

Event Report

**China's Cultural Diplomacy:  
The Role of Non-State Actors**

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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Since the 1990s, China has been actively conducting a soft power foreign policy with the promise of establishing a “win-win” situation for all participants worldwide. Chinese cultural diplomacy is based on various pillars, such as the Confucius Institutes (CIs) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). During the seminar, the results were presented of a three-year comparative study on Chinese cultural diplomacy (CD) in Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia which contribute to the broader debate on China's increasing use of soft power in international relations and offer valuable insights for policy makers, civil society and academics dealing with Chinese cultural diplomacy. In particular, the authors discussed the urgent need – often ignored by decision-makers – to ensure that future collaboration with China does not rely entirely on the information and assistance provided by China. An independent team of experts were brought together, who are familiar with Chinese culture and policy-making, to secure the best preconditions for negotiating beneficial terms for the guest countries. The study, entitled “China's Cultural Diplomacy and the Role of Non-State Actors”, was conducted by a research team at the Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of Czech Republic between 2015 and 2017.

### ***Opening Remarks by Professor Lutgard Lams, Faculty of Arts, KU Leuven***

Professor Lams opened the event by briefly providing a backgrounder on the three-year collaborative study on the role of non-state actors in Chinese Cultural Diplomacy (CD). In particular, four case studies have been done on Chinese CD in European countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Austria), Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), the Middle East (United Arab Emirates), and Southeast Asia (Malaysia). The project's innovative distinction stems from the fact that Chinese cultural diplomacy has so far been academically viewed solely from a monolithic perspective; this study takes into account various factors, such as a wide array of actors as well as country-specific intercultural dynamics at play in the way China engages with different partners around the world. In other words, it is also important to look at how multiple actors approach China, thus expanding the focus from a default top-down flow of influence from governmental actors to initiatives also coming from non-governmental actors.

### ***Associate Prof. Dr. Jens Damm, CJCU/Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of Czech Republic***

Professor Damm first explained the early phases of the project. Set up at the Oriental Institute in Czech Republic, they initially explored possible research prospects by examining widely known cultural diplomacy initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes (CI) around the world and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A review of literature which could be found at the CI was done, including a look at existing academic debates around different responses of guest countries on Chinese CD. For example, positive analyses praised how China has successfully brought states in closer cooperation with each other within the framework of the BRI. Skeptical views were also present in the literature, which viewed the BRI as a possible 'Trojan Horse' in the making that has a self-interested politico-economic agenda. It has been said as well, that the prevalent "win-win situation" rhetoric has not necessarily translated into reality as some people on the ground perceive it differently.

The missing link in the literature turned out to be the lack of discussion on the role of non-state actors such as non-profit organizations among others. This called into question regional variations in and new forms of Chinese CD, including active participation of civil society actors, ethnic minorities, and transnational Chinese (for instance, Chinese students who began to work in the foreign country where they graduated, and subsequently travelled to and from China) who have established their own sets of networks and gained knowledge of the region through their interactions with academia as well as commercial, artistic, and cultural circles. The emerging research question became: How exactly does China's cultural diplomacy work in various regions in the world? It then necessitated an innovative methodological approach – for each case study, a team up between one regional specialist and one Chinese studies or Sinology expert. Also part of the activities within the scope of the project were conferences organized with Chinese colleagues as well as empirical field research.

It was also important to revisit available literature on China's official discourse and the aims of its cultural diplomacy. One general observation was that the more the study was zoomed in on specific case studies, the official discourse became more blurred. The presence and contribution of transnational actors as well as non-Chinese actors produced certain local knowledge and expertise on the subject and there is now a need to incorporate

these factors in the discussion of overall Chinese CD instead of confining research to a top-down perspective. Professor Damm recalled a question addressed to him by a Chinese participant in a conference in Berlin, who solicited advice on how China can do better in terms of its cultural diplomacy. This was a relevant question as well from the EU side since there has also been an alleged observation that China is dividing Europe by giving preferential treatments to Central and Eastern European countries like Hungary over other countries. What then, can both the EU and China do to improve this? In general, how can public diplomacy be better brought from China to the regions, and how can regions counteract accordingly? Hence, while the results of the study were a helpful addition to Chinese CD research, it also gave particular focus on policy recommendations for decision-makers, including EU policy makers, civil society, and the media.

