Confucius Institutes and the Network Communication Approach to Public Diplomacy

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Abstract
Discussions of public diplomacy in recent years have paid a growing amount of attention to networks. This network perspective is understood to provide insights into various issues of public diplomacy, such as its effects, credibility, reputation, identity and narratives. This paper applies the network idea to analyze China's Confucius Institutes initiative. It understands Confucius Institutes as a global network and argues that this network structure has potential implications for the operation of public and cultural diplomacy that are perhaps underestimated in existing accounts of Chinese cultural diplomacy. In particular, it is noted that the specific setup of Confucius Institutes requires the engagement of local stakeholders, in a way that is less centralized and more networked than comparable cultural diplomacy institutions. At the same time, the development of a more networked for of public cultural diplomacy is challenged in practice by both practical issues and the configuration of China's state-centric public diplomacy system informed by the political constitution of the Chinese state.

Introduction

> *The Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese, but to the whole world.*
> (Chinese President Hu Jintao, address to the Australian Federal Parliament,
> October 2003).

In 2002, the Chinese government began to consider setting up institutions to promote Chinese language and culture overseas. One of the key elements of this policy of promoting Chinese language and culture internationally has been Confucius Institutes (CI). Modeled on institutions such as the British Council, France's Alliance Française and Germany's Goethe Institutes, the growth of China's Confucius Institutes has been one of the most important developments in 21st century public diplomacy. Between 2004 and 2012, China set up over 900 Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in 108 countries to promote Chinese language and culture. China now has the third largest number of national cultural institutes operating in other countries, after the United Kingdom and France.

Despite the rapid worldwide growth of Confucius Institutes, there is a lack of detailed analysis of their roles and functions, with a common assumption being that they are simply propaganda arms of the Chinese party-state. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement in June 2014 expressing concern about the presence of Confucius Institutes on North American campuses, arguing that 'Confucius Institutes function as an arm of the Chinese state and are allowed to ignore academic freedom' (AAUP 2014). Such concerns find echoes in the academic literature on Confucius Institutes, with Brady (2008: 159) describing Confucius Institutes as 'China's foreign propagandists', while Niquet (2012: 81) has argued that Confucius Institutes are 'a part of efforts to modernize China's propaganda apparatus'. Critiquing the decision of the University of Chicago to establish a Confucius Institute on its campus, the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins argued that through such links, U.S. universities 'have become engaged in the political and propaganda efforts of a foreign government in a way that contradicts the values of free inquiry and human welfare to which they are otherwise committed' (Sahlins 2013).

This paper adopts a different approach, arguing that the rise of Confucius Institutes can be understood as occurring at the intersection of three debates, which have been of vital importance both internationally and within China: the significance of the concept of 'soft power' in international relations; the role of cultural diplomacy as an arm of public diplomacy and international communication; and the implications of new forms of network communications. In doing so, we note the inherent tension that arises in public diplomacy as to 'whether government-sponsored activities are manipulative "propaganda" or valid "public diplomacy"' (Zaharna 2004: 219). While our perspective is not a 'neutralist' one, presenting propaganda as a necessary evil in a complex global system of states (Taylor 2011), we would argue that an excessive focus upon the distinctiveness of China's form of government vis-à-vis other nations that engage in such public diplomacy on a large scale can obscure the degree to which the rise of Confucius Institutes is also associated with innovations within the field of public diplomacy, which have implications for its practice around the world.

This paper focuses on Confucius Institutes, which operate primarily through face-to-face interactions, and on cultural diplomacy rather than mass media or networked

communications. At the same time, it aims to illustrate ways in which these Institutes facilitate message exchanges and information flows, and can demonstrate a networked communication strategy in action, which involves the co-creation of credibility, mastering narratives, and identities by using - rather than simply disseminating - information (Zaharna 2010). Drawing upon case studies of Confucius Institutes in Australia and Germany, this paper discusses the network structure of Confucius Institutes, their network synergies and network strategy. It also considers the extent to which their success in achieving public diplomacy objectives is based around building relationships, identifying potential synergies between CIs and their host institutions, and incorporating diversity and flexibility into their everyday operations.

