

# Cultural Statecraft

## The Confucius Institute Project in Australia

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## Abstract

The last several decades have seen China continue to grow its position as a significant power in regional and world affairs. One such strategy for cultivating its international image has been the Confucius Institute (CI) project, a centrally-coordinated network of not-for profit bodies tasked with promoting Chinese language and culture in overseas educational institutions. Australia has become host to one of the largest number of CIs in a single country, with fourteen CIs established in Australian partnering institutions to date. By focusing on the CI project in Australia's domestic context, an interesting question arises: Why has the Chinese government promoted the growth of the Confucius Institute project in Australia and elsewhere? I argue that the Chinese state has used the CI project as one of its key mechanisms of cultural statecraft, facilitating China's national development in the same manner as its broader statecraft apparatus. Drawing upon primary research including interviews with employees of the CIs, I show that the government has coordinated the CI Project through a loosely centralised model in which individual CIs are delegated with sufficiently high levels of autonomy over their operation and management. This allows the Chinese state to efficiently promote the learning of Chinese culture and the Chinese language in much the same benign manner as the efforts of other governments. However, given the relatively poor level of transparency in the CI project's operations in educational institutions throughout Australia, the possibility for the CIs to be used as tools of the Chinese state's sharp power cannot be discounted.

## Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

This thesis was granted ethics approval on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, 2019.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Following liberalising reforms and rapid economic development over the last several decades, China has begun to consolidate a position as a significant power in world affairs. Alongside its economic and military rise, the Chinese government has increased its cultural initiatives as an additional means to further its national interests (Q. Chen, 2016). This has caused some anxiety in the Western world, of which several writers have argued is due China being regarded outside their own historical and ideological context (Ling, 2013; Machida, 2010). As China has become further enmeshed in international institutions and with other nations, there has been increasing interest on the extent to which its rise is challenging the Western-led world order.

On one side of the debate are writers who argue that China is pursuing a more assertive foreign policy and contesting the norms and institutions underlying the current world order. Underlying this agenda may be the government's need to placate nationalistic interest groups and preserve domestic legitimacy (Gries, 2004; Johnston, 2017). On the other hand, other writers view China's foreign policy as an effort to maintain the institutions of the current world order given the benefits China has reaped through its integration with, not displacement of, multilateral institutions (Nathan, 2016; G. Wang, 2008, p. 22; J. Wang, 2015; W. Zhang, 2012). This perspective argues that the Chinese government's foreign policy actions should be understood within the prism of its top priority, which is to pursue national development.

The debate over the nature of the Chinese state's growing power (as a benevolent Great Power utilising soft power to achieve its aims or as a malevolent Great Power seeking to exercise hard power to achieve its objectives) has had significant interest in Australia given the increasing level of trade and interdependence between the two countries. Sensing economic opportunities and desiring greater independence from the US, Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam cemented formal relations with China in 1972 (Mackerras, 2014, p. 234). Particularly following Chinese President Deng Xiaoping's liberalising reforms from 1978, this relationship continued to grow in economic importance. In 2007, China overtook Japan to become Australia's largest trading partner (Australian Embassy in China, 2019). China's position as Australia's dominant trading partner has continued to solidify year on year, with recent trade statistics revealing that it now receives over a third of Australia's exports (DFaT, 2019b).

While the majority of academic literature on China's influence in Australia has been published from an economic perspective, there has been an increasing diversity of discourse propagated by different interest groups. On one side, 'China opportunity' advocates have extolled the merits of greater collaboration with our most important economic partner and dismissed potential concerns as unsubstantiated racism (eg. Carr, 2018; Laurenceson, 2018). Conversely, China sceptics have promoted 'China threat' and 'China panic' narratives that warn of the CCP's malicious penetration of Australian government and civil society institutions (eg. Hamilton, 2018), at times

exhibiting continuity with early colonial invasion discourses (Lee & Laurenceson, 2019).

Both sides of this debate have been accused of oversimplifying the topic in order to promote their own interests. Ang (2016) has argued that China opportunists have largely been unable to conceive of China in an inclusive framework outside of the economic benefits it brings, and as such have neglected non-economic aspects of the Australia-China relationship. Similarly, others have highlighted that the way China critics have constructed China as a nation has reinforced the othering of China and its conception as a threat, even as Australia has been one of the largest beneficiaries of its rise (Laurenceson, 2018; C. Pan, 2018). McCarthy and Song (2018a, p. 324) have discussed the nature of this debate, labelling its tendency to promote anxiety over evidence as 'Changst'. Due to this, China's domestic initiatives in Australia have been largely treated from an assumption of suspicion (McCarthy & Song, 2018b), with writers raising concerns of adverse influence over domestic politics and academic institutions (eg. J. Fitzgerald, 2018; Goodman, 2017; Hamilton, 2018; Joske, 2018). Nowhere are such concerns over China's rise more apparent than in the policy and scholarly interest in the 'Confucius Institutes'.

Since 2004, one of China's key cultural foreign policy initiatives has been the establishment of the Confucius Institute (CI) project. This is organised as a centrally-coordinated network of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs), not-for profit bodies tasked with running classes and events to promote Chinese



language and culture in foreign education institutions<sup>1</sup> across the world. The growth of the CI project in the world has been meteoric. As of the beginning of 2019, there were 548 CIs and 1193 CCs across 154 countries and regions (Hanban, 2019a). The CI project has followed this trend in Australia, where it has been rapidly embraced by educational institutions for their funding, resources and networking opportunities (Hartig, 2016, p. 125). Due to this, as of the beginning of 2019, Australia is host to 14 CIs and 67 CCs (Gil, 2019). These figures are significant as Australia is now the third largest destination for CIs and CCs in the world, just behind the United States and United Kingdom (Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016).

Contrasting to the uptake of CIs and CCs by host institutions, most public literature on the CI project in Australia has exhibited continuity with discourses of Changst. This has been witnessed in the CI project being the subject of unsubstantiated accusations, including that it is a propaganda mouthpiece for singing ‘praises to Mao’ (D. Liu, 2018) and a mechanism of China’s ‘silent invasion’ of Australia (Hamilton, 2018). The effect of this discourse has now also been witnessed in recent state and federal government activities. In May 2018, after significant criticism from parents and community groups, the CC program in NSW public schools was placed under review (Gerathy & Kozaki, 2018; NSW DoE, 2019a). After the publication of this review in August 2019, the Department has announced that it will be closing all

<sup>1</sup> While CI agreements only specify the host institution to be a legally registered educational organisation (Hanban, 2019e), almost all CIs are hosted by a university. CCs are coordinated by a partnering CI and are typically hosted in primary and high schools, although have also been established in some universities and private colleges (Hartig, 2016, p. 2).

CCs at the end of the year (Baker & Chung, 2019). Additionally, all Australian CIs have been targeted by the Australian federal government's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme due to their suspected influence over Australia's government and educational institutions (Hunter, 2019).

These recent events raise the question of whether there are serious grounds for concern over the CI project's influence in Australian political and economic life, or its criticisms are merely a thinly-veiled form of xenophobic or racist beliefs. To answer this, further research needs to be conducted on China's specific engagement with the CI project in Australia and the structure and nature of its operation in local contexts.

### **Research Question and Argument**

Given the interest in the nature and functions of the CI Project in Australia and the sheer scale of the CI Project, an interesting question arises: Why has the Chinese government promoted the growth of the Confucius Institute project in Australia and elsewhere?

By examining the ownership structures, funding sources, operations and management of the global CI project and its iterations in Australia, I argue that the

Chinese state has used the CIs<sup>2</sup> as one of its key mechanisms of ‘cultural statecraft’. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has utilised the CI project as part of a broader effort to consolidate its domestic legitimacy, the immediate purpose behind the CIs is to promote a desired image of China to the world and enrich the learning of Chinese culture and language in much the same benign manner as the efforts of other governments. The government has coordinated the CI Project through a loosely centralised model in which individual CIs are delegated with sufficiently high levels of autonomy over their operation and management in consultation with the educational institutions in the host country in which the CIs are based. Therefore, the Chinese government has most likely been unwilling to exercise sharp power through the CIs. However, given the relatively poor level of transparency in the CI project’s operations in educational institutions throughout Australia, there is insufficient evidence to discount the possibility that the CIs can be used to exert the Chinese state’s sharp power aims.

## **Research Methods**

To investigate this question, I have made use of qualitative research methods. Firstly, I conducted interviews in English, either in person, by phone or through email. All participants were employed by organisations in Sydney, and interviews were restricted to language teachers and key experts in relation to the CI project and

<sup>2</sup> When referring to the Chinese state’s use of the CIs broadly, I also include CCs. However, given their relatively minor role in the CI project and (in the majority of cases) subservience to a coordinating CI, I do not refer to CCs explicitly unless discussing them directly.

China's influence in Australia. This included four academics and a former politician, whose employment has involved interaction with China-affiliated organisations. In addition, I interviewed a Chinese language teacher employed by a CI and a teacher who has overseen the management of the CC in the school of their employment. All interviews were targeted to the participants' relevant experiences in relation to their employment. In-person and phone interviews were semi-structured to allow further expansion on points of interest that were raised in the course of the interview. To protect the identity of participants, interviews are anonymous and their places of employment are not disclosed.<sup>3</sup>

Both Hartig (2016) and Gil (2017b) have previously conducted interviews with CI and Chinese government staff on the aims and specific mechanisms of CIs in Australia; while Hartig analysed the structure of CI partnerships, Gil focused on their impacts on both state and society level. My interviews aimed to expand upon this knowledge, particularly in relation to understanding the multiplicity of influences on CIs outside the central organisation of the CCP and any adjustment in strategy due to the recent increase in public scrutiny of Chinese organisations and individuals in media and political discourses.

<sup>3</sup> When citing interviews, I refer to their interview code. For example, the Confucius Institute language teacher I interviewed has been coded 'CI1'. A complete list of interviews and their interview codes can be found in Appendix 2.

It must be acknowledged that there is no way of verifying the truthfulness or reliability of the responses of interviews conducted, particularly in regard to respondents who may be compelled to give particular responses by their employer. As such, they are used in addition with official policy reports, media statements, speeches, and white papers from Australian and Chinese government sources. This included official publications and leaders' speeches, as well as Australian and Chinese media releases. These sources posed limitations concerning the information available on China's government, the CI project and the operation of individual CIs. Additionally, many sources authored by Chinese institutions did not have English versions, and those that did potentially altered or removed content from the original. To address this, I utilised both English and Chinese sources when available, sought assistance from a native Chinese speaker to verify my translations and have acknowledged when there are gaps in information.

Due to the limitations of the thesis framework, this study's empirical contributions focus on Australia, particularly New South Wales. In addition, due to time, access and ethics limitations, the scope of primary research is limited. The analytical framework has additionally posed some limitations to this study. My identified variables are not able to be easily quantitatively measured, and as such I have relied on qualitative judgement. Lastly, due to the decentralised organisation of the CI project and the geographic limitation of my study, care should be taken in drawing broader conclusions about the Chinese state's ambitions and the operation of the wider CI project in other national contexts.

## **Academic Contributions**

This thesis firstly contributes to current debates on China's national goals and their implications for its role in world affairs. By using the framework of cultural statecraft, I build upon existing studies that have predominantly analysed China's international engagement through the lens of economic statecraft. As one of China's key cultural statecraft initiatives, the ambitions behind the broader CI project suggest that while the Chinese state may be assuming a greater role in world affairs and has increased efforts to improve its international image, these goals remain secondary to its key priority of continuing China's national development and maintaining the legitimacy of the CCP's domestic governance.

This study secondly contributes to current debates over the extent of China's influence in Australian social and political life. The findings of this thesis suggest that the Chinese government has generally promoted its interests in Australia through a decentralised mode of operation, avoiding direct involvement in China-affiliated organisations and individuals. This has allowed the Chinese state to exercise reasonable soft power in order to facilitate desirable partnerships with Australian institutions. However, there remain areas of Australia's academic and political landscape where the CCP may be exercising sharper influence. Additionally, in the case of sharp power being exercised, it is difficult to determine whether this is being

directly orchestrated by the CCP, operationalised through more indirect means or a result of uncoerced individual efforts.

## **Chapter Outline**

I will develop my argument in the following steps.

Chapter 2 outlines the analytical framework for this study. It firstly explores the concept of 'cultural statecraft', which is used to understand the Chinese government's purposes behind the CI project. This is complemented by 'structural power', which theorises the CI project's structure of operation. Finally, it reviews the 'soft vs hard power' debate which will be applied to the CI project in order to understand the nature of its power exercised.

Chapter 3 examines China's broader national ambitions and historical context from which it has developed its foreign affairs agenda. It then provides an overview of the Chinese state's general foreign affairs operations and as localised in Australia in order to contextualise the operation of the CI project.

Chapter 4 discusses the broader CI project in relation to China's national ambitions. It firstly discusses the CI project's conception and ideological underpinnings. This chapter then analyses the structure of the CI project's macro organisation, including its management and funding.

Chapter 5 discusses the CI project as exercised in Australia. It firstly investigates the structure of localised CI operations. Secondly, it analyses the nature of their influence exercised on host institutions and other stakeholders. Finally, the chapter concludes by synthesising this information and producing its key findings.

Chapter 6 concludes by summarising the key findings of this thesis, outlining the implications of these findings for broader debates and stating possibilities for further research.



## Chapter 2: Analytical Framework

This chapter outlines the analytical framework and defines the key concepts that will be utilised in this thesis. The first concept explored is cultural statecraft, which frames the Chinese state's ambitions behind utilising mechanisms such as the CI project. The second concept this study uses is structural power, which will be used to explain the operation of the CI project. Structural power is firstly used to theorise the operation of how a state exercises power outside its domestic territory. Secondly, it is explored in relation to the nature of power using the soft-hard spectrum as previously explored by theorists such as Nye (2004).

### **Cultural Statecraft**

Statecraft in international relations is the use of national means or resources in order to pursue foreign affairs goals (Jonsson, 2012, p. 15). As part of a nation's broader statecraft strategy, cultural statecraft focuses upon a state's use of cultural measures. Although many studies have analysed the cultural initiatives of states through the framework of soft power, the appropriateness of the concept for understanding the goals behind China's statecraft has been questioned due to its ethnocentrism and universalisation of liberal-democratic governance (Fan, 2008; Forsberg & Smith, 2016, p. 130).<sup>4</sup> As such, cultural statecraft was proposed by Forsberg and Smith (2016) as a more appropriate concept through which to analyse

<sup>4</sup> While soft power does not adequately conceptualise the Chinese government's ambitions behind promoting the CI project, it is used in subsequent discussion as a variable for analysing the nature of its influence.

the cultural initiatives of non-Western states such as China and Russia. In comparison to soft power's civil society focus, cultural statecraft acknowledges the active role of states in using these measures to pursue their ambitions (Forsberg & Smith, 2016, p. 130). In the case of China, cultural statecraft also better frames the CCP's attempts to use its foreign affairs initiatives to support achieving its domestic goals.

