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Confucius Institutes and China’s soft power: practices and paradoxes

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Since China’s implementation of the Confucius Institute (CI) project in 2004, most academic works have been written on its objectives, nature, features, development, problems and challenges, especially in terms of soft power projection. Though some of them could unravel the tensions and paradoxes in the CI project, there is a paucity of in-depth and focused analysis on the related issues with a more systematic framework. Utilising Tellis et al.’s tripartite taxonomy approach to power – resources, strategies and outcomes – and integrating it with Nye’s tripartite approach to exercising power – coercion, inducement and attraction – this paper aims to fill this research gap. The findings can shed light on the tensions and paradoxes in China’s development of soft power by providing a more systematic and integrated framework for analysing the dilemmas and predicaments in the exercise of its power strategies in the global age.

Keywords: Confucius Institutes; comprehensive national power; cultural diplomacy; soft power; hard power

Introduction

The growing economic power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has moved the country from the periphery of world politics to the centre and attracted global interest in its culture and language (Zhao and Huang 2010). Capitalising on this economic and cultural attractiveness, the PRC has, since the early 2000s, used the Confucius Institute (CI) project to build harmonious foreign relationships, enhance socio-cultural understanding, globalise Chinese culture and promote collaboration with foreign countries (Kurlantzik 2007; PRC Ministry of Education 2012). In fact, China’s leaders (e.g. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao) expressed concerns about the role culture plays in enhancing the nation’s ability to compete in the international arena and the need to promote external harmony for national development in their respective reports to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 2002 and 2007 (Jiang 2002; Hu 2007). It is no wonder that the CI project, as a
soft power component of China’s cultural diplomacy, has been gaining
momentum. Between November 2004 and August 2011, China set up 353
CIs (mostly in tertiary institutions) and 473 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) in
primary and secondary educational institutions in 104 countries and regions
(Chinese Language Council International 2011). By the end of 2013, there
were 440 CIs and 646 CCs in 120 countries (regions) (Hanban 2013c).

The exponential growth of CIs has generated heated discussion regarding
their purposes, hidden agenda, problems, challenges and/or potential. A
number of scholars (Ding and Saunders 2006; Guo 2008; Hoare-Vance
2009; Paradise 2009; Starr 2009; Yu 2010; Hartig 2012; Ren 2012; Pan
2013) have examined the purposes, nature, features, structure, operation,
controversies and challenges of the CI project through the lenses of soft
power theory and/or cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of
focused and in-depth study of the tensions and paradoxes in the CI project
with a more systematic framework. This paper aims to fill such a research
gap and provide a more systematic framework by integrating Nye’s (1990)
tripartite taxonomy – coercion, inducement and attraction – and Tellis
et al.’s (2000) tripartite taxonomy – resources, strategies and outcomes – for
analysing the dilemmas and predicaments of the CI project in the exercise
of soft power in the globalised age.

Conceptual and theoretical resources

Before analysing the tensions and paradoxes in the practices of China’s soft
power (cultural diplomacy) as embodied in the CI project, it is necessary to
clarify the approaches and concepts to be used in this study. Basically, this
paper adopts the method of literature review that analyses the primary
resources provided by various stakeholders (e.g. official papers, government
policy pronouncements, constitutions and by-laws of CIs, annual reports,
symposium materials, surveys/opinion polls) and the secondary resources on
the empirical data, interpretations and evaluations related to CIs/CCs (e.g.
case studies, media commentaries, refereed books/book chapters, journal
articles, etc.). This paper also uses both within-study and between-study lit-
erature reviews to develop and integrate conceptual/theoretical frameworks
that could inform the study, to analyse and interpret the data/information
gathered from various textual sources, to identify connections and contradic-
tions or other relations in the literature under review for the purpose of
uncovering the complexities and controversies, and to synthesise the current
knowledge for the study of CIs in the context of China’s soft-power (cul-
tural) diplomacy (Smallbone and Quinton 2011; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and
Collins 2012). This qualitative research method, which seeks to understand
cultural influences, paradigms, controversies and contradictions through the
articulation of diverse discourses and multiple data resources, is a useful
approach to explore and explain the complex linkages among portrayals of
society that give meaning to particular terms, ideas and activities out of their historico-cultural circumstance (Hall 1985; Slack 1996; Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

With regard to conceptual and theoretical resources, Nye (1990) defined ‘power’ as the ability to influence the behaviour of others in order to get the outcomes one wants. He argued that there are three ways to exercise power: (1) to coerce through threats, (2) to induce behavioural change with payments or (3) to attract and co-opt. The first two, coercion and inducement through payment, are forms of hard power; soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction. According to Nye (2009), the major elements of a country’s soft power include its culture, values and policies. However, he also pointed out that the passive use of military and economic resources can sometimes be used to attract, just as their active use can be a means to coerce, implying that different resources can also contribute to soft power. At the same time, Nye (2009) also coined the concept of ‘smart power’, arguing that hard and soft power can be combined and exercised judicially with ‘contextual intelligence’ (161–162).