The paper draws upon a series of interviews conducted by the researchers with Managers and Directors of Confucius Institutes in Australia and Germany during 2009-12, which coincided with site visits to these Institutes. While sources have been anonymized in order to maintain confidentiality, interviews took place with the Directors of five Australian CIs, all of which were in the elite 'Group of Eight' universities. In Germany, interviews and site visits were conducted with Directors/Managers of five Confucius Institutes, at universities that all had a Department of Sinology or China Studies, and two of which are a part of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research's Excellence Initiative. Information on the interviews conducted is provided in Appendix 1.

The paper outlines these core debates, and considers the role, functions and future of Confucius Institutes through in-depth case studies of Confucius Institutes in Australia and Germany, particularly those established in partnership with host universities. These two countries provide useful sites for case studies as both countries have strong and fast-growing economic relations with China. Germany is China's largest trading partner in the European Union, and China is Germany's second largest trading partner after the United States, while China has now surpassed the United States and Japan as Australia's largest trading partner. These close economic relations, driven by high-technology manufacturing in the German case and minerals, energy and agriculture in the Australian case, have a variety of cultural and other spillovers, including growth in tourism, research collaboration, and educational exchanges. The two countries also have important differences that range from language to history, geography, foreign policy orientation and population composition, which inform their relations with China. For example, Germany has had a formal presence in China dating back to the 1860s, although the number of people of Chinese descent in Germany today is not high. By contrast, Australia had little formal contact with China prior to the 1970s, but has a large Chinese-Australian population, with about 5 per cent of Australians having some form of Chinese ancestry (including people of Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Macau backgrounds) (ABS 2012).

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

China's commitment to bolstering its connections with the rest of the world has been a strong feature of its economic and foreign policies since 1978, after the death of Mao Zedong and the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping. Medeiros (2009) has argued that the concept of a 'peaceful rise' has a strong basis in China's international behavior, reflecting both the sense that strong international links are advantageous to China's rise as an economic power in the world, and the sense that China has a

historic mission to restore its status as a leading regional and global power, after the long history of depredations at the hands of foreign powers and the relative isolation of the Mao years. There is also the need to counter negative perceptions in the international community that the rise of China constitutes a threat to other nations, whether through concerns about its enhanced military power, or its growing economic significance as measured through trade and foreign investment (Broomfield 2003).

The concept of *soft power* has had considerable influence in China. First proposed by the Harvard University international relations theorist Joseph Nye, soft power refers to 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments'; it 'arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas, and policies' (Nye 2004: x), and 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye 2004: 5). For Nye, 'soft power' is associated with culture and values, in contrast to the 'hard power' of military force or economic might. Soft power initiatives are thus an important element of a nation's *public diplomacy*, or 'a country's engagement and communication with foreign publics' (Wang 2011: 3) and the promotion of national interests in international arenas. Cull (2008: 32-35) has observed that the practice of public diplomacy can be divided into five elements that he refers to as:

1. Listening: collecting information on international opinions, whether by legal or covert means i.e. spying and intelligence gathering;
2. Advocacy: promoting particular policies, ideas or interests to foreign publics, typically through one's own embassies in other countries;
3. Cultural diplomacy: promoting a nation's cultural resources overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad;
4. Exchange diplomacy: promoting reciprocal exchanges of people with other nations e.g. as students;
5. International broadcasting: the use of news bureaus, radio and television broadcasting, and Internet communication to engage with foreign publics.

Although the soft power concept was first designed as a guide for U.S. foreign policy strategies (Sparks 2014), it has had considerable influence in China. One reason for growing interest in China with the soft power concept has been the manner in which it addresses the apparent contradiction between China's growing economic centrality and its relative lack of influence in international relations (Ding 2008; Wang 2011; Blanchard and Liu 2012; Li and Hong 2012). Rawnsley has observed that 'China has embraced the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy with an enthusiasm rarely seen in other parts of the world' (Rawnsley 2012: 126). Brown (2010) has associated the growing interest in soft power in China with the rise of concepts such as 'peaceful rise', 'peaceful development' and a 'Harmonious World' among the Chinese Communist Party leadership in the 2000s, while Cabestan (2010: 3) has observed that 'the key objective of this new discourse has been to change the outside perception of China for the better, and build a positive image of China's contribution to the world'.