### National Goals

To comprehend China's use of cultural statecraft, it is important to first understand the specific ends to which it is being employed. There is significant consensus that the Chinese government's central aim for its foreign policy is to ensure a stable international environment that facilitates its national economic development (Brown, 2017, pp. 18-24; G. Chan, 2018, p. 9; Sutter, 2012, p. 2). In addition, China's cultural statecraft is understood as a means of promoting a favourable national identity to the world. These goals serve to support the CCP's ultimate objective of preserving its domestic legitimacy (Wilson, 2015, 2016).

In comparison to these inward-focused ambitions, some scholars have argued that China's engagement in world affairs would be better understood as pursuing hegemonic challenge to the current US-led world order (Feng & He, 2017; Ikenberry, 2013; Johnston, 2013). The definition of hegemony in international relations is contested; however, it is broadly understood to be a position of ideological or material dominance, affording the hegemon a place of privilege in world affairs (Cox,

1987, p. 7; Keohane, 1984, pp. 34-35; Nye, 1990, p. 186). While hegemony predominantly benefits the ruling hegemon, it has been argued that it serves as an overall positive structure that maintains peace and stability (such as in the case of US hegemony) (Keohane, 1984, p. 31). However, it has also been argued that rising states will inevitably agitate for hegemonic transition as it is in their national interest to consolidate a position of privilege, provoking instability and conflict (Allison, 2014).<sup>5</sup>

Those believing the CCP to have hegemonic ambitions have argued that as it consolidates its economic and military power, it is inevitable that the Chinese state will seek to challenge the norms and institutions of the current world order in order to pursue its own interests (eg. Feng & He, 2017; Ikenberry, 2013; Johnston, 2013). Additionally, the Chinese elite may be influenced domestically by ideas promoted by the mass 'common-sense'<sup>6</sup> (Allan, Vucetic, & Hopf, 2018; Hopf, 2013). This could explain China's civil society-led nationalism compelling the CCP to pursue a more assertive foreign policy direction in order to maintain domestic legitimacy and ensure national stability (Callahan, 2015; Cho & Jeong, 2008; Johnston, 2013; Karatasli & Kumral, 2017; Quek & Johnston, 2018; Shirk, 2007), even when the

<sup>5</sup> Allison (2014) has conceptualised this phenomenon as the, 'Thucydides Trap'. Referencing the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, he has urged the need for restraint and cooperation between existing and rising hegemonies in order to avoid conflict (p. 78).

<sup>6</sup> While not explicitly defined, 'common-sense' was a term developed by Gramsci (1971) to conceive of the aggregated ideas of the mass population that could serve to further legitimise or challenge the rule of those in power (Crehan, 2011).

existing international environment has largely been conducive to China's economic interests (Gries, 2004; Johnston, 2017).

Despite these pressures, the Chinese state has in practice not exerted substantial efforts to significantly alter the current world order or promote its form of governance in other domestic contexts (Chou, Pan, & Poole, 2016, p. 185). To date, the CCP has focused on addressing nationalistic concerns through domestic means such as economic development and internal educational initiatives (Blanchard & Lu, 2012, p. 575; G. Chan, 2018, p. 9). In addition, it has been recognised that China has further motivations to support the international status quo, as many of the current hegemonic norms, including territorial sovereignty and free trade, in fact facilitate its own foreign affairs interests (Nathan, 2016; J. Wang, 2015; W. Zhang, 2012). This gives suggestion that instead of seeking hegemonic challenge, the Chinese state's grand foreign affairs strategy has largely focused upon improving its international image and facilitating mutually-conducive relationships within the existing international framework.

### Strategic Engagement

Because of the economic focus of China's foreign affairs goals, many studies on China's statecraft have focused upon economic statecraft (eg. Pacheco Pardo, 2018; Reilly, 2017), the use of economic means to achieve foreign policy objectives (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 39-40). Economic statecraft takes two main forms. Firstly, it involves targeted measures in aim of achieving specific policy outcomes, such as

raising tariffs in response to another state's undesired policy position (Baldwin, 2016, pp. 39-40). Secondly, it employs broader strategic engagement in order to facilitate greater trust and connections with other states, such as unconditionally pursuing increased bilateral economic relations (Kahler & Kastner, 2006; Pacheco Pardo, 2018, p. 239; Reilly, 2017).

The Chinese state has made significant use of both types of economic statecraft in order to influence specific policy outcomes and facilitate favourable relationships with other states. While its targeted interventions have been generally successful in achieving a desired response, the confrontations involved have undermined the Chinese government's international image and broader bilateral relationships. This has been particularly observed when the CCP has used more heavy-handed economic statecraft measures that feed existing fears concerning its rise. For example, Reilly (2017, p. 182) has noted that while China facilitated greater institutional links through its strategic engagement with Europe in the early 2010s, the use of economic threats to delegitimize the authority of the Dalai Lama during his European visits hindered China's efforts to improve its regional reputation. Although the CCP has continued these forceful measures when deemed appropriate, it has concurrently increased popular strategic engagement in aim of improving its international reputation and cultivating positive bilateral relationships (Lai & Lu, 2012, p. 197; Pacheco Pardo, 2018, p. 240).<sup>7</sup> It is intended that the increased

<sup>7</sup> A recent example of this dynamic has been China's engagement with the Pacific Islands. In order to develop economic partnerships and improve its reputation in the region, the Chinese state has

prestige facilitated by these measures allows the Chinese government to achieve broader influence over other states, partially absolving its need to engage forcefully with targeted economic statecraft (Reilly, 2017, p. 175).

The funding of the CI project and the financial support of its initiatives can be understood as strategic engagement of economic statecraft. However, this framework does not sufficiently explain the non-financial influence that the CI project exercises. In addition to capturing the strategic engagement exercised through the CI project, cultural statecraft also explains the CCP's efforts to construct a desired national image to the world in order to support the consolidation of its domestic legitimacy.

### National Identity

Following a tumultuous experience of semi-colonisation, revolution and reform, the Chinese state has struggled to unify its people behind an inclusive national identity (Irgengioro, 2018; Men, 2014). The CCP has responded to this issue by seeking to promote China's future as a return to imagined understandings of its historical greatness (Callahan, 2012; Mayer, 2018, p. 1217). Wilson (2016, p. 135) has argued that the Chinese state's efforts to construct a desired national identity abroad through its use of cultural statecraft has simultaneously reinforced domestic

increased its provision of unconditional aid to Pacific Island nations (C. Zhou, 2019). However, it has concurrently employed targeted aid programs, of which it has been alleged are aimed at influencing particular states to terminate their diplomatic relationship with Taiwan (Whiting, Zhou, & Feng, 2019).

understandings of Chinese identity, ultimately serving to reinforce the CCP's internal legitimacy. As reconstructing China's national identity has been identified as a key priority of the CI project (G.-Q. Liu, 2015), cultural statecraft provides an ideal framework from which to analyse these efforts.

Using the concept of cultural statecraft, the CI project can be understood as a form of both strategic engagement and identity building. CI partnerships aim to increase institutional links between nations, facilitating continued economic development. In addition, initiatives conducted by the CIs attempt to raise China's international prestige. These aims are mutually-conducive and serve to consolidate the CCP's domestic legitimacy.

### **Structural Power**

While the concept of cultural statecraft is a useful frame for understanding the Chinese government's aims behind promoting the CI project, additional context is required to clarify how exactly the CCP operationalises CIs to pursue this agenda. The concept of structural power has significant potential to explain the structure of the operation of the CI project, and from this better understand how China seeks to influence CIs for its purposes. In addition, as many criticisms of the CI project have been in relation to the CCP's alleged control, structural power engages directly with current academic debates. Structural power conceptualises how CIs autonomously attempt to shape knowledge and institutions to facilitate China's broader foreign affairs goals in their local contexts. There has been some debate on the structure of

China's exercise of power through its various instruments, and while this has been previously explored in relation to the CI project in academic literature, there is yet to be a study that comprehensively analyses it using the analytical framework of structural power. Complementing this understanding, this framework will then analyse the nature of influence the CI project exercises using the soft-hard power distinction as theorised by Nye (2004).

### Operation of Structural Power

Structural power seeks to theorise how states utilise the institutions outside of their domestic territory in order to realise their domestic goals. As this concept is grounded in domestic theorising, it is important to understand how it has been translated from domestic understandings of the exercise of power. Mann (1984) initially theorised on the structure of state power, differentiating between despotic and infrastructural power. Firstly, despotic power is the capacity of a state's leader to set and achieve goals without the need to negotiate civil society groups or routines (Mann, 1984, pp. 188-189). While many rulers in history exercised significant despotic power over their territory, contemporary leaders in most of the world now struggle to achieve even minor goals without the facilitation of the existing state and civil society infrastructure. However, even if leaders are limited in the extent they can autonomously pursue their own goals, this same infrastructure allows the state to realise its broad objectives as a polymorphous entity by exercising sizeable 'autonomous power' through the bureaucracy and civil society (Mann, 1984, pp. 189-190).



Building upon this framework, Strange (1987) theorised the structural power that states exercise to create a favourable environment on an international level for the purpose of achieving their domestic goals. Strange identified four aspects of structural power, including control over systems of violence, goods and services, finance and knowledge. While a state's instruments may exercise structural power through one or several aspects in particular, each aspect serves to reinforce the others and build a state's structural power capacity as a whole (Strange, 1987, p. 565). From this framework, although the CI project focuses on control over knowledge as a mechanism of cultural statecraft, it can also be understood as serving to reinforce the other aspects of structural power as part of its broader statecraft apparatus.

Structural power also provides promise in theorising the operation of the CI project as it explains the nature of China's control over the instrument and extent of autonomy possessed by localised CIs. Weiss and Thurbon (2018, p. 2) have argued that structural power can be understood as an 'outward-facing expression' of a state's infrastructural power. This suggests that if the CI project is in fact a mechanism of structural power, it is able to facilitate China's centrally-coordinated national aims in its local contexts in a manner similar to infrastructural power. Therefore, even if China does not exercise significant control over individual CIs, the existing domestic and international infrastructure provides incentives for these CIs to

autonomously act in ways that both work towards realising China's broader national goals and reinforcing China's structural power.

### Nature of Structural Power

In addition to the operation of structural power, this thesis examines the nature of the exercise of structural power on those China seeks to influence. This concept is vital to understanding the CI project's influence as it qualifies the nature of its impact upon Australian institutions, and therefore its perceived legitimacy. To measure the nature of this influence, the CI project's exercise of power will be instrumentalised using the soft-hard distinction as theorised by Nye (2004). In particular, it will be analysed through the concepts of soft<sup>8</sup> and sharp power.

Before the Post-War period, the frequency and primacy of conventional warfare required little conception of power outside of physical coercion. Building upon this foundation, scholars in the realist/neorealist tradition such as Waltz (1959) and Mearsheimer (2003) have stressed the importance of hard power, the ability of states to militarily or economically force others into doing what they want. This framework has constructed power as an end in itself between states and does not take any serious consideration to the influence of ideological or cultural factors on the behaviours of states (Guzzini, 1993, 2000; Wendt, 1992). While there have been

<sup>8</sup> Although the civil society focus of soft power was identified as inappropriate for understanding the Chinese state's active role in pursuing its national ambitions, it is used as a qualitative measure in order to understand the nature of influence exercised on other states and institutions.

recent contentions that the CI project could exercise hard power through economic coercion in more subtle ways (eg. Cardenal, Kucharczyk, Mesežnikov, & Pleschová, 2017, pp. 15-17; Nye, 2018a)<sup>9</sup>, the nature of its initiatives does not resemble the blunt force of traditional conceptions of hard power. Therefore, it is not appropriate for understanding the power exercised through the CI project.

In contrast, scholars have emphasised the importance contemporary states place on soft power, the indirect influence states exercise through prestige such as cultural, moral or economic influence. As Nye states:

‘When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive’ (Nye, 2004, p. x).

The CCP has affirmed the importance of exercising soft power for the purpose of achieving its domestic and international goals in academic, political and media discourse since the turn of the century (Q. Chen, 2016; Ding, 2008; Melissen, 2011). Considering China’s growing economic interdependence through the world, its exercise of soft power has generally been recognised as successful in furthering its national development goals (Ham & Tolentino, 2018; Kivimaki, 2014; Lai & Lu, 2012;

<sup>9</sup> This is explored in the subsequent discussion of sharp power.

Wilson, 2015; W. Zhang, 2012). The actions of localised CIs working towards facilitating favourable relationships and enhancing the standing of China in their local contexts resonates with this broader agenda (Blanchard & Lu, 2012, pp. 571-575; Rawnsley, 2016, pp. 19-20). In particular, some scholars have argued the success of CIs in facilitating learning of Chinese language and culture and academic exchanges as part of a legitimate soft power agenda (Gil, 2017b, pp. 54, 95-96; Hartig, 2016, p. 188). Therefore, soft power has been identified as an appropriate concept through which to analyse the nature of the CI project's influence.

Nye has built upon soft power theory more recently by highlighting the importance of narratives as, 'the new currency of soft power' (2011, p. 104). This can be observed in states both seeking to promote positive narratives and delegitimise those considered unfavourable (Hartig, 2015). China has attempted to use its cultural statecraft to shape national narratives for the purposes of cultivating soft power (Hartig, 2016, pp. 57-83; Nathan & Scobell, 2012; H. Wang & Lu, 2008). Pursuing these domestic aims outside China's own territory, the cultural and language initiatives of CIs can be understood to work towards increasing China's international reputation and promote more favourable relationships with other states (Cabestan, 2008, p. 209; Hartig, 2012a, p. 57).

Challenging this beneficent understanding of China's initiatives, the Chinese state's power has more recently been portrayed as a state engaged in utilising subversive tactics, which appear benign, but are actually tools of 'sharp power'. This term has

been used to convey various meanings, although has centred upon authoritarian states attempting to translate their repressive domestic operations into their international agendas through means of ‘distraction and manipulation’ (Cardenal et al., 2017, pp. 6-7). Nye (2018b) has argued that as sharp power relies not on persuasion, but deception with hostile intent, it is in fact a form of hard power, which achieves its goals through military or economic coercion.