To examine the abstract conception of power, Tellis et al. (2000) used a tripartite taxonomy of ‘resources’, ‘strategies’ and ‘outcomes’. Power as resource(s), ‘essentially describes the sum total of the capabilities available to any entity for influencing others’. Strategies are ‘attempts to capture the processes, relationships and situations through which entities intend to influence one another’. Outcomes focus on ‘consequences to test whether the targeted entities respond in the manner intended by the initiator’ (14–15, italics in original). This tripartite taxonomy, together with Nye’s (1999) tripartite approach to power, forms the conceptual framework for analysing the tensions and paradoxes of the CI project.

The above-mentioned theories and concepts mostly focus on issues related to the USA’s power strategies in the context of new global challenges to its hegemony. Yet the power concepts in general, and Nye’s theories of hard and soft power in particular, also found resonances in Chinese academic and official circles at the turn of the century (Ding 2008). For instance, Wang Huning, one of the political advisors to former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, argued in a 1993 article that there had been an international shift from power based on wealth and violence to a knowledge-based power structure, and enjoined that China should strengthen its culture so as to attract other countries (Guo 2004). Accordingly, under the presidency of Jiang Zemin, cultural development was made a part, together with economic and political developments, of the ‘three-in-one’ model (sanweiyiti) for strengthening socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhang 2010). Zheng Bijian, a party theorist who coined the concept of China’s ‘peaceful rise’ in 2003, advocated the promotion of Chinese culture abroad as a means of overcoming hostility towards communism and negative images of the nation and its people. The ‘peaceful rise’ theory (later
changed into ‘peaceful development’ in order to further soften the nation’s international profile) involves using soft power to promote China’s international image, alleviate the fear of the ‘China threat’ and establish a favourable environment for China’s sustainable development (Hoare-Vance 2009). In 2007, in a Chinese Communist Central Committee report to the 17th Party Congress, former President Hu Jintao stated that China needed to emphasise culture as a part of its soft power, though he did not specify what form this soft power should take or how it would enhance China’s influence over other nations (Hu 2007).

Although the power theories mentioned above can provide conceptual lenses for the study of China’s soft power as embodied in the CI project, the national context should also be considered. Firstly, China’s soft power is not confined to the cultural dimension. Economic, diplomatic and political means have also been taken to strengthen soft power in China’s national development (Kurlantzick 2007; Cho and Jeong 2008). Secondly, hard power and soft power are combined and integrated in Chinese diplomacy, but not in the sense of ‘smart power’, as put forth by Nye (2009). Hence, these elements may compete or even conflict with each other, as the former suggests harmony while the latter suggests confrontation. Thirdly, since the Jiang Zemin era, China’s leaders have sought to resurrect Confucianism as a means of promoting domestic peace and order as well as external harmony, securing sustainable national development and alleviating increasing international fear of the ‘China threat’ (Cho and Jeong 2008). However, there is no clear articulation at the government or state level of how Confucian values are to be integrated with socialist ethics to form a systematic, coherent ideology that is appealing and attractive to Chinese and foreign peoples, aside from vague references to public virtue, civilised behaviour, professional ethics, humanistic norms and collectivistic mentality found in official propaganda (e.g. Xinhuanet 2007). These specific China factors are also taken into consideration in analysing the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the CI project that embodies soft power as a kind of cultural diplomacy for the development of the nation in an increasingly globalised world.

**Resources**

According to Etzioni (1968, 357–361), there are three distinct types of power resources – utilitarian, coercive and normative. Utilitarian resources are material rewards that resemble inducement (including economic possessions, technical and administrative capabilities, manpower, etc.); coercive resources are material objects capable of doing violence to bodies or psyches, or assets used to impose the wielder’s preferences on others; normative resources are malleable symbols that work through persuasion and draw on ideas, values and sentiments. These categories tally, more or less, with the strategies of inducement, coercion and attraction/persuasion set
forth by Nye (1990). Regarding the CI project, it mostly utilises utilitarian and normative resources in its exercise of soft power strategies, though these resources could also be used in a coercive manner by Chinese authorities.