Public diplomacy has been seen in China as a means of countering the 'China threat' thesis, by projecting images of the 'real China' internationally, promoting a favourable image of China in other nations, and projecting China's national interests in international relations (Qiu 2009; Zhang 2009; Zhao 2012). China has invested heavily in cultural diplomacy over the last decade through arts and cultural exchanges, Confucius Institutes, the very large numbers of Chinese students abroad, growth in the

number of students from other countries studying in China, and the creation of foreign language services for China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI) and the Xinhua News Agency. The hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing as well as the 2010 Shanghai Expo could also be seen as exercises in cultural diplomacy and the projection of Chinese soft power throughout the world (Rawnsley 2009; Xin 2009; Brown 2010; Huang 2012).

At the same time, China possesses a significant problem in projecting its soft power through public diplomacy, arising from the perceived lack of distance between its media and cultural institutions and the government, in a one-party state that is seen as authoritarian by other nations. The perception of government control over the output of CCTV, the Xinhua News Agency or Chinese cinema constitutes an important barrier to the capacity of such institutions to have international influence. Cull has observed that 'like all forms of communication, the effectiveness of each form of public diplomacy hinges on credibility … international broadcasters know that the impression of an editorial connection to government runs counter to credibility [and] cultural organizations are able to flourish in places where a formal arm of the state would have no credibility' (Cull 2008: 34-35). An example of the problems China has faced in this regard is seen with the understanding of propaganda. In China, the concept has historically had a relatively neutral connotation, akin to terms such as publicity or public relations, whereas in the West it is 'associated with manipulation and … implies the secret exercise of power that is beyond our immediate control' (Rawnsley 2000: 69). Sparks (2014) has observed that perceptions of a lack of government transparency and media freedom constitute barriers to greater recognition of China as an emergent international leader, and the significance of such negatives is borne out in popular indices of 'soft power' such as those developed by the U.K.-based Institute for Government (McClory 2010).

Public Diplomacy and Networks

One of the major discussions in public diplomacy in recent years has been around the significance of networked approaches to public diplomacy. The concept of networks has been the subject of a growing debate in the public diplomacy literature (Brown 2010; Cowan and Arsenault 2008; Hocking 2005; Hocking *et. al.* 2012; Zaharna 2005, 2007, 2010; Zaharna *et. al.* 2013). Hocking (2005, 2008) has argued that there now exists 'two worlds' of public diplomacy: the traditional hierarchical approach, centered on intergovernmental relations and top-down communication; and the network-based approach, where 'public diplomacy [is] one facet of an environment in which international policy is increasingly conducted through complex policy networks' (Hocking 2008: 64). The network model of public diplomacy is seen by its advocates as providing 'a fundamentally different picture of how diplomacy works in the twenty-first century' (Hocking 2005: 37), emphasizing horizontal communication as well as multidirectional flows and exchange of information.

The two models of public diplomacy derive from different models of media and communication. The traditional approach draws from the mass communications tradition and the sender-message-receiver model, being based upon on what Zaharna has described as 'carefully crafted messages disseminated via mass media vehicles to a target audience with the goal of changing attitudes or behavior' (Zaharna 2010: 94). Publics in this setting are understood as the receivers of messages and images from

the 'sending' nation, rather than as partners engaged in dialogue with respective governments and its agencies (Hocking *et. al.* 2012: 39). By contrast, the networked communication approach is derived from technological developments associated with the Internet and social media, as well as new forms of modeling relations in both the natural and social sciences: as Newman *et. al.* (2006: 1) have argued 'networks are everywhere … the imagery of the network pervades modern culture'.

The sociologist Manuel Castells has contributed a highly influential series of works on the network society as 'the social structure characteristic of the Information Age' (Castells 2000: 5) where:

> The diffusion of Internet, wireless communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software has prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time … [and] people (the so-called users) have appropriated new forms of communication … [and] built their own systems of mass communication (Castells 2009: 65).

