and have them conquered. I have many like-minded friends with whom to share my feelings and experiences. I can do anything I want with those crazy and lovely Americans, Japanese and Chinese. I learnt many things from them. Most importantly, I am happy.

Thailand, I miss you. Cannot wait to go back home.<sup>374</sup>

I met Chris and Ms Wei again two months later in Bangkok, when they came for the Embassy's contest. She got the third prize, missing the go-China opportunity again. But it did not seem to bother her too much. For one thing, this event was not as significant as the "Chinese Bridge" to her, whatever Ms Wei may have to say; in addition, she was preoccupied with something else. Her beloved grandpa passed away the day she performed on stage. "I was telling him that I'd bring my certificate back home for him, and he smiled..." A few days later, her Facebook status changed to "*huohua le*" (cremated).

What made Chris into the "Chinese Bridge" competition was her curiosity about the world and ambition to embrace it. Her Chinese heritage gave her an edge, not a reason, to get on stage. Admittedly, ethnic identity could be a rather fluid experience in life and may unconsciously influence people's behaviour. Using Chinese as one of her de facto mother tongues, Chris identifies herself as “ลูกครึ่ง

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<sup>374</sup> This is a rephrased version of the original post, so as to protect the informant's identity.

(lûuk khrâŋ, literally, half-child, means mixed race)”. The potential to go to China was one of the excitements unfolding in front of her when pursuing a college education. And capitalising on her heritage to grasp this opportunity constitutes, to a certain extent, a negotiation and enactment of her ethnic identity as half-Chinese. Yet, being Chinese is not the rationale for her action. It is not because of her particular attachment to or interest in China that she chose to strengthen this tie by participating in the competition for a change to re-establish a connection with the ancestral homeland; rather, her participation is propelled by the enhanced visibility of China on foreign campuses as a result of government’s investment in international exchange and education. In other words, she would embrace any chance that she saw, and the Chinese government was there offering one. Instead of viewing Chris’ devotion to the “Chinese Bridge” competition as reflecting China’s soft power, it would be more accurate to see it first and foremost as a choice made out of her own vision for life; and the impact of Hanban’s project lies in proactively putting China into that vision, constituting the first step in generating any potential soft power. Yet going abroad to China is not the most important thing in Chris’ life, nor the only vision she has for future. She still has the money to go for a dining-out occasionally, and sometimes receiving gifts from her foreign friends in college. With her language ability, she has more “bridges” other than “Chinese” leading to the outside world.

Other students might not. Accompanying Chris and Ms Wei to the “Chinese Bridge” competition was another student from the Chinese department, Wendy, who was specifically brought along by Ms Waan to observe and learn about the competition, a privilege indeed. Looking quiet and shy, Wendy followed us strolling from one store to another without speaking. When others were buying

souvenirs, I stood along beside her, waiting, and I said, “Do you want anything? For family and friends?” She smiled and shook her head. “You also want to go to China?” “Yes, I really want... even just for one day!” I was a bit surprised to see her eyes suddenly lit up, and asked about her Chinese learning experience. She had a volunteer teacher that she really liked, who had gone back to China to finish her master’s degree. “I really wish to see my teacher again. She was so nice to me.”

She was not alone in having a memorable friendship with Hanban dispatched volunteers. It indeed took a voluntary spirit to be the only Chinese in a remote mountainous area in Thailand, teaching the entire school for two years, with the only social activity being taking a van to the nearby town once every other week – I met one teaching serving in northeast Thailand Sakon Nakhon Province, she joked that there were few chances to spend her allowance.<sup>375</sup> When she was about to leave, photos of her grading homework got posted on Facebook by the students, with messages written in Thai, English and Chinese, “lucky to learn Chinese together with you. Very grateful to all you gave us. Hope to see you again. Wish you all the best in work.” “You are a very, very good teacher, I hope you never forget us.”<sup>376</sup> In those cases, the volunteers were more than teachers to the local students; they also served as a precious real-life contact with the outside world.