To facilitate the expansion of the CI project, China has offered material and human resources, which are basically utilitarian, to local partners in various countries/regions. Confucius Institutes are operated in one of three modes: they may be wholly operated by the CI headquarters in Beijing (i.e., the Office of Chinese Language Council International, called Hanban in Chinese), joint ventures with local (university) partners or locally run offices licensed by the CI headquarters in Beijing. Most CIs are operated as joint ventures, as they are less expensive to set up and maintain when local partners take responsibility for physical and operational matters. More importantly, this mode can help China more quickly meet its goal of rapid expansion of CIs to enhance its global branding (Starr 2009). Based on the data and information from various sources, the initial agreement between Hanban and the foreign host institutions may vary from three to five years. Hanban usually provides a start-up fund of US$100,000, followed by an annual subsidy to a foreign partner (Ren 2010; Hartig 2012; Shambaugh 2013). However, according to Shambaugh (2013, 246), some foreign partners receive US$100,000 to US$250,000 or more per annum, and some of them receive subsidies from Hanban even though the latter seeks to provide only three years of seed funding, with the foreign partners absorbing 100% of operating costs thereafter.

In spite of the substantial subventions from Hanban, there have been concerns about the sustainability and financial viability of CIs after the initial period of agreement, when these non-profit-making organisations are expected to become self-supporting by charging course fees (Shepherd 2007; Barr 2011; Confucius Institute Headquarters 2011). It must also be noted, however, that out of financial concerns, some of these institutions have been accused of succumbing to pressure from Chinese authorities and avoiding activities relating to the Falun Gong or the Dalai Lama for fear of losing CI classes, fee-paying Chinese students, scholarships, exchanges and conferences (Hoare-Vance 2009; Barr 2011; Hartig 2012). Thus, utilitarian resources can still be seen as coercive if the foreign partners do not trust China’s intentions; herein lies the source of tension in the operation of CIs.

In addition to monetary subsidies, Hanban also supplies textual and human resources to facilitate CIs’ operations and development, although there is an inherent tension or dilemma between the quality and quantity thereof (Wang 2007; Zhao and Huang 2010). According to Hanban’s 2012 Annual Report (Xu et al. 2012), there were over 655,000 registered students in the CIs/CCs in 108 countries/regions by the end of the year. Up to 34,000 Chinese language classes have been set up and about 16,000 cultural activities have been organised, with up to 9.48 million participants. At that
time, there were about 20,000 full-time and part-time faculty and staff members, 30% of whom were despatched by Hanban (Xu et al. 2012). The shortage of experienced teachers is still a major problem in meeting the needs of the increasing number of foreign participants. In order to meet the demand for trained teachers, Chinese volunteers have been sent abroad after receiving only limited amounts of training, thus causing quality assurance concerns (Siow 2011; Ren 2012).

Utilitarian resources in the textual domain fare no better, as Hanban reportedly cannot strike a balance between quantity and quality in CI expansion and programme implementation. For example, teaching materials in Russia were found to be unhelpful, as they had been translated, sometimes poorly and inaccurately, from English. In the UK, teaching materials were described as ‘awkward and inapplicable’, while there was a shortage of textbooks in Spanish-speaking countries (Siow 2011, 2). More recently, Hanban has begun to encourage locally based teaching resource development initiatives, but it remains difficult to maintain quality across institutions or to establish benchmark standards across operators/providers. It is, admittedly, very difficult to cater to the needs of a wide variety of local contexts/cultures while maintaining high quality control standards; however, negative reports or news about CIs’ textual and human resources may confound China’s image engineering efforts through soft power build-up. Thus, there is a mismatch, if not an outright conflict, between resources (means) and intended outcomes (end).

The CI project is also relatively frail in terms of normative/ideational resources (e.g. political values, philosophy and/or moral appeals) (Wang 2008; Paradise 2009; Zhao 2009). Basically, the project is intended to promote traditional Chinese culture and contemporary Chinese language in the global context, largely by appealing to foreigners’ interest in, or favourable impressions of, the culture and language offered in CI programmes, and has little or nothing to offer in terms of normative/ideational resources. Paradoxically, although the CCP remains in power, it has moved away from its socialist origins and has developed no attractive ideational/normative resource to fill that void and appeal to the world. Moreover, it is still unable to articulate a coherent, logical ideological system apart from a hybrid of Marxism-Leninism, traditional values and selected contemporary international values that its leaders use to justify the current developmental model and structure (Hoare-Vance 2009), yet there is no attempt to resolve the conflicts and contradictions that exist in this hybrid of heterogeneous elements.

In fact, China has become relatively more strategy-oriented rather than ideology-oriented, as the CCP has been keen to find a legitimate place for the party-led state in the nation and the world. This is probably why the CI project has little or no ideational resource to offer apart from a ‘charm offensive’ that uses economic/material means to strengthen China’s soft
power (Kurlantzick 2007). This lop-sided dependence on utilitarian and coercive resources, without any substantive or attractive normative or ideational resources, tends to discount CIs’ effectiveness in China’s soft power projection (Wang 2008; Paradise 2009; Zhao 2009). Certainly, the resources themselves are not the only sources of tensions and paradoxes; the strategies through which these resources are utilised also play a major role.