***Dr. Ondřej Klimeš, Post-doctoral Fellow at Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of Czech Republic; Associate Professor in modern Chinese history, Department of East Asian Studies of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Charles University in Prague***

Specializing in contemporary Chinese politics, Professor Klimeš' contribution to the project was his analysis of the Official Concept of Culture and Cultural Diplomacy in China. He recalled that since 1978, there have been many reforms done in the country. And throughout those years until today, the ruling Communist Party has remained present in all processes shaping all spheres of life in China, including its economy, culture, education, media, science, and even its demography. Furthermore, while it is not the party-state's objective to control its government policies the way it did before, it still possesses the capability to do so when it deems it necessary. This strength is also present in the sphere of culture. It is therefore important to study cultural politics, or how the state acts on culture, since it remains to be the strongest political actor in the principle of cultural diplomacy.

It has been said that China is, among other things, an ideocracy – a state wherein ideology and 'spiritual' activity continue to play an influential role in the country. Many scholarly works have touched on this when discussing the development of Chinese CD. Wang (2011) found that during the latter period in China's political history, its cultural democracy or praxis has been moderated by business factors and commercial dynamics abroad. D'Hooghe (2015), on the other hand, foregrounded the growing number of actors involved in Chinese CD. Moreover, Hartig (2016) noticed that China's public diplomacy has transformed from a one-way soliloquy into one that focuses on communication and mutual understanding. In all these studies, the state was recognized consistently as the strongest player and the most efficient actor in public as well as cultural diplomacy. Hence, it is essential to look at the central concept of Chinese CD: what is being inputted into the message or the communication process, including that which is coming from non-state actors. Another way to put the question is the extent to which remnants from the central vision are still there. It is important to note that the first functional term of President Xi's leadership can be characterized by a consolidation of party-state mechanisms and strong rejuvenation of cultural governance in China. This indicates that the state recognizes the role of culture, cultural policy, and the media, in spreading cultural politics.

Professor Klimeš also discussed Chinese CD as an “ideational activity.” State action on culture also affects the dominant ideology it promotes. Interestingly, the former head of the propaganda department in China, Liu Yunshan (October 2002 – November 2012), wrote an article prior to his appointment, about culture as a danger for subverting the sociopolitical order in China. There is, therefore, a need for the state to oversee the actors and the central message within its cultural diplomacy agenda, and this has always been the case. In fact, the propaganda department of today continues to flourish not without its historical precedents in the form of significant politico-cultural concepts advanced by previous leaders: revolutionary culture and art by Mao Tze Tung (1942), material and spiritual civilization by Deng Xiaoping (1980s), the concept of advanced culture and the Three Represents by Jiang Zemin (1989-2002), and cultural construction and cultural soft power by Hu Jintao (2002-2012). Moreover, traditional China was regarded to be the cultural center of the universe and surrounding countries would need to adapt to Chinese mores and norms. In other words, there has been a long Chinese tradition of regarding and utilizing culture this way. For President Xi Jinping, culture is also bound to serve domestic interests and help preserve political power -- that is, ‘socialist cultural power,’ which ‘must be guided by Marxism.’