Some scholars that otherwise acknowledge the CI project as a mechanism of soft power have highlighted that its alleged censorship and promotion of state-sponsored ideology, such as the one-China policy<sup>10</sup>, have to an extent justified conceptions of China as a threat (Hartig, 2015; Yuan, Guo, & Hong, 2016; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016). Going further, some recent publications have conceived of the CI project as a facade from which the CCP is able to orchestrate more malicious influence (eg. Hamilton, 2018, pp. 215-220; Luqiu & McCarthy, 2018; Peterson, 2017). However, although some scholars have recently articulated the CI project as sharp power (eg. Cardenal et al., 2017, pp. 15-17; Nye, 2018a), there are yet to be any studies that thoroughly investigate these claims. Therefore, sharp power has been identified as the second concept with which to test the nature of the CI project’s influence.

<sup>10</sup> The one-China policy is the understanding promoted by the People’s Republic of China and agreed to by many nations that there is only one country of ‘China’, despite the Republic of China (Taiwan) maintaining a separate government. The policy affirms that the Republic of China government is unlawful and must be reintegrated with the mainland.

## **Conclusion**

This analytical framework establishes the key concepts that frame this study.

Cultural statecraft encapsulates the CI project's purpose as part of China's national agenda of national development and consolidating domestic legitimacy.

Complementing these aims, structural power serves as a framework to understand how exactly the broader CI project and its localised organs operate to achieve these goals. Additionally, examining the nature of this power through the concepts of soft and sharp power clarifies the nature of influence that the CIs exercise in their localised contexts. By analysing these concepts together, this study is able to reach a more comprehensive understanding of why and how the Chinese government has promoted the CI project in Australia.

## Chapter 3: China's National Ambitions

As China's key cultural statecraft mechanism, the CI project has become one of the most well-known foreign affairs initiatives of the Chinese government (Blanchard & Lu, 2012, p. 573). Despite its outward-facing nature and devolution of control to local institutes as argued in this thesis, the aims and operations of the broader CI project are still significantly influenced by the CCP's domestic agenda. Therefore, in order to understand how China seeks to influence CIs and for what purpose, it is necessary to contextualise the CI project in the domestic setting from which it has been established.

This chapter first provides an historical overview of China's contemporary national context. It then examines the general purpose and operation of its foreign affairs initiatives in order to understand the framework for China's specific purposes behind the CI project, to be explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **China's National Context**

Like all nations, China's history has had a profound effect on contemporary understandings of itself as a discrete state and culture. Consequently, this historically-constructed national image has generated significant debate in China's national discourses on its place in the world. China's history has been continually reconstructed by the CCP, and this has been witnessed in its selective appropriation of China's history to legitimise its governance. In particular, the CCP has achieved this goal through cultivating a domestic narrative around the need to recover from

its century of humiliation [百年国耻 bainian guochi] at the hands of European imperialism and return to a constructed position of China's historical greatness (Callahan, 2012, p. 51; Mayer, 2018, p. 1217).<sup>11</sup> This section will briefly review the impact of China's recent history on Chinese national discourses in order to contextualise the role of the CI project in relation to China's contemporary national ambitions.

### China's Semi-Colonial History

Despite China's rapidly increasing military and economic strength, its national identity has continued to be shaped by the more shameful moments in its past. Of particular impact on China's national identity has been the century of humiliation, a series of defeats occurring from the First Opium War in 1839 until the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 (Kaufman, 2010). Previously, China had assumed a privileged position as a civilisation-state within its region, asserting tributary relationships with neighbouring localities that reinforced its political centrality and dominance (F. Zhang, 2009, p. 550). However, following its defeat in the First Opium War, China lost both its political and material superiority and was subjected by European powers to what has been described as a 'semi-colonial' position (Kaufman, 2010, p. 5). Materially, China was, 'carved up like a melon', with the forced opening of its borders, ceding of territory and other unequal treaties conducted by European powers (Kaufman, 2010, p. 5). Additionally, China's political and ideological

<sup>11</sup> Constructions of China's historical status have generally focused on the cultural, political and economic prestige of the Tang dynasty to which China must return (Lewis, 2009, pp. 1-9).



legitimacy was destroyed, with its status reduced to being the 'sick man of Asia' (Callahan, 2004, p. 202). China was forced to concede its own constructed status as the middle kingdom to subservience at the hands of foreign European powers (Kaufman, 2010, pp. 4-5). This also included forfeiting its traditional understanding of itself as an empire in favour of new Western understandings of nations as sovereign states (G. Wang, 2008, pp. 25-26).

In addition to this humiliation at the hand of Western powers, China's own perceived internal failures drove further shame that manifested in national consciousness. In particular, government and popular discourses lamented China's inability to militarily and economically modernise in order to defend itself (Cohen, 2002, p. 3). This sentiment was experienced particularly when confronted with Japan's invasion of China in the Sino-Japanese War; aside from being colonised by an external power, China was forced to acknowledge that it had even been bested by a nation from within its own geographical region (Kaufman, 2010, p. 5; Schell, 2008). These understandings of history continue to inform China's national consciousness and contribute to its desire to restore its previous position in the world.

### Party and State

The CCP has both been shaped by and sought to shape national discourse on the century of humiliation in order to consolidate its domestic legitimacy. Firstly, as this discourse has had significant impact on forming Chinese understandings of nationalism and national priorities in individuals and civil society, it has had influence

in shaping the policy directions of the CCP's domestic and international agendas.

Secondly, due to the power of these narratives, the CCP has sought to shape them according to their own purposes. Both these processes have influenced how the CCP constructs itself and China as a nation.

Following the tradition of other authoritarian regimes, the CCP has attempted to establish itself as not just the party governing China, but the state itself. It has been commonly accepted in modern China that the CCP has penetrated all organs of the state bureaucracy and many areas of civil society to the extent that party and state can be referred to synonymously (Callick, 2013, p. 34; Zheng, 1997, p. 9). In practice, no individual within China is able to exercise meaningful influence or assume a position of significant authority without being a member of the CCP or receiving its endorsement (Callick, 2013, p. 40). More recently, President Xi has pursued this goal further, with his plan for, 'deepening reform of Party and state institutions' (Liangyu, 2018), largely understood to be a means of centralising control under the CCP Central Committee (Suzuki, 2019, pp. 89-90). This system has allowed the CCP to maintain substantial influence throughout China's bureaucratic and civil society institutions.

Despite this extent of influence, many areas of Chinese bureaucracy and civil society have in practice been able to exercise some degree of autonomy. This has partly resulted from conscious policy by the CCP, which has recognised that empowering and granting limited independence to these institutions has facilitated a more

efficient, consistent and stable environment for economic growth, as well as strengthening narratives of national inclusivity for the significant majority of Chinese citizens who are not party members (Zheng, 1997, pp. 17, 47-48). Additionally, the geographical and organisational realities for a country as large and diverse as China have created difficulties for the CCP to exercise complete control over all state and civil society institutions (Zheng, 1997, p. 17). Particularly concerning local levels of governance, bureaucratic and civil society organs have been able to achieve relative levels of freedom to promote their interests (J. Yu & Wang, 2019, pp. 33-36).

Within its mainland territory, the CCP has maintained enough power to exercise rule over its defined population without significant challenge to its institutions, even in territories with secessionist interests such as Xinjiang and Tibet (Karatasli & Kumral, 2017, p. 7). However, scholars have acknowledged the indirect influence that public sentiment appears to wield over government decision making in its attempts to maintain this control and legitimacy. That has been particularly witnessed in how the CCP has pursued more assertive foreign policy objectives due to the need to satisfy nationalistic sentiments within China's civil society (Buzan, 2018, pp. 458-459; Quek & Johnston, 2018; Shirk, 2007, pp. 2, 7-9). Additionally, Johnston (2013, pp. 37-38) has highlighted how public opinion is mobilised by party leaders seeking to gain influence, particularly in times of instability in party leadership.

Despite the impression of concession given by the CCP, in reality it is able to emphasise certain aspects of national discourse in order to consolidate its legitimacy

and justify its own policy directions. Reilly (2011, p. 25) has argued that the CCP's responses to public opinion, combined with its combination of 'repression and persuasion', have in fact served to reinforce the legitimacy of its rule. This has been witnessed in multiple facets of domestic policy, particularly with regard to education and economic development (Buzan, 2018, pp. 458-460).

### National Discourses

As the CCP does not exercise total control over China's bureaucracy and civil society, many of its policy directions are influenced at least partially by the need to maintain popular support and stability across all spectrums of Chinese society (Johnston, 2017, pp. 37-38). As argued by He (2019b, p. 348), while the Chinese government's goal of national development involves deepening political participation, it also requires this participation to be controlled in order to reduce political instability and maintain a stable environment conducive to economic development. To create this favourable domestic political environment, the CCP has appropriated historical and cultural narratives in order to encourage political participation towards national unity and common purpose. On the other hand, these efforts have been balanced by the CCP's attempts to control the spaces and frameworks of discourse in order to suppress dissent and instability (He, 2019b, p. 348).

As discussed, one of the key concepts evoked in China's national consciousness has been the century of humiliation, which continues to exert significant motivations and constraints on CCP policy direction. Cohen (2002, pp. 4-9) has identified this

consciousness emerging in civil society groups in Chinese cities from the early nineteenth century, as evidenced from discourse in general publications, education and political initiatives and even commercial advertising. Despite occasional instances motivated by political or commercial self-interest, these discourses generally stressed the importance of both embracing the burdens of current humiliation and remembering that of the past in order to avoid it in the future (Cohen, 2002, pp. 4-5, 9-10).

Building upon this national consciousness, recent CCP leadership has attempted to construct more positive narratives of China's future that further unite the nation behind the CCP's domestic agenda. In particular, the Confucian concept of 'Harmonious Society'<sup>12</sup> has been promoted since the turn of the century. This narrative emphasised the pursuit of just and equitable development in order to address China's increasing socio-economic fragmentation and strengthen national solidarity behind the CCP's governance (Pong, 2009, pp. 180-181). In 2005, President Hu Jintao expanded this narrative to China's foreign affairs ambitions, proclaiming China's goal to create a 'Harmonious World' (和谐世界 *hexie shijie*) (Hu, 2005).

While this discourse signalled the pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy, the focus remained upon consolidating the CCP's legitimacy (G. Chan, Lee, & Chan, 2012, pp. 36-37).

<sup>12</sup> Appropriating the Confucian ideal, Harmonious Society (和谐社会 *hexie shehui*) has been promoted as metalanguage to support fostering the CCP's desired national culture. In particular, this has focused on maintaining social harmony domestically (Xinhua, 2005).

More recently, President Xi Jinping has further articulated a Chinese international vision through his discourse of the 'China Dream' (中国梦 zhongguo meng).

Promoted as facilitating the, 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Kuhn, 2013), the China Dream outlines a vision for China to continue its economic development and assume a position of leadership in regional and world affairs (Hinck, Manly, Kluver, & Norris, 2018, p. 100). President Xi has explicitly identified building cultural soft power as a priority in order to restore China's reputation to that of historical consciousness and realise the China Dream (Callahan, 2015, p. 221).

China's foreign policy can be understood as an extension of these national discourses. Similar to its domestic initiatives, much of the foundations of China's foreign policy has been influenced by discourse on the century of humiliation and how China may rise to its previous status as a great power. Due to this, scholars have identified that China's foreign policy is almost entirely dictated by its domestic agenda (Buzan, 2018, p. 456; Hughes, 2006, pp. 92-98, 152; Shirk, 2007, pp. 6-9). Accordingly, it can be surmised that the main ambition of China's foreign policy initiatives has been to support the CCP's domestic agenda of national development and political stability (Mayer, 2018).

Viewed with this lens, the CI project can be understood as a tool of China's foreign policy that serves to promote the CCP's national development. Firstly, the CI project allows the Chinese government to promote a desired construction of China in other

states as an extension of its domestic narratives. Secondly, the partnerships facilitated by the CI project ultimately contribute to advancing China's national economic development. As such, the CI project most likely operates in coordination with the Chinese government's broader foreign policy apparatus.

### **Organisation of China's Broader Foreign Affairs Operations**

While the CCP has utilised multiple government organs with specific purposes in aim of achieving its foreign affairs goals, the majority of this work has been conducted through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Chinese Communist Party Publicity Department (CCPPD)<sup>13</sup>, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) and United Front Work Department (UFWD). As there is much speculation concerning the extent that the CI project coordinates its activities within China's wider government infrastructure, these organs merit some discussion.

Typical of foreign affairs departments, the MoFA has presided over China's broader foreign affairs policy and administrated its more conventional state relations.

Supplementing this, while the CCPPD is predominantly domestic-focused, it also conducts, 'external propaganda', in aim of promoting positive Chinese perspectives to the world and addressing negative portrayals by other outlets (Shambaugh, 2007, pp. 29, 47-50). This has been seen, for example, in its guidance of China's outward-

<sup>13</sup> Previously known as the CCP Propaganda Department. The Chinese term for 'propaganda' [宣传 xuanchuan] does not have an explicitly negative connotation. In 1998, the CCPPD changed its official English translation to 'Publicity' in order to address this (Hartig, 2016).

facing media operations, such as China Central Television's (CCTV) international Mandarin and foreign language channels (Y. Zhu, 2010, pp. 169-195). Both the MoFA and CCPPD conduct what Nye has theorised as daily and strategic communications (2004, pp. 107-109); they are focused on promoting and shaping both day-to-day and longer-term messages concerning CCP policy decisions from a state-level perspective. Therefore, the extent that they coordinate with the CI project is most likely limited.

Contrasting with these more conventional foreign affairs mechanisms, the OCAO and UFWD have engaged with localised institutions in aim of mobilising support from a ground level. Key to this is the development of people-to-people relationships, which are then exercised in aim of improving both China's reputation and economic development from overseas (To, 2014, pp. 4, 254). Nye has identified this as the third dimension of public diplomacy through which states attempt to exercise soft power (2004, pp. 109-110). As these relationships may be used to facilitate China's broader goals in their localised contexts, they can be understood as structural power.

The structure of China's national government and nature of OCAO and UFWD work gives reason to believe that these organs may be more likely to have exercised influence over the CI project. Until 2016, the OCAO was one of 12 government departments overseeing the CI project (Gil, 2017b, p. 7; S. Y. Pan, 2013, p. 26). In March, 2018, the OCAO was integrated into the UFWD, which has continued its



functions alongside related portfolios (X. Zhang, 2018).<sup>14</sup> Suzuki (2019, p. 90) has argued that due to this history, the UFWD now possibly exercises some influence over the CI project. Aside from this link, the nature of the UFWD's responsibilities over China-affiliated individuals and organisations most likely provides some form of direct or indirect influence over local CIs. Therefore, their operations will be discussed.

#### The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office

The OCAO was the main organ managing the affairs of overseas Chinese (OC), and continues this work under the UFWD. Included in its responsibilities are to coordinate the work of other departments in relation to OC affairs, provide support to overseas Chinese media and language schools and increase the cooperation of OC with China (PRC State Council, 2019).