Strategies

To a large extent, the CI project aims to create, through a soft power strategy, a benign environment for China’s economic development and modernisation (Guo 2008). From the setup of the first CI in South Korea in 2004 up to November 2008, the CIs and CCs were opened at a rate of nearly one every five days (Ren 2012, 11). By December 2013, there were 440 CIs and 646 CCs in 120 countries/regions (Hanban 2013c). When envisioning and promoting the cultural attraction of CIs to foreign partners and peoples, Hanban has failed to realise that the rapid expansion of overseas institutions that are monitored and regulated by an authoritarian political system, whose intent is to use those institutions as a state propaganda tool, could raise suspicion and concern among foreign peoples, especially those academics who worry that CIs would interfere with academic autonomy and freedom (Wachter 2007; Hartig 2012; Mosher 2012; Pan 2013). There has been criticism centring around improper interference with teaching and research, political espionage, surveillance and propaganda, though some academics have refuted these (Shepherd 2007; Hoare-Vance 2009; Starr 2009; Nakagawa 2011; Branigan 2012; Mattis 2012). Some foreign partner universities certainly have concerns about the involvement of CIs in credit-bearing undergraduate or post-graduate courses, not only for resource allocation and quality assurance reasons, but also out of fear of indoctrination or propaganda (Mosher 2012). As a result, there has been a view that CIs would always have ‘no-go zones’ – embargoed topics, such as Tibet, Taiwan and Falun Gong (Paradise 2009; UNCUT 2012). Also, there are those who warn that the rising number of CIs represents a type of Chinese cultural coercion – cultural invasion as permeated with ideology (Ren 2012). Obviously, some of these criticisms might not be completely justified. First, it is not logical for a public diplomacy programme to provide a platform for opponents to attack the government that funds it (Sautman 2013). Second, if China only aims to promote its culture and language through CIs, it can hardly be seen as enforcing ideo-cultural coercion through indoctrination. Despite this, the fears and suspicions, however ungrounded, might be a stumbling block in the development of China’s cultural diplomacy.

In addition, the organisational structure and control of the project inevitably makes its strategies appear to be quite coercive, at least in terms of rhetoric. The CI project was launched by Hanban in 2004 for the purpose of
developing Chinese language and cultural teaching resources, making Hanban services available worldwide, meeting the demands of foreign Chinese learners and contributing to global diversity and harmony (PRC Ministry of Education 2012). Hanban itself is under the joint governance of 12 different ministries and commissions that are, collectively, responsible for education, culture, foreign affairs and strategic planning for long-term national development under the State Council (Pan 2013). It has overall control of not only the setup and operation of CIs, but also the stipulation of Chinese language education policies, the development of relevant teaching materials, the training and dispatch of language teachers and the conduct of Chinese language examinations (Ren 2012). Although 15 non-executive members (10 foreign representatives and 5 from partner Chinese universities) have been included in the CI Leadership Council since 2007, this structure is still directed by Hanban and under the direction and supervision of the State Council, which is, in turn, led by the CCP (Hoare-Vance 2009). Evidence of the links between the Party and CIs can be found in the speeches of the Chinese leaders, such as former President Hu Jintao and former Politburo member and propaganda chief Li Changchun, who have taken active roles in CI ceremonies and set the agenda for their development (Hoare-Vance 2009). Though the CI headquarters is fashioned as a non-profit organisation, it is actually a quasi-governmental body that reflects the views and policies of the state (Ren 2012). In this way, China’s soft power is closely connected with political influence and agenda as CIs have been identified as part of its objective of national development (comprehensive national power) and enhancement of cultural power (Hoare-Vance 2009). This political agenda may, in turn, discount the softness of its cultural power strategies.

Quite often, what seems to be soft cultural diplomacy can be perceived as coercive, when policies are not carried out in a soft manner. Part of the perceived coerciveness stems from various sections of the CIs’ constitution and by-laws, which stipulate that foreign partners shall not contravene the laws and regulations of China; that host institutions must accept both supervision from and assessment by CI headquarters, and should be willing to accept its oversight, evaluation and certification; and that Hanban is responsible for examining and approving the implementation plans of annual projects as well as for selecting and appointing CIs’ Chinese directors and faculties (Hanban 2013a). Albeit there are cases in which CIs have operated smoothly and without concrete evidence of Hanban intervention, the controversies and suspicions arising from the constitution and by-laws might be counterproductive to China’s efforts to promote international harmony and enhance its global brand (Shepherd 2007; Barr 2011).