The Public Diplomacy Apparatus of China was also probed in the research, analyzing multiple measures and agencies involved in the conveyance of Chinese public diplomacy. This comprises ‘software’ elements (such as the Central Leading Small Group for Propagandistic and Ideational Work, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Ministries of Education and Culture), ‘hardware’ elements (the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Military System), various information activities, cultural exchanges, local government initiatives, and civil society initiatives. While these are effective and influential, Zhao Kejin (2014) observes several limitations which can be overcome: the excessive role of government, overemphasis on traditional culture, inaccessibility, and disregard for global communication methods and perspectives on China. Additionally, the state must also ensure the credibility of “the message” it wishes to relay in carrying out its cultural diplomacy. When doing research on China, Professor Klimeš also reminded of the need to think about the interplay between state actors, which are the strongest players, and various non-state actors.

***Dr. phil. Astrid Lipinsky, Research Associate, University of Vienna; interim Professor of Chinese Economics & Society, Göttingen University***

Dr. Astrid Lipinsky presented the first case study of the project, which focused on the European capitals of Vienna and Berlin. The general finding was that Chinese CD in capital cities is distinct from Chinese CD in minor cities. Particularly in Vienna and Berlin, there was no observed Sinophobia unlike in other places but a long tradition of cultural and artistic exchange partly characterizes their relations with China. From a historical perspective, Austria and Germany were not colonial empires; they were, for a long time, patronizing Chinese art or “Chinoiserie” as can be evidenced by preserved items in imperial residences. Today, a Confucius Institute and some BRI initiatives are present in Berlin and they continue to play a central role. However, these are not that dominant since cultural exchanges, which stem from the aforementioned long tradition, can be found elsewhere. For example, if one needs to learn Mandarin, there are many private as well as public avenues ready to offer courses. Additionally, these emerging institutions are not

necessarily owned or organized by the Chinese government. Activities such as workshops and exhibitions on Chinese art and culture are also organized out of commercial interests. Still, some China-sponsored activities are comprised of Chinese experts who are not necessarily Party members. Hence, what the research shows are newer developments in Chinese CD that increasingly involve the participation of transnational and local civil society groups.

The research also revealed the heterogeneity of Confucius Institutes set up in different cities in Europe. Factors which distinguish one CI from another include: the location (if it is a capital or a minor city), the background of the local director, and his/her knowledge of Chinese studies. For example, in minor cities such as Olomouc (Czech Republic) and Freiburg (Germany), a history of Chinese inhabitants in these cities does not exist. And since local directors' expertise are in no way related to Chinese studies, they do not have considerable influence on the content of work carried out in the Institutes but execute their job without going beyond the Beijing guidelines. This shows that the substance of the work of CIs are locally modified in Europe depending on their location and top management. It is essential, therefore, to locally analyze Chinese CD. Variations in CIs in Europe can also be seen as an opportunity to improve Chinese CD on a local, national, and even European level. One policy recommendation is to engage in further discussions on China's efforts with different local experts, to consciously find local knowledge, and understand local conditions, in order to effect more influence in the host cities. There is a need to identify which actors in host cities China can effectively collaborate with. As communication is always the key, it is also recommended to have an open dialogue on what can be done, which groups, for instance, oppose, and who are in favor. Furthermore, both sides have to be open to criticism. In the case of Vienna and Berlin, the positive mutual image can be tapped to improve cooperation in terms of policy.

***Dr. Věra Exnerova, Research Fellow Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of Czech Republic***

The second case study was presented by Dr. Exnerova, which focused on Chinese CD in two Central Asian cities, namely, Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Tashkent (Uzbekistan). First, it is important to note the overarching historical context of this case – Central Asia is a neighbourhood region spanning millennia of mutual influence in the form of cultural exchanges, rulers (such as Genghis Khan) moving back and forth within the region, and political tensions at different periods in its historical timeline. As such, Central Asian societies today are characterized by various strains of influence including that by Russia, the EU, the US in recent years, China, as well as religiously by Islam. For example, a comparison between its links to the EU and to China reveals a certain sway towards China due to similarities in the form of governments. Although the EU is a leading donor in the region, economically handicapped, and at the same time, authoritarian Central Asian governments tend to support Chinese (infrastructure) investments. In terms of an allied approach, a closer look gives away Uzbekistan's relative hesitancy towards China when compared to the relatively more liberal Kazakhstan. Culturally, China's concern for Central Asia lies in the same ethnic groups which inhabit both Western China and Central Asia, prompting China to see the need to effect positive cultural influence on the region.