OC have garnered significant interest by the CCP for their potential as bridges between China and other nations. Following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, OC were increasingly viewed as a conduit for addressing negative images of the CCP and promoting its international legitimacy (To, 2014, pp. 11-12). Xi Jinping has continued this agenda since the beginning of his presidency in 2012, viewing OCs as a tool to legitimate the CCP's domestic governance and shape narratives

<sup>14</sup> As more specific organisational changes are still unknown, the functions of the OCAO are discussed discretely.

concerning its foreign affairs to international audiences (Brady, 2015, p. 57). As a large target market of CIs is OC, there is potential that CIs could have been utilised to support these purposes. However, even when officially recognised as an overseeing body for the CI project, there is little evidence that the OCAO exercised direct influence over local CIs or the broader CI project.

While guided by the CCP's broader foreign affairs policies set by the CCP Central Committee (S. Fitzgerald, 1972, p. 25), the OCAO exercised relative autonomy over its localised operations (Groot, 2018). However, with its incorporation into the UFWD in March, 2018, it has been speculated that these operations may now be more directly controlled by the CCP leadership (Groot, 2018; Suzuki, 2019, p. 90). As such, there is a greater possibility that the CI project may be influenced by the UFWD.

#### The United Front Work Department

Since Xi Jinping's recent reforms, the UFWD now possesses the responsibility over OCAO activities with a larger remit. As previously stated, these reforms have also resulted in greater control over the UFWD exercised by the CCP's central leadership, including in lower levels of administration (Groot, 2018; Suzuki, 2019, p. 90). In addition to OC, the UFWD both coordinates between government organs and manages the affairs of other groups outside the CCP's direct control to ensure they are a 'united front' in working towards achieving the CCP's national goals (Joske, 2019; To, 2014, pp. 79-80).

Due to these reforms, the UFWD is now the main CCP organ concerned with harnessing China's overseas relationships. This has effectively made the MoFA subordinate to the UFWD (Joske, 2019). In addition to presiding over formal bilateral relations, the UFWD has historically engaged with OC-affiliated organisations in their local contexts, including schools and media outlets (To, 2014, p. 49). However, in recent years the UFWD has also increasingly targeted non-Chinese people and organisations, both within and outside China (Hamilton & Joske, 2017, p. 6). With this large breadth of authority, the UFWD most likely exercises some influence over local CIs. However, there is no evidence to suggest it is directly involved in their management.

### **Nature of China's Broader Foreign Affairs Operations**

Many mechanisms of China's foreign affairs operations can be safely categorised as soft power, engaging in efforts to promote positive images of itself and address negative portrayals in a similar manner to any other state. However, the CCP's influence over individuals and organisations through its cultivated relationships provide the potential for manipulation and undue coercion, raising the possibility of the exercise of sharp power. The nature of these operations will be discussed in general in order to contextualise how the CI project fits into the Chinese government's broader foreign affairs operations.

While the details concerning localised operations have remained relatively opaque, documents have revealed some general trends by which the OCAO and UFWD have sought to establish and utilise relationships with OC. As OC-facing organisations, local CIs have most likely been included as targets of these initiatives. To (2014, p. 49) has cited official documents outlining that in order to realise these goals, the OCAO operated, 'to maintain sufficient independence while supporting target groups to achieve outcomes; to understand and infiltrate their inner workings without overtly intervening; and to influence through guidance, rather than openly leading them'. The UFWD operates similarly to the OCAO guidelines in its external operations, attempting to influence through guidance instead of overt control or leadership (Brady, 2017, p. 4). Functioning primarily through Chinese embassies and consulates, much of its work appears as standard diplomatic affairs (Stratfor, 2010; To, 2014, p. 4). Through these operations, the UFWD attempts to induce organisations and individuals to act in ways deemed favourable by the CCP, described by To (2014, pp. 52-53) as the CCP's 'guiding hand'.

The guiding hand exercises influence in several ways. Firstly, it seeks to encourage sympathy with Chinese perspectives and actions favourable to its national development (Brady, 2017, pp. 4-5; Hamilton, 2018, p. 26). In addition to affirming notions of patriotic service and mutual benefit in OC, the guiding hand seeks to reward favourable actions from any significant group or individual through means such as granting access to consular resources (Brady, 2017, p. 4; To, 2014, p. 53). For example, a business considering increased trade with China may be encouraged to

do so by increased consular assistance. These actions generally fit the standard practice of soft power initiatives.

In contrast, the guiding hand also employs methods to deter undesired behaviours. Most simply, a consulate official or other CCP staff member may voice guidance to significant individuals or groups concerning a certain issue or express concerns about current actions. However, the guiding hand may also enact punishments in response to these undesired outcomes through actions such as revoking existing consular privileges or event invitations (To, 2014, pp. 52-53). For example, a university may receive less cooperation from its local Chinese consulate in establishing partnerships with Chinese organisations after hosting an event promoting views critical of the CCP. Of even greater concern is the possibility of the guiding hand leveraging the services of existing organisations within its network to exercise this influence. This has been particularly noted in regard to OC-run media outlets publishing articles critical of the CCP, who have found their advertisers fail to renegotiate contracts (J. Fitzgerald, 2018, p. 61). Whether exercised through CCP staff or affiliated organisations and individuals, these actions have a much greater potential to be of a sharper influence.

Finally, the self-censorship that is observed by China-affiliated organisations and individuals can potentially be attributed to sharp power exercised by the CCP.

Shambaugh (2007, p. 29) has previously outlined how a variety of individuals and organisations, 'know the limits of the propaganda state, even if they are engaged in

a process of constantly probing them.’ As such, they may proactively promote positive narratives of the PRC or refute its criticisms in response to unspoken expectations placed upon them by the CCP. For example, there are concerns in Argentina that academics are refraining from criticism of the CCP for fear of losing future opportunities in China (Cardenal et al., 2017, p. 51). While it is difficult to ascertain the extent that China has facilitated this self-censorship, particularly outside of China, it is most likely at least partly a product of their construction.

## **Conclusion**

China’s domestic ambitions have been shaped by its historical experience, in particular the century of humiliation and desire to return to historical understandings of itself as a great power. From this context, China’s foreign policy can be understood as an outward extension of these goals, seeking to facilitate China’s economic development and construct a desired national identity that unifies all Chinese people under CCP leadership. While China’s conventional diplomacy exhibits standard mechanisms of soft power, some of its local-level initiatives raise concerns of the potential to exercise sharper influence. This will be explored further in relation to the CI project in the following two chapters.

## Chapter 4: The Confucius Institute Project

This chapter analyses the broader operation of the CI project before it is examined specifically in relation to localised CIs in Australia in Chapter 5. In particular, this chapter examines the CI project's inception, macro and micro governance, statutory guidelines, funding and ongoing operations. It lastly concludes by theorising the general nature of the Chinese government's influence through the wider CI project.

### **Background to the Confucius Institute Project**

#### Confucius

Particularly pertinent to these purposes in its cultural statecraft has been the CCP's constructions of Confucius and Confucianism. While invoking the image and values of Confucius, the CI project has avoided any serious coverage of traditional or contemporary Chinese ideologies as per its stated guidelines and due to potential ramifications from its international scrutiny (K.-K. Chan & Hunter, 2012, p. 145; Hanban, 2006; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016, p. 638). However, by associating China with its more favourably-viewed cultural aspects, the CI project works towards achieving this reconstruction of Chinese identity (S. Y. Pan, 2013, p. 27). Therefore, the development of the contemporary Confucius narrative and appropriation of Confucianism in order to legitimise CCP rule deserves elaboration.

Although Confucius garnered a reputation for his educational achievements during his lifetime, he was unable to exercise significant political influence over the aristocracy of the time (Ames, 2019). Instead, Confucius has achieved significantly

more influence and notoriety following his death. This was witnessed from the early Han Dynasty, when Emperor Wu realised the value of Confucian ideals<sup>15</sup> in maintaining order and stability and incorporated these into the state ideology (Kramers, 1986, p. 753). While consolidating its place in society over China's history, Confucianism faced challenge during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. Seeking to overthrow the existing social order and delegitimise the opposing Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) that was now occupying Taiwan, Chairman Mao Zedong declared Confucius to be a counter-revolutionary in support of ruling class interests and ordered its complete eradication as part of the 'Four Olds'<sup>16</sup> (Chey, 2008, p. 38; Ho, 2006, pp. 64-66). His views on the ideology were so strong that he is claimed to have affirmed, 'If the Communist Party has a day when it cannot rule or has met difficulty and needs to invite Confucius back, it means it is coming to an end' (Kibangula, 2011 in Mendis, 2014, p. 24).

Despite Mao's condemnation, Confucianism has made a recent comeback as the CCP has realised the potential of its ideology in maintaining domestic stability and fostering internal legitimacy of the CCP (Deng & Smith, 2018; Osnos, 2014, pp. 285-293). Additionally, the CCP has found use in Confucius' positive image as a tool for addressing the China threat image held by other states as discussed (Cho & Jeong,

<sup>15</sup> In particular, Confucianism's strict adherence to social hierarchy and the cultivation of individual virtue have been attractive to governments seeking to solidify their authority (Zhao, 2018, p. 322).

<sup>16</sup> The Four Olds (四旧 sijiū) was a concept created during the cultural revolution to encompass the old customs, culture, habits and ideas the CCP set out to destroy in order to consolidate Chairman Mao Zedong's communist ideology.



2008). The re-emergence of Confucianism began when developing Confucian scholarship outside of the mainland, particularly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, created pressure for the CCP to assert ownership over the philosophy (Makeham, 2008, p. 61). This was furthered once the CCP realised the potential for Confucian ideals to legitimise the CCP's model of governance and contribute to a desirable national culture<sup>17</sup> was realised (Bell, 2008, p. 10; Niquet, 2012, p. 76).

Following these developments, the CCP began renewing support for academic study of Confucianism from the 1990s (Makeham, 2008, pp. 61-63). After the establishment of the CI project in 2004, Confucian metalanguage progressed to official CCP dialogue when President Hu Jintao began explicitly promoting his vision for China to be a Harmonious Society (Bell, 2008, p. 9). More recently, the reembrace of Confucianism as part of state ideology was cemented when Xi Jinping asserted in his speech commemorating Confucius' 2565<sup>th</sup> birthday that Confucianism had, 'provided a key source of nutrition for the survival and continuous growth of our nation,' and was, 'an important approach to understanding the national characteristics of the Chinese as well as the historical roots of the spiritual world of the present-day Chinese' (Xi, 2014). The CI project continues to promote this discourse as an extension of China's domestic narratives.

<sup>17</sup> Recent Chinese presidents have asserted the importance of fostering a desirable national culture, particularly focusing on moral refinement, collective identity and obedience to the CCP (eg. Hu, 2007, 2012; Xi, 2014; Xi, 2017).

### Conception of the Confucius Institute Project

There is no official authoritative account of the conception of the CI project and the source of its ideation has been debated. Hartig (2016, pp. 99-100) has cited German sources attributing it to former ambassador to Germany, Lu Qiutian, who himself affirms the idea arose from the cultural misunderstandings ‘between East and West’ he experienced in his diplomatic career around the turn of the century. According to this account, when Lu proposed his ideas to leadership in the Ministry of Education, it appeared to resonate with their own challenges of addressing the numerous overseas requests they were receiving for language teaching support (Hartig, 2016, p. 99). Scholars have speculated that discussions within the Ministry of Education on the idea began from around 2002 (Guo, 2007, p. 57; Li, 2008, p. 53 in Hartig, 2016, p. 99). Following this, state councillor Chen Zhili has taken the credit for formally proposing Confucius as the figurehead for these organisations in early 2004 (D. Wang & Adamson, 2015, p. 226). After a pilot was conducted in Uzbekistan later that year, the first CI was established in Seoul at the end of 2004 (Hua & Wei, 2014). The expansion has been explosive; as of the beginning of 2019, there were 548 CIs and 1193 CCs across 154 countries and regions (Hanban, 2019a).

### **Operation of the Confucius Institute Project**

#### Hanban

While the CCP’s foreign affairs organs may exercise influence over the administration of the broader CI project, there is little evidence to confirm current arrangements. Officially, the CI project is overseen by the Office of Chinese Language Council

International ([国家汉语国际推广领导小组办公室 hanjia hanyu guoji tuiguang lingdao xiaoyue bangongshi]; also known as Hanban [汉办] and Confucius Institute Headquarters [孔子学院总部 kongzi xueyuan zongbu]; hereafter referred to as Hanban), a body of the Chinese Ministry of Education. At its inception, Hanban was overseen by 12 different government organisations; this included the General Affairs Office of the State Council, OCAO, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, MoFA, State Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (China Radio International), State Press and Publications Administration, State Council Information Office and State Language Commission (Gil, 2017b, p. 7). In this arrangement, each ministry was responsible for overseeing Hanban's work in relation to its own portfolio (S. Y. Pan, 2013, p. 26). However, as of 2016, all Hanban and affiliate CI media have only associated themselves with the Ministry of Education (Gil, 2017b, p. 19; UNSW CI, 2019b; USyd CI, 2019c). This has not appeared to have had any significant effect on macro CI project priorities or operations.

As Hanban is governed by the Ministry of Education, it is assumed that funding for the CI project is provided by this department. However, Shambaugh (2007, pp. 49-50) contends that it is in fact 'laundered' through this ministry by the CCPPD's External Propaganda/Publicity Department. Huang and Xiang (2018) have concluded that this is sufficient evidence to assume the political basis of the CI project.

However, to date there has been no conclusion on how exactly this has been of influence. Additionally, while the macro operation of the CI project has received criticism for its lack of independence from government, this practice exhibits little difference with that of other national language and culture institutes (X. Liu, 2019). For example, Spain, France and Japan's cultural institutes are all directly overseen by national government departments, with Spain's president and king even exercising direct leadership over the direction of the Cervantes Institute (Cervantes Institute, 2019; Gil, 2017b, pp. 64-65).

In order to achieve its previously-stated aims, Hanban has outlined several key functions to be carried out by its twenty divisions<sup>18</sup>. These include the promotion of Chinese language internationally, providing support for institutions teaching Chinese language programs, drafting international Chinese teaching standards and promoting teaching resources. (Hanban, 2019f). Hanban's Chinese language page additionally specifies that it is responsible for supporting the development of Chinese studies, managing Confucius Institute scholarships and managing other 'important' activities such as the Chinese Bridge Chinese-language competition (Hanban, 2019g).

<sup>18</sup> This includes the Division of General Affairs, Division of Human Resources, Division of Discipline Inspection, Division of Auditing, Division of Finance, Division of Assets Management, Division of Development and Planning, Division of Policy Studies, Division of Asian and African Confucius Institutes, Division of American and Oceanian Confucius Institutes, Division of European Confucius Institutes, Division of Teachers, Division of Volunteer Affairs, Division of Teaching and Resources, Division of Chinese Testing and Scholarship, Division of Cultural Affairs, Division of Sinology and China Studies, Division of International Exchanges, Information Office (Editorial Office of Confucius Institute) and the Division of Logistics (Hanban, 2019g).