Hanban also controls the administration of CI funding through a series of regulations. For example, it reserves the right to conduct, when it deems necessary, inspections and assessments, including audits, appraisals and
verification, of CIs’ budget implementation and final accounts and the efficiency with which Chinese funds are used; it also reserves the right to demand further explanation from any individual CI of its budget and final accounts and may take action against any CI that violates regulations for administering Chinese CI funds. In the event of a legal dispute between CI headquarters and an individual CI, the principal bodies of the various partners in that operation are to accept the jurisdiction of the Beijing Court (Hanban 2013b). Although there have been no reported cases of legal action against or penalties levied on individual CIs, these regulations are the sticks that accompany the carrots, and might cause legal disputes between local CIs and the Beijing headquarters (Paradise 2009). From that perspective, what seems to be a utilitarian resource could be used in a coercive manner to impose China’s preferred course of action on foreign partners, though Hanban has been careful not to pressure CIs through political and economic strings thus far (Liu 2010).

Moreover, with massive government support and the increasing demand for Chinese language education in other parts of the world, the growth of CIs has surpassed China’s projections (Ren 2010; Yang 2010). While the government has to provide start-up funds and subsidies to meet the demand of local CIs, it has incurred criticism that may tarnish, rather than enhance, China’s brand and image. Such criticism has focused on the appropriateness of allocating educational funding overseas, out of concern that CI funding will come at the expense of domestic educational expenditure, especially given that Hanban aims to open 1000 CIs by 2020 (Hoare-Vance 2009) while China has 10 million children without proper schooling (Starr 2009; Pan 2013). In addition, it is suspected that Hanban’s engagement in commercial activities focusing on Chinese language education overseas yields enormous profits that might point to potential corruption under Hanban (Ren 2010, 2012; Zheng 2012). This sort of suspicion might have stemmed from the fact that the Hanban annual reports have only made known to the public the annual expenditure items, but not the incomes from overseas operations (Xu et al. 2009, 2010, 2012). These negative responses unfold the tension and paradox in the strategy of using utilitarian resources in the CI project, which lacks a high degree of transparency and effective communication with various stakeholders, both internal and external.

As mentioned above, the CI project provides material and human resources in addition to funding, to attract foreign partners. Nevertheless, as it is not easy to recruit qualified local teachers to teach CI courses/programmes, China has to dispatch teachers to CIs and CCs abroad. However, such teachers are in short and unstable supply in China, as experienced university instructors of Chinese might not be willing to leave their families for one or more years just to work abroad for low salaries (Starr 2009; Barr 2011). According to Ren (2012, 7), the monthly salary of US$1500 is quite low in comparison with the remuneration received by a visiting researcher
going overseas (roughly US$2000 to US$5000), so university instructors are less enthusiastic about being sent overseas to teach at CIs. Moreover, these individuals seldom have the necessary accreditation to qualify as full teachers to teach in overseas institutions, nor do they have the experience in or knowledge of the local culture that would enable them to develop or tailor teaching and learning resources and pedagogies effectively to meet the interests and abilities of local students (Starr 2009; Confucius Institute Headquarters 2011; Siow 2011). The problem is not limited to the teachers, however; in some institutes, the materials supplied by Hanban barely meet local standards for readability, and hence do not attract many readers (Hartig 2012). Besides, the strategies for utilising textual resources also lack local sensitivity, as the domestic Chinese scenes portrayed in the texts are alien to foreign readers, the materials go beyond their language mastery or acquisition abilities and the rote memorisation they require is too boring to arouse readers’ interest (Confucius Institute Headquarters 2011).

China’s eagerness to expand the CI project overseas within a short period of time has forced it to move forward without effective, well-designed strategies. As such, China has been unable to use its resources effectively to build up its soft power. Instead, its strategies have unwittingly been counterproductive, as they may cause the targets of China’s soft power initiatives to lose interest or confidence in collaborating with Chinese authorities to sustain and develop the CI project. To remedy this situation and relieve cultural tension, more intensive collaboration between Chinese experts and local scholars and teachers to research and develop inter-culturally sensitive, contextually specific and learner-centred resources is needed.

The core element of China’s inducement strategy is the teaching, learning and assessing of Chinese language, which is seen as necessary and advantageous for non-Chinese who seek business and job opportunities in China (Paradise 2009; Yang 2010; Hartig 2012). The Beijing government has based the standards for spoken Chinese, script and romanisation on Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), simplified characters and the pinyin system (the official phonetic system for transcribing the Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet), respectively. The use of standardised PRC-based Chinese through CIs and the Chinese Proficiency Test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) tends to marginalise the more complex Mandarin and traditional characters in use in other Chinese communities (e.g. Taiwan and Hong Kong) (Ding and Saunders 2006; Starr 2009). It is noticeable that Taiwan, once a major destination for people around the world to study the Chinese language, has been largely replaced by cities in mainland China (e.g. Shanghai and Beijing) (Suzuki 2009). This has been viewed by some as a coercive strategy designed to secure Beijing-based linguistic sovereignty (Ding 2008).
While most of the suspicions and fears mentioned above are not completely ungrounded, neither are they well-evidenced (Barr 2011; Siow 2011). As Yang (2010) remarked:

By far, there appears to be little factual support for the accusation for improper influence over teaching and research of CIs. The CI headquarters in Beijing does not dictate the curricular design of a language or cultural program. The teaching materials provided by Beijing have been designed to facilitate pedagogical needs and are not intended for propaganda purposes. The headquarters cannot control the contents of lecture series or the design of a festival program. (237–238)

Yet these accusations and suspicions, however ungrounded, could reveal the inherent tension underlying the efforts made by an authoritarian regime to use a state-monitored engine to engage, actively and aggressively, in a global cultural undertaking involving soft power diplomacy (Zhao 2009; Mosher 2012; Sahlins 2013).