I did not get to know more about Wendy that day. It was two weeks later when I visited their university that I finally understood her situation. She is from an extremely poor rural family, studying on university-provided scholarship. Ms Waan spoke highly of her diligence and perseverance, which was the reason that

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<sup>375</sup> Interview in Bangkok, June 2, 2016

<sup>376</sup> Rephrased to protect the informant’s identity

she brought Wendy on the Bangkok trip, to prepare her for the competition in the future. “Her parents’ home, I saw it once, did not even have a proper gate. I feel for her, I was from a poor family as well.” Ms Waan was born in Southern Thailand and got her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in China. She is also of Chinese and Thai origin; her dad is Teochew. “We grew up as Thais though. I knew nothing about Chinese culture, not even celebrated spring festival. I knew a few words of Teochew, and that was it.” She thinks Chinese is not the most difficult language to learn, especially for Thais. Her high school had a Chinese elective class, and that was where she discovered her talent. “Back then I had lost interest in studying, but then I found confidence in learning Chinese, I became a good student again; and when *Qiaoban* came to offer scholarship chances, I applied.” It is not an exaggeration to say that Chinese changed her life. Learning Chinese made her from a rural girl marginalised in school to a respectable university teacher. “I know that kid”, Ms Waan commented about Wendy, “Her biggest wish is to become a teacher in our university; it would be great if she studies in China first.” That was when the excitement in Wendy’s eyes got explained. To her, going to China symbolises the success in achieving upward social mobility that can be copied – her seniors and teachers have already done so, and she is eager to follow suit. With “Chinese Bridge” leading towards the scholarship to get a degree in China, her dream could come true.

For both Chris and Wendy, the “Chinese Bridge” competition is a pathway towards a desired life, a better future that seems to be within reach. The only difference is that Chris may be in a better position to catch various other opportunities; yet for Wendy, with limited resources at her disposal, Chinese is the only way forward. Similar cases can be seen in a documentary made by a

group of Taiwan students, featuring the Chinese high schools in northern Thailand.<sup>377</sup> With the connection with Taiwan withering away and many students still stateless, China stepped in and offered university admission and scholarship to the high school graduates. Growing up singing “San Min Chu-i” under the “Blue Sky, White Sun, and a Wholly Red Earth”, these students only thought about going to Taiwan, until the mainland passed the university offer letter onto their hands, along with a passport that can grant them international mobility – without a Thai identity card, they “will not be able to leave the 20-kilometre radius for the entire life”;<sup>378</sup> and comparing with the completely life-changing option, all declaration of political loyalty seemed lifeless. A Taiwanese teacher who had served in one northern Thai Chinese high school on alternative civilian service commented that “if they study in China and comes back, they have plenty of opportunities – even tourist guides speaking Chinese can earn up to 80,000 baht monthly (around 2,400 USD) in Bangkok; otherwise, staying at home and repeat their parents’ life is all they could ever expect.”<sup>379</sup>

To a certain extent, these Thai students all have a “China Dream”. Yet it was not the kind of dream declared in their stage speeches in the “Chinese Bridge” competition, marked by the official “soft power” narratives on the attractiveness of Chinese culture and society. Rather, it is a kind of typical “American Dream” centred on personal achievements and upward social mobility, which is not necessarily going to be realised in China – in fact, the dreams are mostly envisaged to be achieved back in Thailand. In other words, beneath the domination of official discourses, there lacks a real influence derived from

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<sup>377</sup> Chen, *Tangle* (泰北中國“結”).

<sup>378</sup> Interview in Bangkok, June 22, 2016

<sup>379</sup> Interview in Bangkok, June 22, 2016

Chinese soft power as Joseph Nye defines the word. Nonetheless, it is not to say that the Chinese government has injected all these resources overseas in vain. The fact that China now appears in the personal prospects of those foreign students is a success in itself. The significance varies between people though. For Wendy, it certainly appears life-changing; but for a Singaporean participant – who ended up winning the scholarship in the finals – he was simply there because he had nothing better to do for that summer holiday. “I found it an interesting experience, making friends with students across the globe. Maybe I will use the scholarship a few years later, if it is still valid. Need to start working first, though.”<sup>380</sup>

The difference between Wendy and the Singaporean student in their motivations to participate in Hanban’s activities is representative of a general distinction between what CI means to students in developing and developed countries. Similar to Thailand, in Kenya, scholarships offered by China are the primary reason for students to study in the Confucius Institute in Nairobi. The mandarin learnt there would not be able to equip them with the language skills necessary to get employed, but “the most practical part of the curriculum at the UONCI [University of Nairobi Confucius Institute] was to acquire enough language skills and knowledge of Chinese history and culture to perform well on assessments and Hanban-sponsored language competitions.”<sup>381</sup> Yet in the US, like in Singapore, a scholarship in China is far less significant;<sup>382</sup> and the CI activities

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<sup>380</sup> Interview in Singapore, November 23, 2016

<sup>381</sup> Wheeler, “Cultural Diplomacy, Language Planning, and the Case of the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute,” 58.