### Establishment of Local CIs

The CI project has adopted a unique organisational structure in the establishment of individual CIs. In comparison to cultural organisations such as the Alliance Française or Goethe-Institut that are solely-funded and operated by their national government, each CI has been established as a partnership; this includes Hanban, a local hosting educational institution and a supporting Chinese educational institution (both usually universities) (Hartig, 2016, p. 2). Hanban assumes no direct organisational role concerning individual CIs, with management instead administered by a board composed of roughly equal representation between the local and partnering institutions (Hanban, 2006). As part of this, it is standard practice for both a local and Chinese director to jointly exercise leadership (Peterson, 2017, p. 38).

Many scholars have raised concerns that this operational structure gives the CCP indirect influence over teaching Chinese and material concerning China in partnering organisations (eg. Brady, 2007, p. 165; Lo & Pan, 2016). However, others have argued that the more influential result of this structure has been the decentralisation of control from China's national government to individual CIs and their partnering organisations (Hartig, 2016, p. 3; G.-Q. Liu, 2015; Yuan et al., 2016, p. 338). Even if the CCP maintains authority over the initial establishment of individual CIs, the autonomy granted to them combined with their local context soon causes national and local interests to diverge (Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016, p. 638).

The geographical spread of CIs reveals certain trends that suggest China may possess some direct or indirect influence over where CIs are established. Ding and Saunders (2006, p. 22) noted early into the CI project that the majority of CIs were being established in developed nations, or those that have embraced political pluralism and democracy to some extent. This was more recently confirmed by Huang and Xiang (2018) who concluded that CIs have been predominantly established in countries that are important trade partners with China and have politically-dissimilar governments. This could suggest that the CCP is attempting to target its cultural statecraft to particular states where it holds strategic interests. However, the CI project has more recently broadened its scope, such as in its expansion in Africa and Eastern Europe (Gil, 2015, p. 209; Yuan et al., 2016, pp. 339-341).

The Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes specifies that initiation of the CI partnership is to come from the hosting organisation overseas (Hanban, 2019e), implying that the Chinese government is limited in its capacity to actively broker agreements. Supporting this, Gil (2015, p. 212) has highlighted that the demand for Chinese language learning has facilitated numerous requests for CI partnerships across the globe, leaving Hanban in a passive role to arbitrate which requests it approves. However, Chapter 1, Article 8 also states that, 'A Confucius Institute can be established in various ways, with the flexibility to respond to the specific circumstances and requirements found in different countries' (Hanban, 2019e). Interviews conducted by Hartig (2016, pp. 123-125) suggest that this may on occasion override this general guideline, with partnerships sometimes initiated or

co-initiated by Chinese consulates or universities, and in earlier years possibly even catalysed by Hanban itself. As explored later in the case study of the CI project in Australia, most of these instances have been prompted by economic interests and existing partnerships between universities (Hartig, 2016, p. 125). As such, it is difficult to ascertain the extent that establishment of local CIs is orchestrated in Beijing.

### Funding

Initial and ongoing funding for CIs is a joint responsibility between Hanban and the host institution (Hanban, 2006). This is generally organised under a principle of equal responsibility, although specific arrangements concerning exact amounts and in-kind support differ between countries and institutes (Hartig, 2016, p. 106; Starr, 2009, p. 71). In order to maintain certainty in CI operations, agreements are generally set for five year periods and are understood to be renewed without concern from Hanban (Hartig, 2012a, p. 62). As CIs do not provide publicly-available financial reports, it is difficult to ascertain specific funding arrangements. Interviews suggest that following the initial funding, Hanban provides annual funding of approximately US\$100 000 plus teaching staff and support resources. In return, the host institution provides office space, administrative and other in-kind support (Gil, 2017b, p. 35; Starr, 2009, p. 71). While host universities retain sole responsibility over funding their local staff, this appears to have little impact on budgets as academic staff are not paid any additional remuneration for assuming their CI position (Hartig, 2016, p. 128). On occasion, Hanban has approved additional funding for ad-hoc projects such as

developing contextualised teaching resources and specific events (Gil, 2015, p. 208; 2017b, p. 35). CIs have an expectation to become partially self-sustaining through either sourcing external sponsorship or charging course fees (Hartig, 2012a, pp. 62-63; Starr, 2009, p. 71). However, as Hartig (2012a, p. 63) contends, Hanban is likely to continue funding individual CIs for the purpose of maintaining partial control over their agenda.

### Ongoing Operations

Because of its unique administrative structure, the Chinese government's control over the CI project has been particularly limited to macro organisation. In addition to the initial establishment of individual CIs, Hanban maintains some influence over local CIs through enforcement of broad guidelines and in its teacher training and provision of resources.

One crucial aspect in which the Chinese government has maintained control over the CI project has been its creation and enforcement of statutory principles and guidelines by which CIs are operated. All CIs are governed by the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes (Hanban, 2019e) and a set of guidelines for establishing CIs overseas (Hanban, 2006). According to the constitution and by-laws, CIs are to:

‘...devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these



peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multi-culturalism, and to construct a harmonious world' (Hanban, 2019e).

In order to achieve these outcomes, CIs are tasked with providing specific services. These include Chinese language teaching, professional development and teaching resources for Chinese language instructors, certification for Chinese language proficiency and teaching qualifications, consultative services and facilitating language and cultural exchange activities (Hanban, 2019e). When brokering agreements, CIs are encouraged to pursue these more external-facing activities outside the existing remit of their university's China Studies department, such as in the form of non-award courses and cultural events (Starr, 2009, pp. 71-72). However, due to the vagueness of the constitutional directives and financial reality of needing to compete with other language schools (including other CIs in some cities), CIs have generally taken initiative in adapting their activities to the needs of their local context (Hartig, 2016, pp. 135-136).

Taking more direct control, Hanban has authority over approving annual CI projects and budgets, providing guidelines for and auditing their activities and appointing Chinese directors (Hanban, 2019e). Despite this stated authority, interview evidence suggests that the decentralisation of power practically limits Hanban's involvement to merely random inspections (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 347); all operational decision-

making is devolved to the board of directors of local CIs, comprised of both local and Chinese members (Hanban, 2019e).

Hanban has outlined more explicit political aims in its guidelines for establishing CIs overseas. While its original overseas setup guide specified that CIs are to 'not participate in any political, religious or ethnic activities related to the host country,' it also required them to uphold the one-China policy and 'safeguard the independence and unity of the People's Republic of China' (Hanban, 2006). As recognition of the one-China policy is a pre-condition for relations with the PRC and is upheld by the majority of countries in the world, this practically means very little. In reality, the CI project has been generally sensitive to concerns of propaganda, and these guidelines have not significantly affected operations (Hartig, 2016, p. 174). However, all CIs do conduct their language teaching in standardised Mandarin Chinese and simplified characters (Hanban, 2019e). This has two intentions. Firstly, it aims to reinforce mainland China's own practice and make its perspectives further accessible to OC diasporas (Gil, 2017b, pp. 32-33; To, 2014, pp. 141-142). Secondly, it challenges the teaching of traditional characters and non-Mandarin dialects that are practiced in OC diasporas, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Hartig, 2016, p. 108; Lai, 2012, p. 93; You, 2012; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016, p. 637).

While Hanban does not acknowledge any inducement on its part<sup>19</sup>, CI directors have admitted to conducting self-censorship in order to maintain amenable relations with their Chinese partners. Similar to China's broader censorship apparatus, the reliance on funding from Hanban encourages CIs to actively promote uncritical narratives of the CCP (Hartig, 2016, pp. 133-135). Echoing this, the majority of CI events focus upon either cultural achievements or business opportunities. As CIs generally avoid political topics, these activities resemble the soft power initiatives of other cultural institutions. Of a sharper nature are concerns regarding the censorship of topics considered undesirable. There have been accusations that CIs have made efforts to avoid the discussion of controversial issues such as Taiwan, Tiananmen Square and China's treatment of its ethnic minority groups during language and culture classes (Gil, 2017b, pp. 85-86; Hartig, 2016, pp. 133-135). However, there is little conclusive evidence that these actions have included explicit censorship.

Finally, Hanban is able to exert some indirect influence over the CI project through the educational and administrative support it provides. Hanban dispatches and remunerates Chinese teachers and management staff from China to overseas CIs (Hanban, 2006). However, due to a shortage of qualified language teachers in China, many teachers are hired locally (Hartig, 2016, p. 127; Zhe, 2012, pp. 9-10). All

<sup>19</sup> Churchman (2011) has argued that Chapter 1, Article 6 of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes serves as a basis for censorship in its provision that CIs '...shall not contravene concerning the laws and regulations of China'. However, this assertion is undermined by the fact that the same article stipulates that 'Confucius Institutes shall abide by the laws and regulations of the countries in which they are located, respect local cultural and educational traditions and social customs...' (Hanban, 2019e).

teachers from China undergo training by Hanban (Hartig, 2016, p. 93). In addition, locally-employed teachers are provided opportunities to undertake similar programs in China (Gil, 2015, p. 215; Hanban, 2019h; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016, pp. 631-632). However, there is little publicly-available information on what these programs entail. Interviews suggest that training focuses on generic cultural competencies such as traditional Chinese art and history, with teachers discouraged from engaging in politics (Peterson, 2017, pp. 44-45, 135). In addition, Hanban provides its in-house developed teaching resources to CIs on request; this includes textbooks, audio and web resources (Hanban, 2019d; Paradise, 2009, p. 653). This could be understood as an attempt by Hanban to control Chinese narratives, as recent Chinese textbooks have been criticised for only portraying China and Chinese people positively (Hartig, 2016, p. 178).

Despite these efforts, decisions on teaching content, pedagogy and use of resources appear to be mostly devolved to local CIs. Many CIs have highlighted problems with both teachers and resources provided by Hanban being ill-suited to their own context (Gil, 2017b, p. 92; Hartig, 2015, pp. 252-253). As such, most CIs either develop their own teaching programs or make use of foreign teaching resources. Xu Lin, the Director-General of Hanban, stated that in 2011, only 12.5% of CIs used textbooks that had been published in China (Qu, Zhao, & Cheng, 2012). As previously stated, Hanban on occasion will provide funding for CIs to develop their own localised resources. However, there is no evidence they involve themselves in their production directly.

### Confucius Classrooms

An extension of the CI project has been the running of Confucius Classrooms (CCs). CCs act as a smaller-scale version of CIs, generally established in partnering primary and secondary schools, or in some cases a smaller university or private college, to aid Chinese language teaching being conducted (Starr, 2009, p. 71). Of primary benefit, partnering schools receive start-up and ongoing funding, provision of teaching and learning resources developed by Hanban and a native Chinese speaking teaching assistant.

Similar to CIs, organisational structures vary and Hanban does not officially publish its funding arrangements. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Hanban provides initial funds of around US\$10 000 for each CC established, although exact funding amounts may be pegged to the local currency (CC1; NSW DoE, 2019b). Organisationally, the standard practice is to partner with a local CI to facilitate funding, staffing and resources, although independent CCs can also be established directly through Hanban (Gil, 2015, p. 208; Starr, 2009, p. 71). While the principal or headmaster of the partnering school acts as the director of their CC, the management, budget and specific projects of their CC is often devolved to the member of staff directly responsible for the oversight of Chinese teaching (CC1; NSW DoE, 2016, p. 5).

In regard to the initial establishment of CCs, Hanban applies the same criteria as CIs, although acknowledges the reduced scale and specific teaching context (Hanban,

2019b). As part of this, host institutes must apply to Hanban and form a partnership with a Chinese educational institution (Hanban, 2019b). However, similar to CIs, other stakeholders may take more of an active role in practice. For example, the University of the South Pacific's Cook Islands Campus CC was established and partnered with the Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications after a meeting between the Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna and Chinese President Xi Jinping (The University of the South Pacific, 2017).

Additional to monetary funding, the main enticement for schools to establish CCs is the provision of a native Chinese language teaching assistant. Teaching assistants are generally engaged for a period of one year, although this can be extended. All training, living, relocation and insurance costs are paid for by Hanban (Hanban, 2019i). Recruited as part of the Volunteer Chinese Teacher Program, 'volunteers' must possess a bachelor's degree in an arts or social sciences discipline. In addition, they must be, '...motivated by a strong sense of "devotion, friendship, mutual help and progress" as well as the sense of honor [sic], mission and responsibility in the career of teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages' (Hanban, 2019i). Critics have voiced concerns that the selection criteria for these volunteers most likely disqualifies any applicant harbouring anti-CCP sympathies or possessing unsavoury associations, such as Falun Gong membership (Peterson, 2017, p. 44). However, while this points to domestic issues in China, criticising your potential employer is standard grounds for disqualification in most contexts and cannot be equated with censorship. Similar to CI language teachers, volunteers undergo training in China for

a period of several months (Hanban, 2019i). As previously discussed, while there is little information on training specifics, interview evidence suggests that it focuses on cultural competencies and emphasises political non-engagement (Peterson, 2017, pp. 44-45).

## **Conclusion**

The CI project can be broadly understood as an exercise of China's structural power, fostering favourable relationships with other states and promoting desired constructions of China to the world (Cabestan, 2008, p. 209; Hartig, 2012a, p. 57; G.-Q. Liu, 2015). While CIs are predominantly focused upon Chinese culture and language (Hanban, 2019a), these initiatives serve to facilitate China's broader national goals and ultimately contribute to legitimising the CCP's domestic governance (S. Y. Pan, 2013, pp. 25-26).

The operation of the CI project suggests that China has maintained control over the broad agenda of the CI project, both directly and indirectly. Directly, this has occurred through its statutory framework and system of audit. Indirectly, Hanban's provision of staffing, funding, teacher training and other resources may allow it to exert further influence over local CIs. Due to the lack of information, the exact nature of this influence is unclear. While the structure of operation as examined discounts the likelihood of explicit coercion exercised directly from the CCP in China, some scholars have raised the possibility of this occurring through other localised institutions, such as Chinese consulates (J. Fitzgerald, 2018; Hamilton, 2018).

Additionally, there remains the possibility that the CCP has in practice used CIs to exercise sharp power through explicit or unspoken inducements. For example, as mentioned, uncertainties over future funding may encourage CIs to autonomously pursue mechanisms of sharp power such as self-censorship if this is perceived to align with the CCP's aims. The following chapter will explore these possibilities in relation to the CI project's localised operations in Australia.