China’s strategy of attracting foreigners to the CI project through its own ideas and values is weak. Despite the tremendous breadth and depth of Chinese culture available to them, Chinese leaders have limited their focus to the Confucian ideals of harmony, peace, stability and orderliness. Under the presidency of Hu Jintao, the PRC and CCP were strongly inclined to use the Confucian idea of harmony to counteract the ‘China threat’ theory externally and to maintain a harmonious society internally (Hoare-Vance 2009). This advocacy for peace, stability and harmony for common development (co-development) was further emphasised by succeeding President Xi Jinping in a speech to the Boao Forum in 2013 (Xi 2013).

This use of Confucianism as an ideational attraction is problematic and historically unjustifiable, as the CCP emerged from the 1919 May Fourth Movement, in which Chinese intellectuals attacked Confucianism and warlordism in their pursuit of science and democracy. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Confucianism was once again subjected to brutal attack by the CCP in its struggle against political opponents/dissidents it depicted as conservative or reactionary. It was not until after China’s opening up and reform under Deng Xiaoping, in the late 1970s, that Confucianism began to rise once more as a means of relieving social tension and counterbalancing the materialism generated by the emerging market-oriented mentality. These historical traces show clearly that the ideology or ideational culture in China is both strategic and goal-oriented (Hoare-Vance 2009; Benavides 2012; Cheung 2012) and reveal how fragile and precarious Confucianism, as an ideational attraction, is. In general, CI strategies for attracting foreigners are feeble and restrictive, largely limited to courses or programmes that promote interest in traditional Chinese culture (e.g. calligraphy, painting, language, tai-chi and medicine), cultural exchanges (e.g. visits, conferences and film festivals) and/or business, none of which has much to
do with Confucianism or deepening foreigners’ understanding of contemporary China (Starr 2009; Yang 2010; Zhao and Huang 2010). At a popular level, how these cultural activities could be diversified to cater to a wider spectrum of interests in different ethno-cultural contexts and how to accommodate diverse local cultures through social interaction are vital issues informing the sustainable development of CI programmes, and must be carefully considered (Confucius Institute Headquarters 2011). At a more academic level, given that some high-level, internationally renowned tertiary institutions (e.g. Harvard, Yale and Stanford in the USA, Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, the University of Tokyo and the University of Kyoto in Japan) are reluctant to be involved in the CI project (Starr 2009), it might be difficult to collaborate more extensively with foreign academics to develop courses or conduct research that would enhance the global outreach or branding of Confucianism and foster more positive views about China’s soft power. It remains to be seen whether Chinese language and culture, even dressed up in Confucian garments, are powerful enough to appeal to foreign audiences and harmonise China’s international relationships.

Outcomes

Measuring the outcomes and achievements of the CI project is a complicated task, as different stakeholders in different contexts might have different views at different times. Moreover, these views vary depending on China’s general performance and behaviour in the international and regional arenas. If outcomes are measured solely in terms of the quantitative leaps reported in Hanban annual reports, the achievements of the CI project are very remarkable. For example, according to the Hanban 2012 Annual Report (Xu et al. 2012):

(1) By the end of 2012, 400 CIs and 535 CCs have been established in 108 countries and regions in the world;
(2) 11,000 Chinese language teachers and volunteers have been despatched to 132 countries, an increase of 3000 from the year 2011;
(3) 6229 foreign Chinese language teachers have been trained, an increase of 41.8% over the previous year;
(4) 780,000 volumes of books have been donated to 1660 institutions in 104 countries;
(5) Approximately 70,000 foreign students from over 100 countries were invited to China to participate in the ‘Chinese Bridge’ Chinese Proficiency Competition for foreign college and secondary students as well as international students in China;
(6) The number of examinees taking various Chinese tests amounted to 3.52 million globally, an increase of 75% over the year 2011; and
The Confucius Institute Online has achieved in going online in 46 languages. The number of users for Confucius Institute Online has increased to 596,000 from 124 countries and regions (8–9).