<sup>382</sup> One CI director in the US said at the CI annual conference that, “we should admit that the higher education in China is not yet so attractive to foreign [my note: US] students”. Fieldwork in Shanghai, December 2015

tended to be taken advantage of by students who were already “globally connected”.<sup>383</sup>

Rather than presenting Chinese soft power, the “Chinese Bridge” competition actually presented a channel of upward social mobility for many students in the developing countries; or an attractive gateway leading to a broader world, or simply the “icing on the cake” for those already internationally mobile. It may serve as the first step in generating soft power in Nye’s sense; yet for now, beneath the discursive domination of Hanban, it is still the life choices and resources that can be brought about by learning Chinese – i.e. the growing network power of this language – that underpin students’ participation in the competition and in CI classes. Meanwhile, students’ participation and achievement in those activities are facilitated by the presence of Hanban-dispatched teachers and China-graduated locals, whose professional and personal perspectives are already tied to the network power of Chinese language. In time, the students who have successfully crossed the “Chinese Bridge” may also join in, benefiting from the power of Chinese and working towards its reinforcement.

### 3. A Summary: Crossing the “Chinese Bridge”

Using the “Chinese Bridge” language competition as an example, this chapter offered a detailed analysis of the discourses and meanings produced by structurally embedded people seeking for empowerment. Along with the Open Day, the “Chinese Bridge” competition features as a “Branded Project” in CIs worldwide. Looking at how people are making sense of their actions in this event

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<sup>383</sup> Stambach, *Confucius and Crisis in American Universities: Culture, Capital, and Diplomacy in U.S. Public Higher Education*, 89.

would help to understand the reproduction of social relations in this joint venture, as well as its implications on the ground.

In the co-organised country level competition held in Bangkok, a gap could be observed between the publicly expressed discourses and students' experiences. The rhetorical helped to reproduce the Sino-Thai transnational engagement by formally satisfy the intentions of both sides, which simultaneously reinforced China's discursive domination. With similar components and formality, the "Chinese Bridge" competitions around the world constitute a discursive triumph of Hanban in defining what China and Chinese culture look like. Nevertheless, even in countries less hostile to Chinese discursive influence, such as Thailand, this domination has only been effective within the competition settings, created by and for the Chinese themselves.

What motivated students' participation in fact manifested the network power of Chinese language. For many in the developing countries, the "Chinese Bridge" is a gateway leading to a brighter future, an upward social mobility that is promised by the growing economic value of Chinese language. It is the vision of a better life – not the attractiveness of Chinese culture – that accounts for students' devotion and participation not only in Thailand, but also Kenya. For those who are already internationally mobile, the "Chinese Bridge" could offer them even more choices and resources in personal development. By the same token, what the "Chinese Bridge" competitions have brought to the Chinese government is not yet a strengthened soft power, but a gradually growing number of people whose interests and personal prospects are intertwined with China and Chinese language.

As a language education programme, the impact of CIs and related project on the individuals sometimes has more to do with education and language learning in general – it empowers the learners, giving them access to resources and information and expanding their life choices. As a cultural diplomacy initiative of China, its ostensible success in generating a government sanctioned image is more a product of, by and for the Chinese people themselves. However, by building the “Chinese Bridge” all over the world, it helps to strengthen the network power of Chinese language, grow the number of people who have vested interests in it, which could gradually render the Chinese government more power in shaping our shared form of social coordination, and, in turn, a structural advantage in international communication. In this sense, the students are crossing the “Chinese Bridge” for the benefit of themselves as well as the Chinese government.

## **Conclusion**

Overseas language and culture institutes were pioneered by social actors in European countries as an expression of grassroots nationalism in the late 19th century. With the hot and cold wars in the 20th century, cultural institutions became an indispensable foreign policy tool in many countries across different political camps. In 2004, China established its first Confucius Institute in Korea; and a decade later, with more than 500 Confucius Institutes and 1000 Confucius Classrooms worldwide, they now form one of the most extensive cultural networks on the international stage, and also the most controversial one.

This thesis has focused on the joint venture structure of Confucius Institutes and answered three questions, namely, on what ground is the transnational engagement based; how is it realised and sustained; and what has been produced for whose benefit? Using grounded theory approach and drawing on empirical data from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and China, this thesis offered new approaches to understanding and theorising China's biggest cultural initiative so far, contributing to the CI literature as well as the discussions on transnational and multi-stakeholder engagement in public diplomacy.