For Castells, network communication gives rise to new modes of *mass self-communication*, It is mass communication as 'it processes messages from many to many, with the potential of reaching a multiplicity of receivers, and of connecting to endless networks that transmit digitized information around the neighbourhood or around the world', but is also self-communication because 'the production of the message is autonomously decided by the sender, the designation of the receiver is self-directed and the retrieval of messages from the networks of communication is self-selected' (Castells 2012: 6-7).

A key implication of network communication models is that it is increasingly difficult for central agents, such as national governments, to control communication networks or to manage information flows. As Castells argues, 'mass self-communication is based on horizontal networks of interactive communication that, by and large, are difficult to control by governments or corporations' (Castells 2012: 7). At the same time, public diplomacy theorists such as Cull have argued against a negative or 'defeatist' perspective on networked communication, arguing that new media technologies can 'not only wrong-foot the powers-that-be', but can 'create more opportunities … for public diplomacy, especially if the public diplomat is mindful of … the necessity for thinking in terms of building relationships' (Cull 2008: 53). Cowan and Arsenault have identified network communication as enabling 'a third form of engagement' based around 'collaboration—defined … as initiatives in which people work together on a joint venture or project—[as] an equally critical and, in certain cases, more effective approach to engaging with foreign publics' (Cowan and Arsenault 2008: 11). Similarly, Hocking (2008: 74) has argued that since 21st century public diplomacy is 'conducted in an environment where national and international knowledge networks are proliferating', there is a need for those engaged in public diplomacy to know 'how to connect to them, build alliances, and utilize these networks to exercise effective advocacy in support of policy objectives' (Hocking, 2008: 74).

Advocates of networked approached to public diplomacy, such as Zaharna (2010, 2012), have associated a network communication approach to public diplomacy with three inter-related dimensions: network structure; network synergy; and network

strategy. *Network structure* is about facilitating message exchange and information flow, because networks can enhance the flow of information and therefore increase the overall effectiveness of the whole network. *Network synergy* is concerned with the building of relationships and incorporating diversity into the network. Synergy occurs when individual efforts of the network members are combined as a force multiplier: the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. This happens through the combined processes of cultivating relationships and incorporating diversity in two ways. Firstly, internal relationship building through bonding among network members helps to transform a loose group of individuals into a dynamic team. Secondly, external relationship building, through bridging, is about coalition building that expands the network's resources and reach. This internal and external relationship building not only incorporates diversity, but also generates synergy. Finally, *network strategy* focuses on bringing together the diverse elements of the network in such a way that a shared narrative can emerge, not as a top-down construction, but out of processes of co-creation of knowledge (Castells 2005). In this regard the strategy generates appeal and momentum in order to engage and retain network members, attract new members, and hence enable the network to grow.

Chinese Public Diplomacy and the Growth of Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes became a central part of Chinese public diplomacy initiatives in the early 2000s. In 2004, the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), an organization under the authority of the Chinese Ministry of Education, began to set up Confucius Institutes around the world. According to the General Principles of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes:

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

Confucius Institutes have been among a number of initiatives undertaken by the Chinese government in the 2000s to enhance its international standing through public diplomacy. Observing that 'communications capacity determined influence', Li Changchun, the Chair of the Propaganda Committee of the CCP from 2008 to 2012, argued that:

> Strengthening the setup of our domestic and international communication capacity (*jiaqiang guonei guoji chuanbo nengli jianshe*) is related to the overall situation of China's reform and opening up and modernization; it is related to China's international influence and international status (*woguo de guoji yingxiang he diwei*); it is related to the upgrading of our nation's cultural soft power (*woguo wenhua ruanshili de tisheng*) and the role of our nation's media in the international public opinion structure (*woguo meiti zai guoji yulungejuzhong de diwei he zuoyong*) (Li, C. 2008).