## Chapter 5: The Confucius Institute Project in Australia

The CI project as exercised in Australia has exhibited tensions similar to that observed in the broader Australia-China relationship. Desiring to consolidate productive bilateral relations, the Chinese government has facilitated the development of CIs in Australia. Conversely, the desire for the attached funding and networking opportunities with Chinese organisations has prompted many Australian universities to seek a CI partnership. While organisational arrangements have limited the Chinese government's direct control, Australian CIs have generally operated in ways that have furthered academic and economic connections between Australia and China. Despite these achievements, existing attitudes toward China's domestic governance and its approaches to human rights and territorial disputes have undermined the CIs' efforts to improve China's international prestige. The influence CIs exercise in Australia mostly fit the description of soft power. However, there remains the potential for sharper influence over hosting and collaborating institutions, particularly in regard to censorship.

This chapter investigates the CI project's localised operation in Australia in order to determine how China seeks to influence, if at all, the purpose and operation of the CI project in Australia. Firstly, this chapter provides an overview of the Australia-China relationship. Secondly, it outlines the establishment and structure of operation of the CI project in Australia. Thirdly, it analyses the nature of its localised organs and their impact on partnering institutions. Finally, this chapter concludes by relating these findings to China's broader operation of the CI project.

## **The Australia-China Relationship**

Since the formalisation of relations in 1972, the Australia-China relationship has continued to grow in importance between both nations (Mackerras, 2014, p. 234). In 2005, CCP party leader Hu Jintao declared Australia to be included in China's 'overall periphery', further elevating China's perceived significance of the relationship (Y. Chen, 2016). In addition to being a prosperous middle power through which China can facilitate mutually-beneficial economic development, the CCP has highlighted specific ambitions to be achieved from maintaining favourable relations with Australia. Firstly, China has sought stable access to Australia's natural resources in order to fuel its rapid economic growth (L. Yu, 2016, pp. 6-7; Z. Zhu, 2010). Secondly, the CCP desires Australia to distance itself from US-involvement in Asia and become a more neutral party so that China has less barriers to increasing its influence in the region (Y. Chen, 2016; Hamilton, 2018, p. 2; L. Yu, 2016, p. 741).<sup>20</sup> As such, a number of China's foreign affairs initiatives (including the CI project) have targeted Australia as a strategic priority. In order to contextualise the CI project in Australia, China's broader engagement with Australia will be briefly discussed.

### China's Broader Influence in Australia

China's foreign affairs organs have had relative success in facilitating its broader goals in Australia. While the Australia-China relationship has continued to develop

<sup>20</sup> While the majority of writers have argued that this desired influence is of a sharp nature, these aims are exhibited in many states' bilateral relations, including in the Australia-US relationship.

organically, bilateral agreements and initiatives such as the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement have further increased bilateral economic links between Australian and Chinese government departments, businesses and other institutions (DFaT, 2019a).

Despite these achievements, the CCP has been much less successful in facilitating meso-level action to achieve desired outcomes in specific contexts. OC community groups and organisations involved with China have on occasion pursued activities appearing favourable or avoided those considered unfavourable to China's national interests. However, in the majority of instances these events appear autonomously orchestrated without the direct intervention of Beijing. This suggests that the CCP has been able to exercise structural power over these institutions to further its broader goals, although has largely been unwilling or incapable of exercising more targeted influence. As CIs are meso-level institutions tasked with promoting China in local contexts, this broader phenomenon merits further discussion.

Firstly, the Chinese government faces challenges in coordinating unified actions through OC-affiliated organisations due to the diversity of the OC community. Jakubowics (2011, pp. 74-76) has previously articulated the plurality of identities in the broader Australian-Chinese community due to the diverging generations and geo-political contexts of immigration, making the possibility of even a remotely-united Chinese front almost impossible. More recently, Dibb (in Tillett, 2018) has argued that the recent wave of immigration from mainland China is more

homogenous in its patriotism due to recent national education initiatives, and therefore could be much more easily harnessed by the CCP to further its aims. This has been potentially observed in recent counter-protests held across Australia in support of China's intervention in Hong Kong (Knox & Zhao, 2019). However, while endorsed by Chinese government figures following the events and in many cases resulting in violent confrontation, these actions have generally been perpetrated by a small minority of OC and have been reactive in nature to what has been considered by Chinese citizens as an attack on their nationality (Simons, 2019). To date, there has been little evidence of active pro-PRC political representation or lobbying occurring in Australia. Even in the case of OC organisations explicitly supported by the CCP (such as the CIs), the diversity of the OC communities they interact with has resulted in these organisations generally avoiding political engagement in favour of cultural or economic priorities (Laurenceson, 2018, p. 27).

Secondly, the minimal amount of coordinated action may suggest an unwillingness on the Chinese government's part to direct resources toward these ends or fears that that these efforts would be counterproductive to its broader goals. While the CCP occasionally voices criticisms of the current international system as a means to promote its own legitimacy, this is largely confined to broader statements in international forums and has not been observed on a regional level (Callahan, 2015; G. Chan, 2017, p. 256). In the Australian context, despite occasional frictions in bilateral relations concerning China's territorial disputes or human rights issues, both countries have maintained their commitment to the mutual benefits to be realised

from increased economic interdependence and have largely regulated their behaviours to ensure this is not disrupted (L. Yu, 2016, p. 748).

### **Operation of the CI Project in Australia**

The CI project has had relative success in Australia, with CIs operating in a variety of academic institutions. However, the limitation of Hanban's financial support combined with the nature of partnerships with host institutions and other stakeholders have resulted in CIs exercising minimal direct influence. These processes will be discussed in relation to the establishment, funding and ongoing operations of Australian CIs.

#### Establishment

The establishment of CIs in Australia has generally conformed with the standard model as explored in Chapter 4. To date there are now fourteen CIs attached to universities or government education departments in Australia (Hanban, 2019a).<sup>21</sup> Hartig's (2016, pp. 123-125) interviews with Australian CI-affiliated individuals suggest each institute was established in an ad-hoc manner to suit existing international partnerships and local institutions' ambitions regarding their engagement with China; from these interviews he could only confirm two Australian universities that initiated the process, with other agreements led by China-affiliated organisations such as the local Chinese consulate, the partnering Chinese

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 1.

organisation or a joint venture stemming from an existing relationship between educational institutions or cities.

The initial CI agreements appear to resonate with this ad-hoc organisation. The first Australian Confucius Institute agreement was signed at the University of Western Australia in 2005, with the launch of its official program in March 2007 roughly coinciding with the official launch of CIs in the University of Melbourne and University of Adelaide. It is alleged that some local educational institutions were led to believe by Hanban that they would host the sole CI in the region, and therefore there was an initial scramble to secure agreements (Hartig, 2016, p. 125). However, this was not upheld and there are now multiple competing CIs in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

Similar to overseas trends, CIs have attracted a range of universities as partners, including those associated with higher prestige. Of the thirteen Australian universities with CIs, six belong to the prestigious Group of Eight<sup>22</sup> and many had previously-established partnerships with Chinese universities (Hartig, 2016, pp. 120-122). This suggests that the incentives for greater connections with China have

<sup>22</sup> The Group of Eight is an association of what is commonly considered the top universities in Australia. It consists of the University of Melbourne, Australian National University, University of Sydney, University of Queensland, University of Western Australia, University of Adelaide, Monash University and University of New South Wales. Out of this group, only the Australian National University and Monash University have not established CI partnerships.

appealed to the majority of universities, regardless of status or previous relationships.

Overall, the establishment of CIs in Australia appears to have generally followed locally-initiated practices as per Hanban guidelines. While Chinese consulates and universities potentially took a more active role in facilitating some of these relationships, there is little evidence to suggest that this was centrally-coordinated by the Chinese government (Gil, 2015, pp. 212-213).

### Funding

While no financial reports are publicly available and exact funding amounts are most likely determined in the context of the partnership, evidence suggests that CIs in Australia generally follow standard funding practices for CI relationships. In 2016, Hartig (p. 126) confirmed that all Australian CIs followed the principle for equal contribution between Hanban and the host institution, although this also included in-kind contributions such as teaching resources, office space and staffing. Some have argued that Hanban's funding has given China significant influence over broader university activities in Australia (J. Fitzgerald, 2018, pp. 62-63; Hamilton, 2018, pp. 215-218). However, others argue that as China has pursued this partnership model in order to outsource some of its financial responsibility and achieve the desired rapid pace of expansion, it has in fact partially ceded its sovereignty to the CIs' hosting institutions (Hartig, 2016, p. 3; G.-Q. Liu, 2015, p. 794).

Additionally consistent with CIs overseas, some tensions have emerged concerning future funding and the extent Australian CIs are expected to become self-sustaining. Particularly in response to initial concerns over the long-term financial viability of CIs, Hanban has attempted to provide greater security through committing to five year funding contracts (Hartig, 2016, p. 106). However, CIs have expressed concerns over future funding due to the rapid expansion of the CI project, domestic criticisms of China's funding decisions and future uncertainty of its economy (Gil, 2015, p. 224; 2017b, pp. 93-94; Hartig, 2016, p. 128).

This insecurity has created a sometimes-contradictory dynamic in CIs regarding their relationship with Hanban. On one hand, the desire to secure future funding from Hanban has incentivised CIs to ensure that their localised initiatives are received favourably by the CCP. In particular, as Hanban approves funding for special events or projects on a case-by-case basis, they potentially exercise a level of discretion over CI activities (Hartig, 2016, p. 133). However, the uncertainty over funding has also prompted Australian CIs to pursue greater financial independence from Hanban. This has firstly occurred through sponsorships from state governments and corporations in at least some high-profile CIs (Hartig, 2016, p. 129; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016, p. 636). Secondly, CIs have attempted to expand their profit-making activities. For example, many have developed corporate training programs or industry-specific Chinese language courses in order to pursue lucrative niches. The CIs at the University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology even offer tailor-



made courses for specific business needs (QUT CI, 2019; UQ CI, 2019). These developments suggest that while CIs possess incentives to pursue the CCP's priorities, this is balanced with more localised profit-seeking initiatives.

### Ongoing Operations

The management and ongoing operation of Australian CIs is generally consistent with that exhibited internationally. As part of this practice, the influence China is able to directly exercise through these CIs appears limited, as many institutes have pursued significant paths of divergence in their localised operations in response to funding uncertainties and the existence of multiple institutes in many cities. While this has broadened their capacity for exercising structural power, their greater independence has resulted in a lesser potential for China's influence over localised CIs.

The management structure of Australian CIs suggests that China may be able to achieve some control over localised operations through its oversight and contribution to staffing. Following standard practice, each CI aims to appoint both an Australian and Chinese director to oversee governance of the institute, with the remainder of the board mostly filled by professors from each partnering institution. However, several Australian CIs do not have a Chinese director, resulting in the majority of management being exercised by the host university (Hartig, 2012b, p. 263). It has been speculated that this result is most likely due to the lack of additional remuneration to cover increased living costs in Australia, as well as the

perceived career limitations caused by the limited scope of CIs within their wider host university (Gil, 2017b, p. 93; Hartig, 2016, pp. 152-153; Peterson, 2017, p. 37). Additionally, due to a shortage within China of suitably-qualified language teachers, the majority of Chinese teachers are hired locally (CI1; Hartig, 2016, pp. 126-127). This has resulted in Hanban having little capacity to exercise even indirect influence over localised CI operations.

This localisation has been additionally evidenced in the breadth of services Australian CIs have offered in response to the needs of their local context. In addition to financial considerations, CIs in cities with other institutes and private language providers have had to specialise as a matter of existential justification (Hartig, 2012b, p. 266; 2016, pp. 135-136). In Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, this has resulted in CIs offering a range of specialised services attuned to the needs of their host institution and surrounding locality. For example, the CI at the University of Melbourne (UoM) focuses on providing services for businesses and school teachers (UoM CI, 2019), while that at RMIT specialises in Chinese medicine and health sciences (RMIT CI, 2019). Additionally, some CIs have introduced local non-academic board members to assist these ends. This has been witnessed in regard to the University of Sydney (USyd) CI's cultural and media focus, with its board now including Claudia Chan Shaw, an Australian art and media figure (USyd CI, 2019b). Accordingly, Australian CIs have permeated a significant array of their local academic, cultural and business environments.

Regardless of the increased connections between Australian and Chinese educational institutions, Hanban's practical ability or willingness to utilise them for China's national interests appears to be limited. Although the Constitution and By-Laws of the CI project allow Hanban to direct the operating guidelines of CIs and exercise general oversight (Hanban, 2019e), it has made little use of these powers aside from its annual financial audits, as previously discussed. This appears to reflect China's deliberate strategy of devolving the management of the CI project in order to facilitate its rapid proliferation with minimal funding and human resources (Hartig, 2016, p. 2; G.-Q. Liu, 2015, p. 794). Additionally, the competition created by multiple CIs in some cities has resulted in little coordination or combined initiatives between institutes. This lack of coordination between Hanban and CIs has in fact prompted CI staff in many institutes to express a desire for greater involvement by Hanban in order to more efficiently manage their affairs (Gil, 2017b, pp. 89-90). From this it can be concluded that while the CI project serves to build China's structural power across Australia's academic landscape, the Chinese government has displayed little willingness to exercise it through Hanban.

Lastly, there remains the possibility that the CI project in Australia is influenced by the CCP through other Chinese government organs. Some scholars have argued that this would be most likely coordinated by the UFWO as part of its broader influence over a range of China-affiliated organisations and individuals in Australia (Brady, 2017, p. 4; J. Fitzgerald, 2018; Suzuki, 2019, p. 90). As engaging with OC diasporas was identified as an early priority of the CI project, the OCAO was initially one of

twelve government organs overseeing Hanban (Gil, 2017b, p. 7). As it also engaged with local OC operations (PRC State Council, 2019), localised CIs most likely fell upon its remit. This influence is increasingly likely following the OCAO's incorporation into the UFWD, which is now controlled more directly by the CCP leadership and exercises increased authority following recent reforms (X. Zhang, 2018). While there is no evidence that the OCAO or UFWD have been directly involved in the operation of the CI project, the breadth of their influence over China-affiliated organisations leaves open the possibility that they exercise influence over CIs.

### Confucius Classrooms

Also resonating with standard international practice, all Australian CCs have been established through a partnership with a CI to facilitate funding, resources and training (Gil, 2015, p. 208). As of the beginning of 2019, there were 67 CCs in Australia (Hanban, 2019a). In NSW, existing CIs have formed partnerships particularly with private schools to establish CCs. For example, the University of New South Wales CI supports CCs at Rosebank College and Ravenswood School for Girls (UNSW CI, 2019a; 2019c). In addition, the USyd CI has established CCs at the King's School and Wenona School (DET, 2016).