Confucius Institutes have many local variations. Yet it is a common feature across the world that the host institute invests in and benefits from CI's development. In other words, Confucius Institutes are not only a "Chinese" institute, but obtain the material and symbolic capitals from both the Chinese and the hosting sides, and accommodate potentially conflicting authorities from different countries in their administrative structures. Whereas traditionally the credibility of cultural institutes is upheld by maintaining a formal independence

from the government agencies, CIs pushed the tension between cultural diplomacy and cultural relations to a new level by making Chinese government and foreign universities partners. With the joint venture structure and multi-stakeholder engagement unprecedented among its foreign counterparts and predecessors, CIs have raised new questions to the old practice of cultural diplomacy through language education.

On the one hand, the joint venture structure seems to be reflecting the cutting-edge trends in public diplomacy. Facing the power dispersion brought about by the technological underpinnings of globalisation, states as “power containers” are leaking; and social forces, this time boosted by broader and easier transnational connections, are shaping not only how states realise their interests, but what constitutes those interests in the first place. In public and cultural diplomacy literature, it has been increasingly recognised that relational strategies and transnational engagement are becoming the core imperatives; and national interests shall be served by going beyond it. On the other hand, CIs are initiated by the Chinese government to address its image problem which appears more salient in the context of China’s rise. With a state centric view of public diplomacy and the emphasis on top-down information control, Confucius Institutes can hardly escape being criticised as a tool of propaganda and censorship extended overseas.

A gap is presented between the state centric view on CIs, emphasising them as both a product and resolution of the problems encountered in China’s rise (i.e., the “China rising” perspective); and the relational approach to CIs, highlighting its global network structure and synergy (the “global connectivity” perspective). The former is the mainstream in the CI literature. Even when they are called

“network”, it is in the sense of “a network of Chinese influence”, rather than “a network of transnational relations”, that scholars are using this word. However, neither the state centric nor the relational approach has adequately reflected what is going on in Confucius Institutes. The former overlooked joint venture structure as the defining feature of CIs, whereas the latter underestimated Chinese government’s influence in steering and shaping this collaborative project. With Chinese government being a prominent actor, CIs nevertheless embraced a relational approach in transnational multi-stakeholder engagement; with the collaborating parties having not-necessarily-compatible goals and interests, the transnational engagement nevertheless got sustained. To understand this phenomenon, we shall re-evaluate the basis of this collaboration and focus on the process of interaction between various actors, so that the product of it can then be understood.

Firstly, on what ground is the CI joint venture based? While China’s soft power ambition is not the concern of CIs’ global partners, what binds them together? Chapter Three went beyond the dominant discourse in American society and suggested that the power of language itself is underpinning the global CI network. Confucius Institutes and their activities have created a transnational social space mediated by the Chinese language where people, goods and information get circulated, strengthening the “network power” of Chinese language – increasing its value by promoting it as the medium through which communications are carried out, and around which human and material resources concentrate.

Using English as an example, we see that the network power of a language can be deliberately pursued; its structural domination reproduces itself through the decentralised choices made by individual learners; and it empowers the learners

and benefits the speakers, but also give certain actors on the linguistic network, for example the standard setters, a structural advantage. In the case of Chinese, the history of language nationalisation and international dissemination in the 20th century provides the context for us to understand the formation of Hanban and the introduction of the “Chinese Bridge” Project, where Confucius Institutes are but one item on the list. China’s economic development provided the incentive for the international society to join the Chinese network; and Hanban, with its “Chinese Bridge” Project, came to provide the means. TCSL in China evolved from a preliminary work in ideological struggle to a professional field, and then from a national cause to an international collaborative pursuit under the new label of TCSOL. Making Chinese a stronger language is the common interest shared by all actors on the Chinese linguistic network, and also the common denominator of Confucius Institutes worldwide.

Meanwhile, the network power of Chinese renders the Chinese government a structural advantage in shaping the teaching and learning of this language worldwide and helps to make its discourses and cultural products potentially more prominent and influential. If successfully cultivated, it will draw various kinds of resources towards the Chinese speaking world while making it bigger, bringing the Chinese government more benefits than merely soft power. However, comparing with that of English, the network power of Chinese is still in the making.