Among the range of other public diplomacy and international communication initiatives undertaken by China during the 2000s were:

- Development of the English-language CCTV International 24-hour news channel, as well as channels broadcasting in French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic languages (Rawnsley 2012; Huang 2012);
- China Radio International (CRI) now broadcasting in 59 languages worldwide;
- Xinhua News Agency expanding its international news agency services, and providing subscribers with news in eight languages, as well as having over 1000 correspondents in 180 bureaus worldwide (Xin 2010; Wang D. 2012);
- Support for Chinese Culture Centres Abroad, as well as cultural exchange programs, including China Culture Years, such as the 'Year of Chinese Culture 2011-2012' in Australia, and the 'Year of Chinese Culture' in Germany in 2012, both sponsored by the Ministry of Culture;
- International education exchange initiatives, including rapid expansion of the role of the China Scholarships Council (CSC) in promoting Chinese doctoral study abroad, and the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE) promoting student and academic exchanges.

In terms of their fundamental tasks and services of teaching language and culture to people in other nations, Confucius Institutes are comparable to international agencies such as The British Council, Alliance Française, the Goethe Institute and Spain's Alliance Cervantes. These institutes typically address a mainstream public audience that normally does not have any special knowledge about the country in question, through activities such as language courses, cultural events such as exhibitions and screenings, and public talks (Hartig 2012). Some debate exists as to whether Confucius Institutes are appropriately seen as being involved with the projection of Chinese soft power. As noted earlier, there also exist concerns about whether they constitute a threat to academic freedom. Paradise has noted that 'as Hanban and other education officials ventured out into the world, they found some resistance to the idea of setting up Confucius Institutes on university campuses because of concerns about Chinese interference in foreign academic life' (Paradise 2009: 659).

One important structural difference between Confucius Institutes and similar European institutions is their decentralized organizational structure. Rawnsley (2009: 285) points out 'Confucius Institutes are joint ventures, are located within a university, and the partner school in China sends teachers to participate'. This differs from the European institutes, which are typically stand-alone entities supported entirely by their home governments. Entities such as the British Council or Germany's Goethe Institute operate on the basis of a hub or star network, where network members communicate through a central position or hub which, as Zaharna (2010: 99) has noted, 'effectively controls the exchange of information'. The center of the network – the London headquarters of the British Council or the Goethe Institute headquarters in Munich – provides leadership, develops structures to plan and coordinate work, recruits and manages members, solicits funds, and channels resources. Confucius Institutes, by contrast, are most often a partnership between the Hanban, a Chinese university and a foreign university, where the Chinese side normally offers teaching materials, language teachers, a co-director and a share of the budget, while international partners provide facilities and local staff, as well as contributing to overall funding (Hartig 2012). It is this aspect of Confucius Institutes as involving

cooperative arrangements between Chinese and international partner organizations that is unique and important in terms of considering network approaches to public diplomacy.

Drawing upon Zaharna's (2010) three-fold typology of networked approaches to public diplomacy, we can evaluate Confucius Institutes in terms of their approaches to network structure, network synergy and network strategy. Confucius Institutes have been described as as 'a highly networked public diplomacy initiative' (Zaharna 2010: 208), and their organizational distinctiveness as compared with the European cultural institutes has been noted above, particularly in relation to their active engagement of host country institutional partners. This analysis draws upon empirical case studies obtained through field research in Australia and Germany over a period from 2009 to 2012, and the aim here is not to discuss differences between Confucius Institutes in different countries in depth, but to provide a mapping of their operations on the ground as viewed through the tripartite formation of network structure, synergy and strategy.

The network structure of Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes appear at first glance to take a similar hub-and-spoke form to comparable cultural organizations, with Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters) in Beijing as the hub and the individual CIs around the world as the nodes. In this structure, Hanban is responsible for circulating and exchanging information and for coordinating and monitoring relevant information across the distributed network of individual institutes. In the case of CIs, however, this simple hub-node structure is complicated by the joint venture structure involving foreign universities, so that the network becomes a potentially multi-directional one, complicating the flow of information from the hub to the nodes.

One way in which the resulting communication challenges are addressed is through regional and global Confucius Institutes Conferences. The first global CI conference was held in 2006 in Beijing, and these have become annual events held in December for individual CI Directors to 'meet like-minded others, share experiences, and exchange ideas … represent[ing] the addition of direct interpersonal communication in a global stakeholder engagement process' (Zaharna 2012: 11). Through such events Hanban serves as an indirect link for CIs around the world to connect with each other. One Australian director observed that 'even though there is a lot of Hanban in [these conferences], there is on the sideline a lot of opportunity for the directors to talk to each other' (I-A1), while a German director has described the annual conferences as a 'mini version of the United Nations' (I-G1). At the 8th annual conference in 2013, for example, there were over 2,200 attendees from over 400 Confucius Institutes in attendance.