A particularly unique CC operating model has been the CI operating in the NSW Department of Education (DoE). It was established in 2011, making it the first CI in the world to be hosted by a government department (Lim & Furze, 2017). All CCs in public schools are administered by this CI (NSW DoE, 2019a). Similar to other CI

arrangements, Hanban has provided start-up funding of AU\$150 000, while the NSW DoE has funded two staff members to oversee the project (NSW DoE, 2019b; 2019c, p. 10). Both partners have contributed to the ongoing budget (NSW DoE, 2019b). Supplementing the CC program, Hanban has provided initial funds of \$10 000 for each CC established. In addition, it gives access to specified teaching and learning resources, provides a native Chinese-speaking teaching assistant and all associated remuneration, funds professional learning for teachers and provides up to \$10 000 a year to support school-based projects (NSW DoE, 2016).<sup>23</sup> There are currently 13 public school CCs operating in NSW.<sup>24</sup> However, following the recent publication of the NSW DoE's review of the program, it has been announced that this CI and its CCs are to be shut down at the conclusion of the 2019 academic year, with the NSW government to implement its own replacement program (Baker & Chung, 2019).

### **Nature of the CI Project's Influence in Australia**

CIIs have recently received significant attention concerning the nature of China's broader influence in Australia. While the majority of their initiatives can be safely categorised as soft power, there remains the potential that they could be mechanised for sharper forms of influence. In particular, concerns have been raised

<sup>23</sup> Initially, Hanban's CC funding in Australian dollars was pegged to the international standard of US\$10 000 per CC. However, from the 2018-19 financial year, this has been revised to \$AU10 000 per CC, regardless of exchange rate (CC1).

<sup>24</sup> In 2013, CCs were established at Chatswood Public School, Kensington Public School, Coffs Harbour High School, Fort Street High School, Kingsgrove North High School, Mosman High School and Rooty Hill High School. In 2015, CCs were additionally established at Hurstville South Public School, Rouse Hill Public School, Bonnyrigg High School, Chatswood High School, Concord High School and Homebush Boys' High School (NSW DoE, 2019b).

over the potential for CIs to facilitate censorship and erode academic freedom, both within their immediate activities and the broader environment they operate in. This has been similarly voiced in relation to their operation of CCs in Australia, although their constrained nature and increased scrutiny makes the potential for their exercise of sharp power relatively limited. The nature of the CI project's exercise of power will be examined in relation to its influence upon host institutions, other stakeholders and individuals.

### Confucius Institutes

Australian CIs have potentially been successful as part of China's broader exercise of soft power in Australian universities, facilitating increased partnerships between Australian and Chinese organisations. However, it is difficult to ascertain the exact influence CI partnerships have had in this process. Hartig (2016, p. 124) has noted that many Australian universities desired to host a CI for the opportunity to engage more closely with Chinese institutions, and some CIs were in fact catalysed by existing partnerships. Despite these correlations, there has been no clear evidence that establishing a CI resulted in closer relations between institutions. For example, USyd previously had a strong existing partnership with Fudan University (USyd, 2014). Following their cooperation in establishing their CI, this relationship has continued in many other areas, including the establishment of the USyd China Studies Centre at the beginning of 2011 (Smith, 2010). In contrast, the Australian National University (ANU) has maintained strong partnerships with China from the 1980s until the present day without a CI (ANU, 2019). This suggests that while they

may contribute to facilitating further partnerships between Australian and Chinese universities, CIs are possibly just one tool of many that China has utilised in its strategic engagement with academic institutions.

Although Australian CIs may potentially be successful in exercising soft power in their hosting academic institutions, they appear to have assumed a complementary rather than pioneering position in Australia's academic landscape and have achieved less influence on a societal or individual level. Despite CIs attempting to engage with the wider public, the majority of attendees have been observed to have existing cultural or business affinities with China and were actively seeking out CI services for their own interests (Hartig, 2016, pp. 129, 176). As previously discussed, language and professional development programs have been largely reactive to the needs of local contexts, for example in the business focus of the CI at the UoM (UoM CI, 2019). This suggests that while CIs have gained prestige as specialist knowledge institutions, they are restricted in their scope to more actively promote more favourable understandings of China. Finally, even if CIs have promoted greater understanding of Chinese language and culture, there is little evidence that this has necessarily translated into more favourable views of the Chinese government or China as a nation (Gil, 2017b, pp. 74-76).

Further hindering the CI project's influence over public opinion have been the increasing geopolitical tensions and international criticisms concerning the Chinese government. In 2008, when the proliferation of CIs in Australia began, overall public

trust in China was polled at 47%; by 2019, this had declined to 32%, most likely reflecting public criticism of the CCP's human rights concerns and increasing military assertiveness in its region (Kassam, 2019, pp. 6-7). Despite focusing on language and culture and avoiding political engagement, CIs' efforts have most likely been undermined by these concerns (S. Y. Pan, 2013, p. 30). As highlighted by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2014, p. 114), narratives must resonate with the recipient's existing understanding of the subject, or else will be dismissed as falsehood or hypocrisy. As such, China will not be able to cultivate significant soft power through the CIs while the CCP concurrently presides over human rights abuses and military aggression (Hartig, 2016, p. 186).

It is in fact these broader issues regarding the CCP that have served as the basis for the conceptualisation of the CI project in Australia as sharp power. In particular, the majority of concerns have been voiced not in relation to the institutes or their actions, but due to China's domestic governance. As stated by Gil:

Criticism and concern about the Confucius Institute project are not due to China's promotion of its language and culture per se, but due to the fact that China is a communist country and its government funds it (2017a).

Echoing broader concerns, some scholars have argued that the CCP's penetration of China's academic and government landscape gives sufficient reason in itself for Australian CIs to be treated with suspicion (J. Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 281; 2018, p. 62; Hamilton, 2018, pp. 196-197, 215-216; Monk, 2018). By extension, it is argued that



the existence of CIs in Australia automatically serves to legitimise problematic aspects of China's domestic governance (J. Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 281; Hamilton, 2018, p. 216). In evaluating attitudes towards states, Katzenstein and Keohane (2007, p. 10) have differentiated between their nature and actions. Gil (2017a, 2017b) has drawn attention to this in relation to China, highlighting that this criticism due to the nature of its governance will exist regardless of its actions. As witnessed in relation to Australian discourses concerning China more broadly, these promote speculation divorced from evidence, and only serve to further the othering of the Australian Chinese population.

Of more concrete nature, there have been concerns over the potential for CIs to compromise academic freedom or exercise coercion over wider university activities through their platform. While these concerns have been expressed in relation to a variety of academic partnerships with Chinese institutions, CIs have received particular attention due to their prominence and perceptions of more direct government control (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 337). To date, no academics in Australian institutions with or without a CI have expressed concerns of censorship affecting their own academic work, and many have in fact criticised the CI project and the CCP's broader actions in scholarly and public contexts with no recourse from their university or other affiliated bodies (A1; A2; P1).

Although the general trend suggests that there is no organised system of influence across the CI project in Australia, there have been two reported instances of

censorship in campuses hosting CIs. In 2013, USyd was accused of succumbing to pressure from its CI when it cancelled a planned talk by the Dalai Lama on its campus (Guardian, 2013). However, the exact source of this influence was never established and the university later reversed its decision in response to the criticisms (ABC, 2013). Of greater concern, in September 2018, the Australian Values Alliance, a group of, 'Australian Chinese who [support] Australian core values' (AVA, 2019), organised a screening of a documentary critical of the CI project in Victoria University, which has hosted a CI since 2016. Presumably due to Chinese influence, the booking was cancelled last-minute without adequate explanation, and the university failed to offer an alternative arrangement (Monk, 2018). However, it was later discovered that while the CI relayed concerns about the event, they were in fact expressed by the Chinese Consulate in Melbourne (Ferguson, 2018). While these events raise concerns of undue influence exercised by China, there is insufficient information to establish the extent that CIs are directly involved.

In addition to potential influence through the university platforms they occupy, concerns have been raised in relation to the activities coordinated by CIs. Critics have argued that the expansion of the CI project in Australia can be understood as an attempt to monopolise the teaching of Chinese language (Hamilton, 2018, p. 216; To, 2014, p. 146). However, CIs appear unwilling in pursuing this objective. As previously discussed, many CIs have in fact pivoted away from language teaching due to the market saturation and in order to pursue more lucrative ventures (Hartig, 2012b, p. 266; 2016, pp. 135-136). Furthermore, all universities have maintained

control over the development of curriculum and resources for their language programs (Gil, 2017b, pp. 84-85). In fact, in response to the unsuitability of the majority of Hanban's resources, many Australian CIs are developing their own localised content or using that from non-Chinese sources. For example, while language classes at the USyd CI are taught with simplified characters, courses follow a textbook series that was developed in the US and teaches both simplified and traditional characters (USyd CI, 2019a). Although the pedagogical freedom given to teachers reduces the possibility of coercion by CIs (Hartig, 2016, p. 133), there is potentially less oversight of those sent from Hanban who may espouse more nationalistic views (CI1). However, a diversity of views exists across any area of teaching, and there are yet to be any specific criticisms regarding language teaching at CIs.

There have been claims that sharper influence is exercised through CIs' cultural events. While the majority have engaged with relatively uncontroversial topics, several have been accused of promoting uncritical perspectives of China. This was witnessed in 2012 when the USyd CI hosted a talk on the 'selection of the Dalai Lama and its political, religious and social influence on Tibet'. The CI justified the event by saying they were responding to requests in the community to cover the topic, attempted to make it as 'purely academic' as possible and asked the speaker to focus on the history of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama before Chinese control from 1959 (Bolton, 2018; Callick, 2012). However, critics have accused the CI of attempting to delegitimise the Dalai Lama and independence of Tibet, taking issue

with the presenter's previously-argued pro-China stance and lack of Tibetan representation (Callick, 2012). In contrast, some academics working in institutions hosting a CI have expressed that, while they may disagree with the opinions expressed, events such as these have generally served to facilitate productive discussions within a healthy academic environment (Hartig, 2016, p. 134). Regardless of whether there were sharper intentions behind the event, CIs in Australia have been responsive to these criticisms and have avoided hosting controversial events in recent years.

### Confucius Classrooms

The CC program has potentially had some influence in boosting China's soft power through the schools it operates in. From 2008 until 2016 (the period coinciding with the establishment of CIs in Australia)<sup>25</sup>, the number of students learning Chinese in Australian schools doubled to almost 5% of total school enrolments (Orton, 2016, p. 42).<sup>26</sup> Language teachers and academics involved in CC programs have expressed that the provision of native language teaching assistants, additional teaching resources, professional development for teachers and extracurricular activities have increased interest for students and parents in continuing Chinese language learning

<sup>25</sup> Some CIs (particularly in Victoria) began brokering CC agreements immediately after their own establishment. However, the majority of CCs were only established from around 2012, coinciding with national and state-level language initiatives (Orton, 2016, p. 16).

<sup>26</sup> Primary and secondary education in Australia is managed on a state level. In addition, Catholic and Independent schools conduct differing practices concerning data collection and publication on student enrolments and subject selections. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain nationally consistent data across states and sectors. As such, I have relied on the data compiled by Orton (2016) comparing enrolments in 2008 and 2016 as most suitable for this project.

in later secondary and tertiary studies (Gil, 2017b, pp. 68-71). However, the implementation of CCs has coincided with national and state-level government initiatives aiming to increase the appeal of studying Asian languages. For example, Prime Minister Gillard's 2012 Asian Century white paper advocated Mandarin as one of four priority languages to be taught in schools (Australian Government, 2012, p. 171). In addition, Orton (2016, pp. 24, 29) has noted that all the increase in Chinese language learning can be accounted for the increase in Chinese-background students in Australian schools, with the number of non-background students in fact decreasing over time. Accordingly, it can be surmised that while CCs may encourage further language learning in their setting, these effects are most likely minimal in Australia's broader context.

Echoing concerns levied against CIs, Australian CCs have been the recipient of heavy criticism from parents, politicians and community groups due to their links to the Chinese government. Due to Hanban's significant funding and involvement in teacher training and professional development, critics have raised concerns that the Chinese government effectively exercises influence over a large proportion of Chinese language teaching in Australian schools (J. Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 281; Hamilton, 2018, p. 219; Babbage in Lim & Furze, 2017; Kaye in Patty, 2011). This was evident when the NSW DoE's regional director, Dr Phil Lambert, suggested that Chinese classes avoid controversial topics in order to focus on language learning (Norrie, 2011). Hartig (in Lim & Furze, 2017) has argued that the CC arrangement, particularly with the NSW DoE, merits additional scrutiny given that the teaching is

delivered to children, who may not yet possess the capacity to critically evaluate the implications of these influences on their education.

While CC partnerships have possibly resulted in professed CCP-sympathy on a macro level, there is little influence that this has directly influenced teaching in local schools with CCs. In Australia, being a CC does not exempt the class from following all school and state education department policies and procedures, including syllabus-specified learning content (NSW DoE, 2016, p. 4). This was further regulated in NSW, as classroom teachers are required to contribute their lessons to a resource bank to be shared across the state (NSW DoE, 2016, p. 5). Affirming their support for CCs, the Chinese Language Teachers Association of NSW (2016) asserted that NSW syllabuses do not provide any scope for covering political content, no curriculum developed by the CCP or any Chinese organs has ever been taught in NSW and local schools maintain complete control over their participation in the CC program. This was reaffirmed by my interviewee, who stated that while their coordinating CI exercised no direct influence over teaching or wider school activities, they in fact regularly requested and were responsive to feedback concerning training, resources and general support (CC1).

Echoing international concerns, many parents and politicians have objected to CCs providing a Hanban-trained native language assistant from China. However, while possessing some autonomy over teaching pedagogy, language assistants have minimal flexibility over the content of their lessons (NSW DoE, 2016, p. 4). Legal and

policy requirements in all states of Australia place duty of care and responsibility for all learning outcomes on the classroom teacher and school principal. Due to this, teaching assistants are timetabled together with their supervising classroom teacher, who leads and supervises all classes (NSW DoE, 2016, pp. 4-5). Furthermore, school principals take ultimate responsibility for teaching assistants, including ensuring compliance with all child protection and code of conduct-related matters (NSW DoE, 2016, p. 5). In regard to classroom activities, anecdotal evidence suggests that due to their general inexperience in teaching Chinese language to foreign audiences, many language assistants predominantly facilitate more practical cultural activities such as traditional Chinese crafts and dances alongside supporting the classroom teacher (CC1). Chinese teachers have in fact requested that Hanban and the coordinating CI provide additional training to language assistants so they may have additional input into teaching (CC1). In August 2019, these presumptions were confirmed when the NSW Government published its review of its CI's CC program in public schools, concluding that there was no evidence of inappropriate foreign influence conducted in CCs (NSW DoE, 2019c, p. 17). While these hard conclusions cannot be definitively broadened to CCs in NSW private schools and outside NSW, the similarity of operations, curriculum and policies give reason to conclude that these findings most likely apply to CCs across Australia.