Dr. Exnerova then highlighted two main results of the case study, of which the first described newer developments in China's Silk Road Diplomacy. Within this framework, China promotes understanding, mutual exchange, trade, and harmony, which are in line with China's central message to the world. This begs the question of the extent to which Silk Road diplomacy translates into reality not only in Central Asia but also elsewhere in the world. The study found that in practice, a diverse group of actors are at work to adjust local conditions to the foreign and domestic needs of China, resulting in a multiplicity of narratives around the Silk Road employed for both political and sociocultural reasons. For example, the Chinese perspective sees the Silk Road as a place of multiple beginnings and endings. Chinese-authored publications distributed in Central Asian local languages illustrate that all influence came from China, and that the Silk Road only originated particularly in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC, involving a particular Chinese diplomat. In Kazakhstan, the major narrative revolves around what they call a Step Road instead of a Silk Road, which began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium BC. An emphasis on the exploits of King Alexander III of Macedonia in 334 BC can be seen in the Uzbek narrative.

Central Asian academic publications also recognize the variety of actors involved in shaping the history of the Silk Road, which do not exclude the presence of Chinese envoys. They describe the Silk Road not as a harmonious place, but something dependent on a strong, dominant ruler subjugating other rulers, thus, benefitting not only economically but also creating a stable environment. On the other hand, authors of Chinese publications are usually experts in economics and politics, writing opening statements such as "the friendly cooperation between Central Asia and China existed since the old Silk Road." They would then go on discussing infrastructure and investments, with little coverage of the history of the Silk Road itself. The message was clearly to convey the Silk Road as a revived venue for achieving harmonious economic development. In conclusion, this survey of different narratives shows that there is one particular narrative being circulated out of thousands existing. This runs counter to a suggestion of adjusting public diplomacy to local conditions. How, then, should history be written? Is China explaining itself to the world or is it trying to explain the world to the world?

On another note, the emergence of new actors and new forms of cooperation can be observed in public and cultural events. An example is an exhibition called "Grand Silk Road, Day of Chinese Culture," organized by the public national library in Almaty in cooperation with the Chinese embassy. Local actors who promote the Chinese image in the region can also include academics, Chinese experts, business individuals, elites, and artists. This finding also suggests that China appears to be better off perceived as a 'transnational societal space.'

***Dr. phil. Jarmila Ptackova, Research Fellow at the Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of Czech Republic***

The case of the Middle East was explained by Dr. Ptackova, who revealed China's unique approach to the Arab world. In general, China usually addresses the Middle East as one Arab bloc and there is, in fact, a substantial amount of policy papers available on China-Arab relations. However, the real challenge lies in differentiating China-Arab dynamics since individual Middle Eastern countries vary culturally, historically, and politically. This

case study particularly focused on the United Arab Emirates, which has a relatively more open society.

What this case illustrates is the strategic approach of China's cultural diplomacy, wherein it modifies the kind of image it projects depending on who it interacts with. In the case of the Middle East, its Muslim minority heritage, or a Muslim China, was selected by the Ministry of Culture to represent the Chinese image in the Arab world. This served as a common ground on which both parties could build up their relations. For the purposes of this research, it was a particularly formidable task to pursue non-state actors since China-Arab cooperation in the UAE is clearly pragmatic and economically motivated. The cultural sphere is being tapped only tangentially and not necessarily for cultural or people-to-people exchanges – it is being used mainly as a tool to enhance the ultimate objective of economic cooperation and development. In fact, the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), which has been the overarching framework for China-Arab cooperation, is the main influencer and has enabled China to employ two strategies. One is on national development, which is the enhancement of international relations for mutual economic benefits, such as the increase in trade, export of labor, as well as ideology. Secondly, the local strategy of developing western China (*Xibu da kaifa*) has now been succeeded by and incorporated into the BRI.

