CHINA’S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

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Background: China’s Cultural Diplomacy Efforts

• China’s well-known cultural diplomacy initiatives such as Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative
• Debates in recipient countries how to react (rejection, submission, negotiation)
• Setting up of a research project ‘China's Cultural Diplomacy and the Role of Non-State Actors’, 2015-2017. With the aim to analyze
  • the regional variations in China’s cultural diplomacy
  • the new forms of Chinese cultural diplomacy, including civil society actors (non-state actors), ethnic minorities, and trans-migrants
Comparative Approach

• Empirical field research in four regions
  • Europe: Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland
  • Central Asia Kazakhstan (Almaty) and Uzbekistan (Tashkent)
  • Middle East: United Arabic Emirates
  • Southeast Asia: Malaysia

• Including
  • Review of existing scholarly (theoretical and empirical) literature regarding the phenomenon of Chinese cultural diplomacy
  • Analysis of available official documents (programs, leaflets, official statements, white books)
  • Interviews and research stay in the respective regions
Results (with a Special Focus on Policy Makers)

- Variety of actors (CD is carried out by including various transnational Chinese and non-Chinese actors, local actors)
- China’s need for collaboration and negotiation with local groups
- Need for incorporation of local knowledge and local experts, including transnational actors
Report of the Four Research Groups

• Researched sites of China’s cultural diplomacy /and or research of actors’ networks
• Regional particularities
• Advice for policy makers (including EU policy makers), civil society and media
The Official Concept of Culture and Cultural Diplomacy

- China = “people’s democracy”, Leninist party-state, ideocracy
- Communist Party of China = the central political actor formally or factually present in all processes
- Cultural diplomacy:
  - moderation by business factors (Wang 2011)
  - growing number of actors (d’Hooghe 2015)
  - ‘new public diplomacy’ (Hartig 2016)
- The party-state remains the main actor
- Xi Jinping (2012 - ?) – consolidation of party-state mechanisms
Cultural Diplomacy as Ideational Activity I

— Reinvigoration of the role of ideology and propaganda
— Propagandistic, Ideational, and Cultural System (xuanchuan sixiang wenhua xitong)
— Thought-work (sixiang gongzuo), thought-management (sixiang guanli), public opinion guidance (yulun yindao; Anne-Marie Brady 2012, Edney 2012)
— Culture = ideology, means of legitimation
— Historical precedents (Hua-Xia, laihua, Tianxia; Republic of China)
— Mao Zedong (1942): revolutionary literature and art
— Deng Xiaoping (1980s): material civilization + spiritual civilization
— Jiang Zemin (1989-2002): advanced culture (Three Represents)
Cultural Diplomacy as Ideational Activity II

— Xi Jinping: socialist culture, progressive socialist culture, socialist cultural power
— ‘The building of socialist culture must be guided by Marxism’
— China’s culture = traditional, ethnic, revolutionary, contemporary
— Unique (tebie) traditional culture = uniquely Chinese (tese) socio-political model
— Cultural confidence (Four Confidences)
— Cultural security: Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841)—‘in order to annihilate another country, it is necessary to destroy its history; in order to destroy a people, it is necessary to destroy its culture’
Public Diplomacy Apparatus

— Central Leading Small Group for Propagandistic and Ideational Work
— Central Propaganda Department
— Domestic/internal + foreign/external propaganda
— Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Foreign Liaison Office of People’s Consultative Conference
— Controls all activities and means involved in communication and the spread of information, such as media, publishing, advertising, information communication technologies, social science research, education, culture, health, sport, tourism..
— Combines with Foreign Affairs System or Military System
— Information activities: State Council Information Office, embassies, Xinhua, China Global Television Network, China Radio International, China Daily, Global Times, Beijing Review..
— Cultural and exchange activities: Confucius Institutes (Min. of Education), China Cultural Centre (Min. of Culture)
— Other state actors: provincial and municipal organs, “civil society” groups, GONGOs, “people’s diplomacy” associations, intellectual elites, academic institutions, overseas Chinese..

Limitations of the Central Concept

— Zhao Kejin (2014): excessive role of government, overemphasis on traditional culture, inaccessibility, disregard for global communication methods and perspectives on China
— Credibility of the message
Case 1: China’s CD in Central Europe

• Focus on two capitals Vienna and Berlin
  • Long tradition of Chinese-European cultural and political relations
  • Great variety of actors and transcultural/transnational networks

• Comparison to Olomouc (Czech Republic) and Freiburg (Germany)
  • Non capitals
  • University cities with a Confucius Institute

Astrid Lipinsky, University Vienna, and Jens Damm, Chang Jung University, Tainan
China’s CD in European Capitals

• Vienna and Berlin
• Importance of a long tradition of cultural exchange
  • Ranging from imperial luxury (Chinoiseries) to academic and student exchanges (communism, democracy)
• Only partly colonial and imperialistic relation, often more equal traditions/relations
• For centuries strong emphasis on cultural exchange (mutual admiration for an alien high culture), but also fear (China as threat and opportunity)
Newer Developments: Commercialization of Art I