While Hanban can spread and collect a lot of information via these conferences, the flow of information from the hub to the nodes on a daily or regular basis does not work that smoothly (Hartig 2012: 264). One Australian interviewee complained that '[w]e don't ever really receive any communication about the status of our applications and the timeframe for receiving our funding. That makes trying a program, trying to stick to a budget more complicated than it needs to be. Practically speaking, this is quite a challenge' (I-A1). In the Australian case, it was also notable that different CIs

had asked in various internal documents for better and more frequent communication and better guidance from Hanban in relation to a range of operational matters. Reports from the 6th Confucius Institute Conference held in Beijing in 2011 reveal that the newly-established La Trobe University Confucius Institute sought 'more guidance from Hanban, and [to] share experiences and lessons with other Confucius Institutes', while the University of Queensland Confucius Institute asked for continued support from Hanban for its programs and activities, such as research internship study tours to China, and CI fellowships to support staff exchange between the university and China (CICRM 2011).

Zaharna is correct pointing out that theoretically there is an intensive inter-weaving of relations because international partners are not only linked to Hanban and their Chinese counterparts, but also to other CIs in their home country or to other international organizations as they may have the same Chinese partner. For example, the CI at Heidelberg University in Germany has the same Chinese partner university as the CI at the University of New South Wales, namely Shanghai Jiaotong University. Similarly, the CI at the University is Sydney is partnered with Fudan University in Shanghai, as are the CIs at Frankfurt University and Hamburg University. At the same time, interviews with CI Directors suggest that this has not necessarily led to more intense communication or even exchange or cooperation between Confucius Institutes. One Australian CI Director described the process as follows:

> We are talking to each other, complaining about what's going on. We are having the same kinds of challenges in some way or the other. There is a little bit of networking, a little bit of knowing each other, and thinking of each other every now and again does pay evidence. It does happen, but on a fairly low-key kind of basis. (I-A1)

Another interviewee explained that 'there is no formal structure for institutes to work together and cooperate. It is happening more on a personal basis' (I-A2). Examples of collaboration identified by interviewees in Australia and Germany included common invited speakers (I-A2, I-A3, I-G2) and, in the case in Germany, a punk rock band to perform at two Institutes (I-G2). In Australia, some coordination happens in cities with more than one Institute in order to avoid competition and promote cooperation between individual institutions but, once again, this is not proposed by Hanban, but occurs more organically because key local personnel know one another and coordinate activities.

It can be said, then, that the overall structural setup of the CI project has the potential to make these institute a prime example of networked public diplomacy. In reality, however, a number of circumstances prevent the network structure to unfold its full potential. First of all, the CI network is simply too big: by the end of 2013, there were 440 Confucius Institutes and over 640 Classrooms all over the globe. As a result, Hanban has ongoing problems with disseminating information to all network nodes appropriately. Second, the CI network is more complex than similar organisations as its individual nodes are more complex due to the inbuilt cooperation between Chinese and international partners. If this cooperation functions well, this contributes to the overall network of CIs; if there is limited cooperation between the two partners (for example because the local and the Chinese co-director do not get along well with each other), this weakens the individual institute and thereby the whole network. Third, as

there is no institutionalized mechanism to bring the nodes together except the annual world conferences and more irregular regional conferences, the capabilities of this network potentially get lost.

The network synergy of Confucius Institutes

One of the perceived benefits of network structures is that they can enable network synergies to emerge. Network synergies are defined as arising from the interaction or cooperation of two or more elements in a network to produce a combined network effect that is greater than the sum of the individual parts (Newman *et. a,.* 2006: 234-36). For network synergies to emerge, one would expect to see evidence of: (1) building relations within the network; (2) building relations outside of the network, as others are attracted to the network which should incorporate diversity into the network (Zaharna 2012). With regard to building relations within the network, CIs can engage in internal bonding and team building, as they are involved in both teaching and cultural activities.