On the presence of China or Chinese culture in the UAE, promoting China-Arab friendship is again clearly motivated by (inter)national economic interests. For one, China is one of the UAE's main economic partners especially in its quest for resource and relations diversification. From a BRI perspective, the UAE is not only China's oil supplier, but is becoming an increasingly important logistical hub for the re-export of Chinese goods to Africa, Europe, and the rest of the Middle East. Since both parties concentrate their efforts on these objectives, a closer look at China-Arab cultural ties in the UAE appears passive. In particular, there is an apparent lack of public space to target in the research since the country is largely comprised of a heterogeneous spatial and social structure. On the one hand, the effectiveness of CIs in this environment is weak since a local Arab audience would not find it interesting or even necessary to rely on cultural exchanges in order to achieve their dreams. With or without Chinese CD in the country, China-Arab relations is already flourishing. On the other hand, the UAE is also filled with Asian migrants who are either seeking jobs or establishing companies in the country. This part of the audience would seize every opportunity available and thus, would be more appreciative of and reliant on cultural activities.

Nevertheless, cultural events still take place but they are not necessarily part of official Chinese CD. For example, Chinese celebrations in the supermarkets around Burj Al Arab are not initiated by the Emiratis, who are targeting the Chinese diaspora and tourists. The researchers also discovered that even though more and more Chinese diplomats take part in Chinese-related activities, they only do so by filling secondary roles such as hosting events, among others.

Finally, the Ningxia Autonomous Region is considered an important physical center of China-Arab friendship. Not only are the bulk of Chinese Muslims found in this region – part of their ancestry comes from Arab traders and soldiers who migrated to China. Within the framework of the BRI, the Chinese government gives focus on boosting the region's local development by attracting Arab investments. However, if one looks at the history of Arabs increasingly visiting China, they tend to explore other locations with big wholesale markets instead of Ningxia. But even on this front, China would still stand to benefit more from

Arab investments. Overall, the study shows that the win-win balance ideal in the China-Arab connection is more of a win-win for China in reality. Although a win is also possible from the Arab side, it is rather up to them to make it happen and is not a main goal of Chinese agenda.

***Dr. phil. Tomáš Petrů, Research Fellow at the Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences of Czech Republic***

Dr. Petrů described Chinese CD in Malaysia as something unique and counterintuitive compared to the recent Chinese CD campaigns in Europe. One main factor is the seven million-strong, well-integrated Chinese community in Malaysia (out of the country's total population of 31 million). Chinese culture is highly familiar in the country and the Chinese Lunar New Year is also widely celebrated. In this case, there appears to be no need to actively promote traditional Chinese culture in Malaysia. Hence, Chinese CD has been very limited save for two Confucius Institutes recently set up and the active Chinese-Malaysian exchange in the education sector.

Chinese CD in Malaysia focuses on the two countries' shared history, religion and achievements. For one, their historical links can be traced back to intermarriages between Chinese princesses and Malaccan sultans, as well as the prosperity of the Malacca sultanate in the 15<sup>th</sup> century under China's hegemony. And despite decades of enmity and distrust that developed during the Cold War, relations between the two countries gradually warmed since the 1980s at the initiative of Mahathir Mohamad. It culminated in 2014, the Year of Malaysia-China Friendship, where China and Malaysia commemorated the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic ties. That year, China loaned two pandas (which was first postponed due to the MH370 tragedy) to Malaysia to mark their 40-year diplomatic ties.