Despite the most likely benign nature of CCs, there remain concerns over their macro organisation through their coordinating CI. In regard to the NSW DoE CI, the recent review did raise concerns that the management of this partnership through

its CI gave the perception of undue foreign influence and undermined transparency and perceived legitimacy of governance (NSW DoE, 2019c, pp. 17-18). In particular, the review highlighted that the CI partnership provided CCP employees direct access to NSW Government infrastructure and high-level employees, increasing the capacity for exercising undue influence (NSW DoE, 2019c, p. 15). In response to this review, the NSW Government has announced that it will be shutting down its CI and associated CCs (Baker & Chung, 2019). As the remaining CCs in Australia are coordinated by a local university-hosted CI, there are few concerns of undue influence over government departments. Greater scrutiny would be better targeted at the wider operations of each CI, as has been previously discussed.

## **Conclusion**

The CIs in Australia have generally operated in a manner similar to that in other states, building bilateral connections and promoting a desired construction of China to their local contexts. However, as there is no direct correlation between hosting a CI and further connections with China, the CI project most likely is one of many statecraft mechanisms that China employs in aid of these goals. In addition, the ad-hoc nature and competing interests of many CI partnerships suggests that the Chinese government has assumed a more passive role in managing CIs, instead managing the broader project in a manner allowing CIs to autonomously pursue China's national goals.



While the majority of CI initiatives can be understood as conventional soft power, there remains the potential that they have been operationalised for sharper influence in regard to censorship of wider university activities. In considering these issues, it is difficult to establish the extent of the CCP's direct involvement. Although CIs do not appear to proactively pursue these activities, they could be assuming either an active or reactive role in coordination with the UFWD or MoFA, as exercised through the Chinese embassy and consulates. There additionally remains the possibility that individuals within CIs autonomously pursue sharper goals independent of central directives, whether through unspoken inducements or patriotic sentiment. Considering the general operational structure of CIs in Australia and lack of consistency in sharper areas of influence, it is most likely that these sharper mechanisms are initiated locally. From these findings it can be concluded that while the CCP utilises the CI project in Australia as a benign means to further China's economic development and improve its national prestige, structural incentives from the CCP's broader apparatus have potential to be exercised through the CI project for sharper influence.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis attempted to answer the question of why the Chinese government has promoted the CI project in Australia and elsewhere. It argued that the CI project can be understood as a mechanism of China's cultural statecraft, operating within China's broader use of statecraft in order to facilitate continued economic growth and promote a desired image of China to the world, ultimately assisting the CCP's central goal of maintaining its domestic legitimacy. The Chinese state has structured the CI project in a similar manner to its economic statecraft, devolving a significant amount of control to local CIs in Australia. Nevertheless, these CIs have assumed positions of reasonable influence in their host institutions and generally acted autonomously in ways that further the CCP's national agenda. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the CIs have primarily been conduits of soft power for China, with the Chinese state most likely not actively pursuing undue influence through them – as I have argued in Donnelly and Kim (2019). However, there remains the possibility that they could be indirectly mechanised as instruments of sharp power in the future.

### **The Confucius Institute Project as Cultural Statecraft**

Due to China's state-directed and nationally-focused ambitions, cultural statecraft was identified as an appropriate concept with which to analyse why the Chinese government has promoted the CI project in Australia. Cultural statecraft particularly builds upon existing scholarly research on China's economic statecraft explain why the Chinese state pursues certain foreign policy actions. Economic statecraft no

doubt remains one of the CCP's key foreign affairs instruments used to influence specific policy outcomes and facilitate broader economic partnerships, increased international prestige and national development. However, while the CI project works towards achieving the same goals, the majority of CI initiatives are not financial but instead focus upon promoting Chinese language and culture. As such, cultural statecraft builds upon the study of economic statecraft and the Chinese government's broader use of statecraft in order to greater understand the Chinese state's national ambitions.

### **The Confucius Institute Project as Structural Power**

While cultural statecraft explains why the Chinese government has promoted the CI project in Australia, structural power explains how it has been exercised. In order to facilitate a favourable international environment, the CI project has been promoted through locally-coordinated agreements and decentralised operations that make use of existing relationships and institutions. This arrangement has allowed the Chinese government to expand the program at scale and exercise indirect influence through local CIs while simultaneously minimising its financial burden. The structure of operation of the CI project resonates with the Chinese state's broader foreign affairs instruments, in particular its economic statecraft. As has been noted by G. Chan (2018, p. 96) in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>27</sup>, China is pioneering a more

<sup>27</sup> Evoking the historical Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI; also known as One Belt One Road [OBOR]) is China's grand strategy of facilitating infrastructure projects across the world in order to facilitate trade and investment and bring mutual benefit to all countries involved (Pacheco Pardo, 2018, p. 238). Similar to the CI project, there has been significant academic discussion over the nature

informal and decentralised form of diplomacy guided by the principles of mutual cooperation and benefit. Therefore, structural power has significant promise as a tool for analysing China's broader exercise of power in the world.

Complementing structural power, the soft vs sharp power debate as a conceptual spectrum has provided greater understanding of the nature of influence China exercises in world affairs and other domestic contexts. As argued in this study, the influence exercised through the CI project can be generally understood as soft power, typically of many other states. As such, while soft power does not adequately explain the state-led agenda of China's promotion of the CI project, it is a useful conceptual tool for understanding China's involvement in foreign affairs and the domestic affairs of other states.

Conversely, the increasingly assertive position that China is taking in foreign affairs has raised concerns of sharper influence through the CI project. As observed, there have been instances in relation to Australian CIs where the CCP has potentially exercised malicious influence in an attempt to censor undesired topics and stifle criticism of the CCP. Nonetheless, scholars using the concept of sharp power have in many instances automatically translated concern over China's domestic institutions to its engagement with institutions abroad. Although these concerns may be substantiated if Chinese government organs are directly exercising influence over

of the Belt and Road Initiative, with many scholars arguing that it may be exercised for sharper influence.

organisations in foreign jurisdictions, this is not the case with the relatively autonomous management structure of CIs. Additionally, some writers have cautioned against the use of sharp power discourses, arguing that they have marginalised the Australian-Chinese community and may potentially provoke the very sympathies toward the CCP that China critics espouse (Brophy, 2018; He, 2019a). As such, while sharp power may explain claims of the CCP's malicious influence through some CI mechanisms, problems arise when generalised to the entire CI project and China's broader exercise of power.

These findings are significant for shedding new light on two ongoing issues concerning the nature of Chinese power.

#### **Implication 1: The key drivers behind China's engagement with the international system**

The Chinese state's promotion of the CI project suggests that while China has become increasingly assertive in international relations and made efforts to improve its international reputation, these actions have been primarily motivated by domestic ambitions. As such, although cultural statecraft may be exercised to improve China's capacity for greater normative engagement with the international community, this goal is most likely secondary to its national priority of maintaining economic growth and stability in order to preserve the domestic legitimacy of the CCP's governance.

Challenging this notion, many scholars have referenced tensions over both China's domestic and international issues, including its authoritarian governance and military hostility in the South China Sea, to argue that the Chinese state's engagement with the international system, including those initiatives appearing harmless or mutually-beneficial, must be treated with scepticism (Ikenberry, 2013; Lautz, 2013; Nye, 2013; Shambaugh, 2013, 2015). In particular, several authors have contended that the Chinese state's increasing assertiveness exposes a desire to challenge the US-led hegemonic order (Feng & He, 2017; Ikenberry, 2013; Johnston, 2013). However, while China may be seeking a greater role in world affairs commensurate with its previous historical position, these sharp power discourses do not adequately explain the CCP's pursuit of stability and continued economic growth. The findings of this thesis suggest that while the Chinese state may be pursuing an increased international status and greater role in world affairs, any potential attempt at hegemonic challenge is secondary to its pursuit of national development and political stability.

### **Implication 2: China's influence in Australian social and political life**

This thesis contends that the CI project is part of the Chinese government's broader efforts to develop the Australia-China relationship, increase China's reputation in Australia and facilitate mutually-beneficial economic partnerships. Additionally, the CCP is potentially pursuing this relationship in order to reduce Australia's dependence on the US so that China may increase its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. It was concluded that although CIs in Australia mostly resemble soft power,

there is potential that they could be exercised as sharp power alongside other Chinese foreign affairs organs.

In the last several years, increased scrutiny has been particularly directed at China's influence over Australian academic institutions, with writers arguing that partnerships with Chinese individuals and organisations have facilitated censorship, CCP control over university activities and complicity in China's domestic human rights abuses<sup>28</sup> (J. Fitzgerald, 2018; Hamilton, 2018; Joske, 2018; Rubinsztein-Dunlop et al., 2019). While many of these claims merit investigation, including in regard to the CIs, care must be taken in applying double standards to China-affiliated organisations and generalising the nature of Chinese influence in Australia.

Firstly, while Australian CIs coordinate university partnerships and conduct activities in a manner similar to many other nationally-sponsored language and culture organisations, they receive the overwhelming majority of criticism. For example, the USyd United States Studies Centre (USSC) receives funding from two weapons manufacturers and the US Department of State (USSC, 2019), and operates much broader influence over university activities in comparison to the USyd CI.<sup>29</sup> However, to date the USSC has received almost no public criticism outside of student

<sup>28</sup> In particular, recent scrutiny has been directed at a number of research partnerships that have been allegedly implemented by the CCP for the purposes of mass-surveillance and data collection of ethnic minorities in China (Rubinsztein-Dunlop, Christodoulou, Koloff, Day, & Hui, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Of particular note, although the USSC asserts its academic independence, the overwhelming majority of its publications and events have affirmed the Australia-US alliance, prompted caution concerning China's rise and/or advocated for Australia to increase its military presence in the Asia-Pacific (USSC, 2019).

publications. As such, examination of sharper influence in Australia would be better approached by investigating all organisations, not just those affiliated with China.

Secondly, in the case of sharper influence by Chinese institutions, it is difficult to establish the direct involvement of the CCP in their exercise. As identified in this thesis, although CIs most likely do not exercise sharp power directly, there is potential that they could be sharper exercises of structural power through either the co-optation of other CCP organs, autonomous actions of individuals or more subtle influence by the CCP's guiding hand. These possibilities suggest that China's broader influence in Australian social and political life may resemble the mostly benign operation of Australian CIs. However, it cannot be discounted that the Chinese state attempts to operationalise its structural power for sharper influence.

### **Further Research**

Although the CI project has been studied as a whole and in the Australian context, there remains additional scope to examine the operation of the CI project, its individual organs and the nature of its power exercised. There is great potential for further research into how CIs operate within China's wider foreign affairs apparatus, or for a comparative study with similar organisations of other states. Conversely, broader studies of how different organs of the Chinese state influence China's foreign policy could shed further light on the motivations and mechanisms behind Chinese government-sponsored organisations overseas, including the CIs. Additionally, many opportunities remain for further research into understanding the



operation of the CI project in other geographic contexts. Moreover, considering the current climate of fear over foreign influence in Australian institutions, questions remain concerning how the broader CI project and individual CIs have responded to these critical narratives.

Lastly, as this study is limited to analysing the CI project, further research on other Chinese government-sponsored organisations and initiatives could challenge my broader conclusions regarding China's role in world affairs and its influence over Australia's domestic landscape. For example, while many existing studies on China's economic statecraft have affirmed China's foreign policy being primarily motivated by the desire for mutually-beneficial national development (eg. G. Chan, 2018; Dollar, 2018; Hameiri, 2015; Pacheco Pardo, 2018), others have argued that it in fact seeks to seize strategic infrastructure, create exploitative debt-trap arrangements and establish dominance over China's greater region (Eg. Cardenal et al., 2017; Kinyondo, 2019; Shah, 2019). Similarly, increasing scrutiny has only recently been directed at China's potential sharp influence over Australian politicians and research partnerships (Eg. Hamilton, 2018; Joske, 2018). Future findings may suggest sharper exercise of the operation and/or nature of Chinese influence.

## Appendixes

### Appendix 1: Confucius Institutes in Australia, in order as they appear on the Hanban website (Hanban, 2019a, 2019c; Hartig, 2016, p. 121)

Australian Partner	Chinese Partner(s)	Date of Establishment
University of Western Australia	Zhejiang University (Hangzhou)	Signed on 6 July 2005; started running on 26 June 2006; launch of the first public education programmes in March 2007
University of Melbourne	Nanjing University	Signed on 10 November 2006; officially launched in March 2007
University of Adelaide	Shandong University (Jinan)	Signed on 10 November 2006; officially launched in March 2007
University of Queensland	Tianjin University	Signed on 9 August 2007; official opening 19 November 2010
Queensland University of Technology	Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education (Nanjing) – Yangzhou University, Nantong University, Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Nanjing Art University and Xuzhou Normal University	Signed on 16 June 2008; officially opened on 15 June 2009
University of Sydney	Fudan University (Shanghai)	Signed on 19 October 2007; officially launched on 17 June 2008
University of New South Wales	Shanghai Jiaotong University	Signed on 11 December 2007; established in 2009
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (Chinese Medicine Confucius Institute)	Nanjing University of Chinese Medicine	Signed on 3 October 2008; officially opened by Xi Jinping on 20 June 2010
University of Newcastle	Central China Normal University (Wuhan)	Signed on 16 October 2008; officially opened on 11 May 2011
Charles Darwin University	Anhui Normal University (Wuhu) and Hainan University (Haikou)	Signed on 6 April 2011; officially opened 31 July 2012

New South Wales Department of Education	Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education (Nanjing)	Officially launched 28 November 2011; to be closed at the end of 2019
Victoria University (Business Confucius Institute)	University of International Business and Economics (Beijing)	Officially launched 19 May 2016 (Lou & Wang, 2016)
Griffith University (Tourism Confucius Institute)	China University of Mining and Technology (Xuzhou)	Unveiling ceremony on 9 April 2011; officially opened 16 November 2012
La Trobe University	Chongqing University	Established in November 2011

## **Appendix 2: List of Interviews**

Academic Interviewee 1 (A1), interview conducted by email, 14 June 2019  
 Academic Interviewee 2 (A2), interview conducted by phone, 1 July 2019  
 CC Interviewee 1 (CC1), interview conducted in person, 8 July 2019, Sydney  
 CI Interviewee 1 (CI1), interview conducted in person, 12 July 2019, Sydney  
 Politician Interviewee (P1), interview conducted by email, 30 July 2019  
 Academic Interviewee 3 (A3), interview conducted by email, 2 August 2019  
 Academic Interviewee 4 (A4), interview conducted in person, 3 September 2019, Sydney

Appendix 3 of this thesis has been removed as it may contain sensitive/confidential content

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