The network power of language can also conceptually bridge the gap between the “China rising” and “global connectivity” perspectives in viewing the CIs. Confucius Institutes are neither an ideal type of the connective mindshift in new public diplomacy nor a tool of the nation-state in the conventional sense. The

network power of language renders the CI hosts more capability to further their respective interests, and gives China an advantage in shaping those interests and how to realise them. It is a common instrumental pursuit and an empowerment sought after by the CI partners, making it possible to reconcile different authorities in the collaboration. Of course, finding common ground does not mean the end of competition and disputes, which leads to the second question, how this partnership is maintained?

What is the mechanism whereby Hanban/CIH and its partners negotiate a workable relation so as to sustain this transnational collaboration on a global scale? Chapter Four proposed the concept of “dynamic equilibrium” to explain the process of multi-stakeholder engagement in the CI project, addressing an underdeveloped literature on relation building in public diplomacy. Dynamic equilibrium means a condition of balance maintained through a dynamic process of negotiation between the cooperating parties on what they want from the CI and from each other. There needs not to be a perfect match of expectation and result every time, rather, the balance is struck through a continuous adjustment of expectation and action over time, where the interests and priorities of oneself are discovered and defined through the interaction with others. Sharing the instrumental goal of strengthening the network power of Chinese language yet without a higher authority of control over each other, the collaborating parties in CIs are engaged by a constant searching of equilibrium in exerting professional, administrative and discursive authority.

The equilibrium in professional authority is generally easier to establish if the host institutes have only limited resources in TCSOL, and rely on the Chinese side to keep the classes going. Nevertheless, even a national level structural

reliance as in Thailand is not a safeguard to having equilibrium in professional authority in each case. Whether it is because that the local teachers are expecting more authority, or that the Chinese teachers are expecting a deeper integration, the need to accommodate the changing anticipations will push the collaboration towards finding new balances. A good learning outcome is often the benchmark for a satisfactory reconciliation.

The equilibrium in administrative authority requires accommodating different management systems. There are four sites of interaction influencing the search for equilibrium in managing CIs – that between two governments as the background, determining whether CIs are to be curbed, tolerated, or promoted; between two partner institutes as the foreground, reconciling the expectations of not only the two institutes, but also their respective management systems by pushing boundaries; between Hanban and the Chinese partner universities and personnel, providing training, regulation and awards as a complete loop of administrative control that promotes Hanban's vision for the CIs; and between Hanban and the hosting institutes, presenting institutionalised and informal mechanisms of negotiation that lets off steam, provides hopes and prevents the worst imbalance from happening, although not always successfully.

The equilibrium in discursive authority is based on alienating the more critical opinions on China, but mostly not through outright propaganda and censorship. Hanban does not control the production of all discourses, nor is it able to eliminate unwanted ones, but it gives more exposure to and helps to bring together those neutral and more favourable opinions; it does not necessarily put pressure on the teachers to say good things about China, but relies more on their already formed subjectivities as Chinese citizens; it does not only present

discourses in China's interests, but can jointly present those preferred by the hosting side as well.

These domains of authority are interrelated; and what is constant in searching for equilibrium across these domains is the creation of a middle ground. With the expectations of the hosts varying from case to case, the creation of middle grounds will have different manifestations even within a country. With the room to adjust hopes and expectations, temporary imbalances will hardly threaten the overall resilience of this global network. Only when expectations fail to be met continuously, or the confidence of having them realised is lost, will the partnership consequently be in crisis, if not coming to an end.

Yet what is not explained by the process of transnational engagement is its products. It leads to the third question – while the cooperating partners are striving to get their interests defined and expectations met through constant negotiation, in keeping the collaboration going, who gets the benefits? Using the “Chinese Bridge” language competition as an example, Chapter Five offered a detailed analysis of the production of discourses and meanings in the transnational social space created by Hanban's projects.

In the co-organised country level competition held in Bangkok, a gap could be observed between the publicly expressed discourses (“the rhetorical”) and students' experiences (“the real”). On the one hand, the rhetorical helped to reproduce the Sino-Thai transnational engagement by formally satisfy the intentions of both sides, which simultaneously reinforced China's discursive domination. On the other hand, the real indicates that this ostensible success in generating a government sanctioned China image is more a product of, by and

for the Chinese people themselves. What motivated students' participation in fact manifested the network power of Chinese language. It is the prospects for upward social mobility and better international mobility associated with the language, not the attractiveness of Chinese culture, political system and foreign policies, that account for students' participation in CIs' activities. By the same token, what has been brought to the Chinese government is not yet a strengthened soft power, but the gradually growing number of people whose interests and personal prospects are intertwined with China and the Chinese language.