- Art is a core part of Chinese cultural diplomacy
- Done by non-state actors
- With commercial interests, either by ticket-sales or by the sale of Chinese art to collectors
- Private gallery interest in China
Newer Developments II: Increased Involvement of Transnational and Local Civil Society

• Research found that there is no singular type of Confucius Institute, and that they differ due to:

  The location – capital or not
  The person of the local director
  The relationship with Chinese studies/Sinology.
Recommendation for Policy Makers from Vienna and Berlin

• Discussion of China’s efforts with the different local experts

• In China-sponsored workshops no “scissors in the head“ (as many Chiense experts including CI experts are not “party members“ but also academics and intellectuals with their own agenda

• Use the positive mutual image (in the case of Berlin and Vienna) in terms of art and civil society exchange also for better cooperation in terms of policy

• Problem: smaller cities, capitals
Case 2: China’s CD in Central Asia

- Kazakhstan (Almaty) and Uzbekistan (Tashkent)
- Importance of millennia of mutual influence, neighborhood, conflicts
  - Only partly colonial and imperialistic tradition.
  - Central Asian societies belong to the spheres of influence of Islam, Russia, US, EU and China
- CA authoritarian governments support the initiative of China (but there is diversity of opinions on both state and non-state levels)
Newer Developments: ‘Silk Road Diplomacy’

• Since 2013 dominant focus on ‘Silk Road diplomacy’ (connected with the PRC’s official foreign policy entitled Economic Belt of the Silk Road).

• Image of positive effort, mutual exchange, trade, harmony.

• In practice, diverse group of actors work to adjust the local conditions to the foreign and domestic needs of the PRC.
Newer Developments: ‘Silk Road Diplomacy’
Newer Developments: ‘Silk Road Diplomacy’

• How?
• Relating the content of different academic publications to the specific version of history of cooperation on the Silk Road.
• Organizing public and cultural events that are tailored to the PRC’s version of the Silk Road.
Newer Developments II: ‘China’ Transnational

- Diverse local actors, including public agents, such as universities, experts, businesses, artists, play role in this process.
- It is not only Chinese minorities, but also – in case of Central Asia – businesses, Dungans, elites, intellectuals, who from many reasons cooperate on spreading the Chinese image.
- China thus become not to be associated with the PRC, but it is more useful to see it and perceive it as a ‘transnational societal space’ or ‘field’.
Recommendations for the Policy Makers

• Support the diversity of historical narratives and foster respect for existing Central Asian historical discourse

• Support two-way mutual cultural exchange

• Involve local civil society (cultural associations, centers, artists, libraries, language centers, minorities) into the dialogue about Central Asia’s history and its relation with the EU and European countries.

• Perception of EU and European countries as ‘transnational societal field’ or ‘space’.
Case 3: A Muslim China - The way to attract the Arabs? (Example of the UAE)

• Islam culture is the main tool to promote China in the Arab countries” (Chinese Ministry of Culture).

• Belt and Road Initiative:

• Economic development: - on national level - export + international cooperation
  • On local level (successor of the Xibu da kaifa)
(Inter)national Interests: Promoting Chine-Arab friendship in the UAE

• China - UAE: Pragmatic relation based economic cooperation
• (China, one of the main economic partners for the UAE /
• UAE, China’s oil supplier, major hub for Chinese re-export)
• Cultural ties and cultural diplomacy in the UAE
  • (Facing a heterogeneous spatial and social structure, no muslim “public”, lack of public spaces)
  • Mainly (successfully) through (UAE) corporations; following economic interests
  • Targeting: Chinese diaspora in the UAE / Chinese tourists
  • Active promoting through EAU; role of Chinese cultural diplomacy actors often passive
Local development: Promoting Chinese-Arab friendship in China

- Ningxia Hui Autonomous region - New brand: The centre of China-Arab friendship
- Promoting Muslim China to encourage investments - boosting local development
- Main objectives:
  - Representing China as a Muslim Country (highlighting cultural similarities)
    - -> cultural diplomacy
  - Attracting foreign investment (Muslim investors targeted for their potential sympathy with Chinese Muslim regions) + State subsidies to facilitate the China-Arab agenda (Inland Pilot Economic Zone)
    - -> local development
  - OBOR (Silk Road link, Comprehensive economic zone)
    - -> national development
  - Hui
    - -> national security
  - Active role of Chinese cultural diplomacy - promoting (Chinese) Muslim culture. (Economic motivation)
  - Arabs also rhetorically indispensable for the justification of the state investments to develop local infrastructure in Ningxia. (Economic motivation)
Win-Win balance in the China-Arab connections

• National economic development (export increase) - local economic development (Arab investments in China)

• Win - Win (for China)

• Win for others is possible, but not the main goal of Chinese agenda
Case 4: Reflections on China-Malaysia “Special Relationship” and the Limitations for China’s Cultural Diplomacy

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Fieldwork Findings

• Use of cultural tools to bolster China’s influence in Malaysia - unique and also different from China’s cultural diplomacy campaigns, witnessed recently in Europe

• The result of having a large Chinese community

• ---) difficult for China to promote its culture and traditions in Malaysia as something new and exotic