Looking for the potential synergy effects, the cases of CIs in both Australia and Germany illustrate important limitations. In some instances, the scope to achieve synergies arising from the pairing of language teaching and cultural activities is undermined by particular Institutes not offering both these activities. At least two Australian CIs did not offer their own language courses and saw their role more as a facilitator for other organizations to teach Chinese, either their own university or schools in the surrounding community. Moreover, many of the Chinese teachers and co-directors only stay for short periods of one to two years, which hampers ongoing team-building opportunities.

More generally, while network members contribute to relationship building and thus strengthen the network in most CIs, it is however not found in every single institute. In Australia, we found that not all CIs had language teachers sent from China at the time of the interviews, and some CIs not having a Chinese co-director (I-A4, I-A3, I-A5), while in Germany there was at least one institute which had a Chinese co-director only located in China (I-G5). This lack of dispatched staff from China clearly limits the synergy potential of individual institutes. Another aspect limiting the synergy effects became obvious in Germany where not all teachers from China spoke German (I-G3, I-G2), which again would negatively influence the assumed possibility of network synergy. The difficulties in achieving cooperation with outside organisations because of cultural differences was noted at the 8th Global Creative Industries Conference in December 2013 when Xu Lin, the general-secretary of Hanban, pointed out that about 110 CIs do not hold the required annual Board of Directors meeting, and that various Chinese co-directors complained about their personal situation abroad, mainly due to a lack of communication with local directors.

With regard to building external relationships, a particularly important issue for CIs has been to establish links to local communities. We found some evidence of this from case studies in Australia and Germany, with Confucius Classrooms being developed in cooperation with local schools, as well as enrolment in Confucius Institutes courses by interested public from the community, as well as staff and students form the host institutions. Another important set of external relations were with local businesses, and CIs in Australia had developed tailored language courses

for business people (I-A3), and also worked with local companies to be external sponsors for their programs (I-G2, I-A3).

The network strategy of Confucius Institutes

The third dimension of the network communication approach concerns network strategy, or the co-creation of credibility, master narratives and identity. One of the fundamental differences between the mass communication approach to public diplomacy and the network communication approach is that the first '*begins* with a pre-determined message' whereas the latter '*ends* with the message or story' (Zaharna 2010: 111). In this setting, 'networks *first* establish the structure and dynamics for effective communication channels, *then* members collaborate to craft the message. Because the message or story is co-created across cultures, it is not tied to any one culture. Rather than acting as a barrier or impediment, culture is incorporated into network dynamics and becomes a rich source of team-coalition synergy' (Zaharna 2010: 111 – emphasis in original).

It is precisely this assumption that networks may refine overall public diplomacy 'messages' that is of importance in the study of Confucius Institutes. Recalling that it is not enough simply to have a network of cultural institutes that disseminate top-down communication determined message from a central headquarters, there has to be a structure that enables collaboration in order to more effectively craft messages. This makes it important to study the joint-venture structure of CIs, which makes CIs a prime example of collaboration in public diplomacy, defined as 'initiatives that feature cross-national participation in a joint venture or project with a clearly defined goal' (Cowan & Arsenault 2008:10).

Having both local staff and staff dispatched from China, Confucius Institutes are theoretically predestined to establish the structure and dynamics for effective communication channels with members collaborate to craft the program, and thereby the message, of individual institutes which is co-created across cultures. When a CI is in the position that is has both local and Chinese staff who work together very well, this cooperation helps to set up an appealing program with a variety of events and topics discussed. However, there are at least two broad limitations here. First, as mentioned above, not all Confucius Institutes actually have staff dispatched from China all the time which influences both the potential synergy effects within individual CIs but also the strategy. Taking this into consideration, it becomes clear that while Confucius Institutes have more potential to co-create a narrative than other comparable cultural institutes, what is also apparent is that this capacity very much depends on the actual situation on the ground. The fact that the CI network is still growing generates ongoing difficulties in resourcing individual CIs and in strategic coordination.