Anchoring the main line of narration in one competition in Thailand, comparisons were drawn within the country and beyond. Chapter Five has illustrated how dynamic equilibrium and transnational social relations are reproduced through the functioning of human agency, and explained on a personal level why it is the network power of Chinese language, rather than the soft power of China, that motivates the formation of this transnational space.

Taken together, this thesis has demonstrated the process of structuring in Confucius Institutes. Based on a shared instrumental pursuit for the network power of Chinese language, the multi-stakeholder transnational engagement is maintained through a "dynamic equilibrium" reconciling different authorities and reproduced by structurally embedded people seeking for empowerment. Confucius Institutes embody the substantive complexity when public diplomacy embraces transnational collaboration – initiated for a national purpose, but the Chinese government cannot dictate the rules and norms of coordination; empowering all stakeholders, but the government still has an advantage in steering its development as the predominant resource provider.

History has demonstrated that nationalism and internationalism, power politics and cultural relations are not complete opposites.<sup>384</sup> Their interaction produces the reality within which people make decisions and take actions. The global CI network is thus a dynamic process co-produced by various stakeholders through interaction, rather than a static design by the Chinese government in advance. In a transnationally formed social space where the sovereignty-based rules are no longer applicable, it is often through setting the forms of coordination that power is exerted, and social structures formed.

This thesis went beyond the dominant perspectives and themes in the CI literature, offered a contextualised description and a preliminary theorisation of the hitherto not fully addressed yet crucially important issues in the global CI network. However, there are also obvious limitations. Firstly, for Chapter Five, it is a pity that I did not have time to follow the “Chinese Bridge” competition in Malaysia. Although comparisons were drawn with primary data obtained in Singapore and literature on other countries, it would make the argument more robust if the Malaysian case could be incorporated.

Secondly, the arguments are arranged in a way that somewhat blurred the cross-country comparisons. Although an outline of comparison has been laid out in Chapter Two, variations of social contexts are given in relevant sections in Chapter Three and Four, and a general contrast between developing and developed countries mentioned in Chapter Five, the flow of the thesis does not prioritise the cross-country comparative perspective. Following the grounded theory approach, it has been observed that national contexts are important, but

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<sup>384</sup> Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 15.

not solely determinative for the transnational cooperation. In order to do justice to the variation within a country, it was on individual CI that my analysis was based. A future research direction would be to incorporate more cases across different countries, and then further elaboration on the weightage of different factors mentioned in Chapter Four (e.g. national context, hosting institute's resources in language teaching, key persons, etc.). In this way, the cross-country comparison could be better illustrated.

Thirdly, Confucius Institutes are but one mechanism in China's public diplomacy constellation. As mentioned in Chapter Four, it works together with the China scholarship Council, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAC, *Qiaoban*), and other branches of government. The relations between these government branches is an interesting and important topic influencing the efficacy of China's global public opinion campaign. In particular, there are some tension between Hanban and OCAC, because overseas language education is a core mandate of the latter.<sup>385</sup> While OCAC targets specifically the ethnic Chinese, Hanban is said to be focusing on the non-Chinese; but in practices, it is impossible to selected participants based on their ethnicity. The most important difference is that the ethnic identification and ancestral belonging are not targeted at or capitalised on by Hanban at a policy level. In places like Malaysia, there is a relatively clear demarcation between the working areas of the two, with Qiaoban targeting the Chinese-medium schools run by the local Chinese communities, and Hanban managing CIs in universities. But in countries where Chinese is in effect taught as a foreign language to even the Chinese community, competition would be

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<sup>385</sup> For how Qiaoban is related to China's foreign policy, see Hong Liu and Els van Dongen, "China's Diaspora Policies as a New Mode of Transnational Governance," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 102 (2016): 805–21.

unavoidable. However, I did not include much information on this matter because firstly, this would warrant another paper or even thesis to address fully this issue; and secondly, I did not manage to get information directly from Qiaoban. With only accounts from people dispatched by Hanban, I was unable to draw a balanced picture. Nevertheless, this lack of information will not invalidate my general conclusion. There are many local teachers working in CI who used to study in China with Qiaoban's support, while their students are now offered scholarships by Hanban. Despite internal frictions, the power of language is not negated by the problem of politics. By building the "Chinese Bridge" all over the world, it helps to strengthen the network power of Chinese language, grow the number of people who have vested interests in it, which could gradually render the Chinese government more power in shaping our shared form of social coordination, and, in turn, a structural advantage in international communication.

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