• Majority population already familiar with these due to their everyday interaction with Chinese Malaysians

• CCD in Malaysia – limited, except for the two CIs and educational sector
Specific conditions, specific consequences

• China – makes use of the presence of the Chinese community – as representatives of Greater China, not the PRC

• In addition to that:

• China – uses a wide range of “hard power” tools in Malaysia

• In that sense – reliant on the support of the M´sian government

• enjoys a ´special´ relationship with Malaysia
  • Party-based diplomacy

• Does not conduct CD campaigns seen in Europe, but uses shared history, religion and achievements
Building up mutual ties

• After decades enmity and distrust – gradual improvement
• From 1980s – *increasing rapprochement* with China, due to PM Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003)
• Under current PM Najib Razak (2009-)
• further *deepening of the “special relationship”*
  • between Malaysia and China
• culminated in the year 2014, the 40th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic ties – set as the *Year of Malaysia-China Friendship* to commemorate this anniversary
The Najib Razak era (since 2009)

- To celebrate the anniversary, China promised to deliver two pandas to the National ZOO of Malaysia ("panda diplomacy")
- This was postponed due to the MH370 flight tragedy, which soured mutual ties and partially marred some of the festivities
- The pandas delivered later the same year and other commemorations of the special relation did take place
Other achievements of 2014

• **Chinese-Malay Studies Centre** (in addition to the existing *Bahasa Melayu Centre*) - established in Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU)

• **Non-economic rapprochement** - the intensity of mutual bilateral agreements between Chinese and Malaysian universities

• Numerous students’ exchanges, scholarships and fellowships

• Civil servants exchange
Education: a major tool of China’s public diplomacy in Malaysia

- Two Confucius Institutes - set up in Malaysia recently
- 10 Chinese universities - offer degree programs in Malay Studies
- On the Malaysian side, the Institute of China Studies (ICS) at the University of Malaya – receives great support from the university management, including a new venue
- High-profile conferences such as the international conference “Reconnecting China with the Muslim World”
  - organized in 2015 by the ICS together with the Zheng He International Peace Foundation and Persatuan Persahabatan Malaysia-China
Xiamen University Malaysia Campus

• **Xiamen University** – established in early 2016 in Sepang – **second Chinese university campus abroad** ever (!!!)

• The groundbreaking ceremony in 2014 – attended by PM: “symbolic of the friendship between M´sia and China“

• PM: Malaysia – ranks 11th on the UNESCO list of preferred destinations for education

• XUMC – will enhance Malaysia´s position, will become a hub for world-class education
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A Precarious Situation

- Any (open) **conflict strongly unwelcome** – mutual trading attractivity – too high
- China: Malaysia´s biggest trading partner in the world
- Malaysia – China´s 8th most important trading associate globally (!), no. 1 in Southeast Asia and 3rd biggest partner in Asia

- despite signs of **tension**, the **trading exchange - huge** and a number of **large-scale projects are taking place**, others planned
Large Chinese Investments

- **Industrial parks** (Kuantan),
- **Hydro power plants** (Bakun Dam, Sarawak)
- **International ports** (Melaka, Penang, Kuala Linggi, Carey Island) –
- **High-speed rails** – *East Coast Railway Line* - ②
- **Mines** (a gold mine in Kelantan)
- **Real estate** (China biggest investor in M’sia) and **development megaprojects** - *Bandar Malaysia* and *Iskandar Malaysia*
Some Projects Welcome, Many Cause Controversies

• A) government – overly positive voices these megaprints are beneficial for regional and national development

• B) activists - strongly critical as to the massive ecological damage, energetic instability and other negative impacts

• the questions is what the real benefits for the local communities are and/or whether these developments amount to open exploitation
Main issues

• **A huge housing complex project** in Johor (Iskandar Malaysia)
  • allegedly a plan to house thousands of middle-class Chinese pensioners – *preparation to build a colony?* (Dennis Ignatius) – *Malaysia My Second Home program*

• **Some investments** – signs of corruption

• all **major ports (co-)owned by ONE foreign power?** – not a comforting idea

• **Not** all Chinese investors **utilize local materials and local laborers**
Summary

• China – viewed as a immensely important trading partner and investor

• The idea of a “special relation“ – “cherished“ by the BN government and also by the Chinese community

• Yet, caution remains due to current developments (OBOR) and undertones of suspision (legacy of the past)
THE CRUCIAL QUESTION(S)

• How much negative impact / how many negative issues are Malaysians willing to tolerate and what are the limits that must not be exceeded?

• Equilibrium of relations – fragile – walking on thin ice

• Latent problems
  • May result in a very explosive situation but also may be sustainable as long as the pros prevail and China does not cross the proverbial line

• Critics: “not true that M´sia must not be choosy because China’s economy is huge and growing while Malaysia’s is sluggish”
• Arguably, China needs Malaysia more than Malaysia needs China
• Beijing needs M’sian participation in order to realize its Belt and Road Initiative
• Malaysia´s problem as a nation - Najib needs China to bail him out of his failed ventures, especially 1MDB
• Serious strategic and security issues – caution remains in place
• CD – not of such importance