Although these figures and data could demonstrate how the CI project has grown over the years, Hanban has not conducted any systematic and comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of CIs and CCs, probably because it might involve massive amounts of monetary and human resources. Hence, the effectiveness of the CI project has not been assessed through any central or local mechanism, and no relevant information has been publicised in Hanban reports. Given the absence of any evidence-based or evidence-informed research for continuous improvement, it is no wonder that most suggestions for the CI project’s future development include general directions or principles, but lack concrete plans for their reification in real contexts. For instance, suggestions for training qualified local teachers and developing more localised materials have been reiterated in various documents, including the Hanban 2009 and 2010 Annual Reports (Xu et al. 2009, 2010). On 10 December 2010, Hanban Chairperson, Liu Yandong, reported that only nine resource packages in 45 different languages had been produced and that 104 CIs had published 77 localised Chinese language teaching resources (Liu 2010); this report, however, did not address whether these localised resources could effectively remedy pedagogical problems or resolve cultural tensions, based on users’ feedback. In the same speech, Liu also reiterated the need to establish an assessment mechanism featuring international co-operation and to manage the CI fund better to increase its efficiency and effectiveness; again, there was no concrete measure or plan for the actual implementation of such an assessment mechanism. By the end of 2012, the Hanban Annual Report (Xu et al. 2012) still could not show how the issues and problems related to quality enhancement in the operation of the CI project could be resolved and there are no reliable mechanisms or data by which the outcomes of the inputs (resources) and processes (strategies) can be gauged.

If one of the major purposes of the CI project is to brand China’s global image, public opinion polls that have been conducted worldwide can be a valid means of gauging whether the outcomes could help reify this purpose (Gill and Huang 2006; Huang and Ding 2006; Paradise 2009). Paradise (2009, 662–663), for example, analysed data from BBC polls between 2005 and 2007 and found that the percentage of respondents holding positive views of China’s influence had dropped over the polling period, from 48% to 42%. This trend was confirmed by the results of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which reported the deterioration in China’s global image between 2005 and 2007. As the BBC polls reported a possible correlation between soft power and positive views in the cases of Japan, France and
the European Union, the decline in positive views of China might have implications for the effectiveness of its cultural diplomacy (Paradise 2009).

Nevertheless, it must be noted that public opinion polls fluctuate and that the factors accounting for the results might vary across the poll periods. For instance, a BBC poll, dated 10 May 2012, reported a rise in positive views of China over the previous year (from 46% to 50%). Yet another BBC poll, dated 22 May 2013, indicated that positive views of China had dropped eight points, to 42%. In analysing the factors shaping these perceptions, the BBC poll reporter (BBC Poll 2012) remarked:

Of those who said the Chinese influence in the world is positive, a majority of 51 percent says it is because of China’s economy, products and services. This area is also the top reason, mentioned by 30 percent of respondents holding unfavourable views, why China is seen to have a negative influence. The way China treats its people (27%), as well as its foreign policy (25%) followed closely among reasons for this disapproval. (10)

This tallies with Pew Research findings that the percentage of Americans holding unfavourable opinions of China rose from 36% in 2011 to 52% in 2012 (Wike 2013), mostly due to China’s perceived economic threat to US job opportunities, trade deficits and government debt. It can therefore be concluded that economic and economy-related resources and strategies can be a source of inducement as well as a means of coercion. It is also apparent that China’s soft power, as embodied in the CI project, has not contributed much to improving China’s global image, in spite of the remarkable rate of CIs’ global expansion as evidenced by the Hanban 2012 Annual Report (Xu et al. 2012).

Conclusion

Based on a more integrated conceptual framework combining the tripartite taxonomies put forth by Nye (1990) and Tellis et al. (2000), the findings of this paper suggest that, in its efforts to brand the nation and promote harmonious international relationships through the rapid expansion of its cultural (soft power) diplomacy via the CI project, China has emphasised resource provision rather than creating appropriate, non-coercive and inter-culturally sensitive strategies to bring about the intended outcomes. It is obvious that the means (resources and strategies) tend to baffle the ends (intended outcomes). Without systematic, detailed, comprehensive and long-term planning, the progress of the whole project is like feeling for stones to cross the river as China has no experience in managing and operating such a venture in multiple countries and regions with diverse cultures, interests and needs. When the national interest is predicated on the size of the CI project or the speed of its expansion, defects in quality inevitably emerge and tend to tarnish rather than brand the image of the nation. In this aspect, the CI project
needs to develop more systematic and rigorous assessment and feedback mechanisms to address the issues and concerns of its partners and students and relieve their fears and tensions.

As Gill and Huang (2006) have commented, there is a tension between China’s efforts to pursue a relatively more open and flexible foreign policy or cultural diplomacy and its insistence on monitoring those undertakings through a closed, rigid and authoritarian system. When a party-led and state-controlled engine operates cultural diplomacy to boost national interests, it tends to use utilitarian soft power resources in a coercive and rigid way, imposing policies, laws and regulations on its foreign partners and pushing its agenda and outcomes through propaganda and control mechanisms. To allay fears of intervention by the party-led state and to eliminate suspicions of propaganda and indoctrination, the CCP should minimise the role played by senior statesmen and bureaucrats in soliciting the active participation of partners and non-state actors in programme planning, implementation and evaluation (Ding 2008).