The education sector appears to be a major tool of China's public diplomacy in Malaysia. For one the Chinese-Malay Studies Centre was set up in addition to the Bahasa Melayu Centre in Beijing. Student exchanges, scholarships, and fellowships also continue to be carried out between the two countries. Another remarkable development is the Xiamen University Malaysia Campus opened in 2016 – the second Chinese university campus abroad. Moreover, ten Chinese universities offer degree programs in Malay Studies and an Institute of China Studies (ICS) was also put up in Malaysia. High-profile conferences have also been organized, such as one entitled "Reconnecting China with the Muslim World" held in August 2015. Indeed, education is the most important sector to tap in Malaysia for the implementation of Chinese CD. It is also beneficial for Malaysia to enhance its position as a world-class education hub in Asia.

Aside from the education sector, two Confucius Institutes have been recently set up. CIs in Malaysia employ its usual activities such as language instruction and other cultural events. The study found them to be less effective than activities initiated by the Chinese community in Malaysia. However, they are not seen by China as representative of the PRC but of greater China. True enough, as they are migrant Chinese, they tend to underline their loyalty to Malaysia rather than to China.

China also appears to prefer employing 'hard power' or economic tools in Malaysia in order to enhance its impact, which the Malaysian government strongly supports (at least as seen

in its official discourse). The two countries share a party-based diplomatic relationship, although it is something of a special kind between a communist and an anti-communist government. China and Malaysia have very strong trade relations: China is Malaysia's biggest trading partner while Malaysia is China's eighth most important trading associate globally, the biggest in Southeast Asia, and the third biggest in all of Asia. However, China and Malaysia face a precarious situation in terms of their economic ties. Some Chinese investments in the country are well-received by the government but highly criticized by activists. Chinese investments range from industrial parks and power plants to mines, traffic infrastructure, hi-speed rails, and real estate. Some of these projects are perceived as highly controversial by critics especially as they touch on sensitive issues such as ecological damage and suspected geopolitical interests from China's side. For example, on the housing complex project in Johor (Iskandar, Malaysia), there is talk of whether China is attempting to build a 'colony' in the country for middle-income Chinese experiencing financial difficulties in mainland China. Domestic issues such as perceived signs of corruption in investments also surface. In developing infrastructure, the fact that China brings with them both materials and manpower triggers questions of value for Malay locals.

### ***Q & A Session***

Various related questions were asked on Chinese Cultural Diplomacy. One participant raised a question on cultural diplomacy as a concept of soft power and the kind of dilemma China faces when it is confronted with issues such as political freedom and human rights. According to the researchers, China's main priority is indeed its domestic objectives. When the dilemma on soft power arises, the tendency is for national interests to take primacy. Even on issues like human rights in Tibet, China prefers not to react.

Another question posed was about Chinese CD in Africa and in particular, how China relates to its partners in the continent. The panelists revealed that preliminary research has been done on Africa. Vocational trainings are conducted in CIs there, but the main objective of China is to set up the basic infrastructure. There is also a very friendly approach between China and African countries. This is different from China's ties with the Middle East, which focuses on building economic zones as the basis for economic exchange and production. In Africa, China tries to relay images indicating a culture of 'respect for authority.'

Another participant expressed curiosity as to the existence of non-state actors in China, and asked for a clear distinction between a non-state actor and an NGO. There exist enterprises and civil society actors in China. There are also some groups which are not officially NGOs but see themselves as such in terms of the western definition of an NGO. Groups such as academicians do not want to be identified as state actors and emphasize their academic freedom in their work. There are other actors who are somehow linked to the state but still classify themselves as independent, private, and not paid by the state. In any case, a lot of debate has arisen on this question within the Chinese academe. Some argue that it non-state actors do not exist and some say that in principle, they do.

The last question attempted to juxtapose Chinese CD with Japanese CD in terms of the "win-win" objective. Indeed, it is difficult to answer conclusively that a win-win situation as well as mutual understanding are there. Whether it is China or Japan, there is a common attempt to draw from history in order to soften the approach but the main interest is definitely not cultural. It is therefore important to look not only at the narrative but also at

the underlying mechanisms at work in order to understand why there seems to be a need to spread the Chinese or the Japanese story to the world.

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