The second limitation concerns the question of credibility with the messages coming from Confucius Institutes. While it is undoubtedly the case that CIs have the potential to emphasise the value of learning Chinese and getting in contact with Chinese culture, the aspect of being the leading Chinese language teaching institution needs clarification. Not all CIs actually teach Chinese, and those that do often experience practical issues related to teaching materials and methods which may hamper CI credibility. It can also be noted that in most major cities, Confucius Institutes are only

one of a number of providers of Chinese language teaching. In these places CIs actually compete with sometimes long-established and well respected institutions in this field, and the fact that CIs are related to the Chinese government does frequently undermine their credibility, whether justified or not.

The bigger issue in terms of credibility however concerns the content provided by Confucius Institutes, especially through non-language events. Next to their task of introducing Chinese language to people abroad, Confucius Institutes also introduce Chinese culture and provide information about China. In order to do this, Confucius Institutes offer various cultural classes such as paper cutting, cooking courses or calligraphy, and organise film screenings, song contests or seminars and lectures dealing with various China-related topics and issues. In this context, it is apparent that some topics, such as the future status of Taiwan, the Dalai Lama, Falun Gong or the Tiananmen events of 1989 are normally off-limits for Confucius Institutes. As one Australian director put it, 'There are no restrictions, but obviously if I would pay the Dalai Lama to come to Australia with Hanban money they would not be happy. You don't have to be a genius to know that' (I-A3). The statement that Hanban does not restrict the daily work is made throughout many CIs, and in general terms that is an accurate observation. There are, however, instances where Beijing's long arm in form of local Embassies Consulates reaches for Institutes. In Germany, one director admitted that 'Our independence is limited regarding precarious topics. If topics like Tibet or Taiwan would be approached too critical, this could be difficult' (I-G2). Another director is sure that 'as long as I don't do anything anti-communist or pro Falun Gong, I don't think my Chinese co-director would intervene in anything I do' (I-G4).

Conclusion

There cannot be any doubt that public and cultural diplomacy have to be aligned with modern communication dynamics which favor horizontal, many-to-many relationships and exchange through networks, over one-directional and one-to-many mass communication approaches, where information was presumed to be sent to largely passive audiences in order to win their hearts and minds. Relational and networked approaches to public diplomacy clearly provide a new direction in this regard, however, as the case studies of Confucius Institutes illustrates, even these approaches are not a panacea. One promising way to go beyond top-down, one-way mass communications approaches lies in the networked structure of Confucius Institutes, which requires the engagement of local stakeholders who can much better contribute to programs offered by CIs. Nevertheless, as pointed out, this innovative approach of incorporating local parties is not automatically promising and in the case of China's cultural outposts this is hampered by two broader sets of issues.

On the one hand there are several practical components that limit the network dimension, including the outlined human resources issues that concern the network synergy or problems of teaching materials and methods affecting the credibility. On the other hand, there are limitations resulting from the political constitution of the Chinese state, which bear on the content of CIs and thereby also the credibility of the whole network. Although due to their unique structure one can describe Confucius Institutes as 'the most open-minded institution China has ever had' (Liu, H 2008:31), nevertheless CIs and people in charge are at times reminded that China's overall

public diplomacy system is still largely a state-centric endeavor and this innovative approach to include both local and Chinese staff in order to create a suitable program and narrative for these cultural institutes stretches its limits due to the authoritarian Chinese state which does not wish to discuss certain topics in public, a fact that partially affects the credibility of the whole project. And as credibility is an important source of soft power, as Nye reminds us (Nye 2004:106), this drawback cannot be offset by even the smartest approaches to public diplomacy.

Appendix

List of interviewees

Interview number	Position and Affiliation	Date of interview(s)
I-A1	Director, Australian CI	20 April 2011
I-A2	Director Australian CI	29 April 2011
I-A3	Director Australian CI	12 May 2011
I-A4	Director Australian CI	4 April 2011
I-A5	Director Australian CI	2 May 2011
I-G1	Director, German CI	13 December 2011
I-G2	Director, German CI	30 June 2011, 12 January 2012
IG-3	Director, German CI	16 January 2012
IG-4	Director, German CI	27 October 2009
IG-5	Director, German CI	11 May 2010

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