The examples of other non-state actors, like the British Council, the Goethe-Institut and Alliance Française on which the CIs are modelled, are rather revelatory to the development of CIs in two aspects. Firstly, the advocacy of an institution, which serves as a means of the cultural diplomacy of the state, might be trapped in contradiction with the policies of the latter. For instance, the British Council (2014) advocates for human rights, yet the UK’s involvement in rendition, ill-treatment of terror suspects and illegal wars might contradict that message (BBC News 2013; Henningsen 2013). Secondly, the operational modes of the British, French and German cultural institutions reveal that stand-alone premises separated from partner universities and dissociated from the party/state propaganda machine might help reduce suspicion and misunderstanding (Hoare-Vance 2009; Hartig 2012). In fact, if the CI project aims to harmonise foreign relationships rather than bolster propaganda, indoctrination and cultural hegemony, stringent control by the party-state might be counterproductive and render its efforts a mockery.

The above analysis also shows that China’s CI project relies more on (non-military) coercion and inducement than on attraction, and that it has used utilitarian resources, which are meant for inducement, in coercive ways. In essence, it has little or no attraction in terms of values or ideologies aside from selected Confucian ethics/values. Even though there is a strong demand for learning Chinese language and culture that might result in massive exposure to China by learners from CIs, as mentioned before, the teaching of traditional Chinese values, culture and language cannot help foreigners acquire an in-depth understanding of contemporary China and enable them to view the nation from a more rational, objective and empathetic perspective. If foreigners are attracted to learn Chinese language and culture for economic purposes, then any downturn in Chinese economic
development would inevitably dampen its cultural attractiveness (Gil 2008; Barr 2011). From that perspective, the CI project should revisit and revise its programmes and see what can be done to rectify foreigners’ misconceptions and misunderstandings of contemporary China, instead of relying on selling China’s brand/image through propaganda and material inducements (Yang and Hsiao 2012).

China’s lack of attractiveness in cultural diplomacy also has something to do with its deficiency in the national values that appeal to foreign audiences. Scholars have pointed out that China’s lack of democracy, social justice, human rights and environmental consciousness, together with its rampant corruption and political oppression, have undermined the country’s soft power resources (Pei 2006; Ding 2008). Instead of moving closer to the global values of democracy and free-market capitalism, China continues to deviate from them, as its economic development has not been accompanied by meaningful liberal democratic reforms to its institutions, which is what Ramo (2004) has conceptualised as the ‘Beijing Consensus’.

Moreover, China is trapped in the belief that comprehensive national power is built mainly on military and economic strengths (Cho and Jeong 2008; Ghosh 2009). However, if military hard power cannot be used in tandem with soft power based on circumstantial expediency and ‘contextual intelligence’ (Nye 2009, 161–162), the former will counteract the attractiveness of the latter. That is why the CI project can do very little to relieve the fear of the ‘China threat’, particularly its economic and military aspects. China must actually demonstrate its peaceful rise and development by flexibly settling territorial disputes with its neighbours and behaving rationally as a responsible global stakeholder, rather than simply using soft power to relieve fear of the ‘China threat’.

Indeed, fear of the ‘China threat’ is inevitable, because China, as a rising power, is bound to challenge and upset the interests of the status quo powers (e.g. US hegemony) (Gertz 2000; Wang 2006). This fear cannot be relieved, even if China has moved closer to global norms and values, as hypothesised by Nye (2002). As Barr (2011) has aptly pointed out:

if we examine each of the ‘threatening’ scenarios in context, we find that the cause of the fear is because China desires the same thing, competes for influence in the same international political arena, and beats ‘us’ in the same game. In other words, it is not so much that China is vastly ‘different’ from the West that causes the emotion; rather, it is because China’s rise creates a critical distance which enables the West to reflect on its own position. (134)

In sum, as China’s comprehensive national power has inherent contradictions and tensions, and as its soft power basis is fragile, the resource provisions and strategies wielded in the CI project can, at best, serve to arouse foreigners’ interest in Chinese culture and language as economic pathfinders (Ding 2008). In consequence, the soft power resources and strategies used
in the CI project can hardly bring about broader intended outcomes of deepening friendly relationships with other nations, promoting the development of multiculturalism and creating a harmonious world (Hoare-Vance 2009). The results of the soft power projection attempted through the CI project reveal that China’s cultural diplomacy still has a long and tortuous journey ahead, and that the country must resolve the conflicts and (re-)balance competing demands between the national and the global, and between past versions of culture and future visions of the nation, in its quest for modernity in an increasingly globalised age.

References


