

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Doing the nation”-the representation of national identity: evidence from Chinese Confucius Institutes in Thailand

Jiangyu Li  and Chong Xv

School of Law and Sociology, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, Yunnan 650500, China

Author for correspondence: Chong Xv, E-mail: 287266373@qq.com

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Abstract

This article examines the extent to which overseas Chinese educators at Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Thailand act as representatives and practitioners of Chinese national identity. Though working for the state, CI teachers promote Chinese language and culture according to their own perceptions. In this paper, participatory observation and in-depth interviews were employed to assess how CI teachers in Thailand articulate their Chineseness and national identity. The findings show that (1) banal national sentiment was an important expression of the CI teachers' national identity, in terms of psychological attachment and ingrained behaviors; (2) pragmatic identity politics are used to distinguish various contributors to the CI; (3) the materialization of Chinese national identity recontextualizes the country via national symbols and cultural activities. The intricacy of the everyday activities of CI teachers illuminates the trans-nationalization and localization of Chinese national identity, which constitute the “doing” of the nation that the imaginary Chinese community in Thailand represents not just a government-endorsed national identity but also the CI teachers' creation of tradition.

Keywords: Chinese national identity; CI teachers; Confucius Institute; everyday nationalism; nationhood; representation

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Chinese government has mapped out a Confucian discourse (Zhang 2004) not only for Chinese people to consume “their” sophisticated traditional culture, but also for a foreign audience. This presentation of a soft China emphasizes a peace-loving tradition and a *He* (和, harmony)-centered national identity. The Chinese government founded the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), often referred to as the Headquarters, in 1987, promoting Confucius as a national brand. This approach was influenced by, and developed, European cultural diplomacy, which employed institutions such as the British Council and Goethe Institute to spread their cultures worldwide. China began constructing Confucius Institutes (CIs) in other nations to promote Chinese language and culture and broadcast China's new cultural image abroad. An attempt was made to convey the tale of China to the world (China Daily 2016). As of the end of 2018, there were 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 Confucius Institute Classrooms in over 154 countries (Confucius Institute Headquarters/Hanban 2018). CIs see themselves as public institutions that are run on a not-for-profit basis, with the goal of spreading Chinese language and culture to a broader audience all over the globe. They were founded on the apparent premise of responding to a substantial surge in the world's needs for Chinese language study, but work to redefine the meaning of Chinese culture and national identity. The meaning of Chinese national identity is promoted by their agency in defining and redefining an officially promoted Chineseness.

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However, the fast expansion of such institutes has given rise to skepticism and criticism in other nations. For instance, the Confucius Institute (CI) at the University of Chicago was shut down in 2014 as a result of a boycott organized in the name of academic freedom spearheaded by retired academics. Marshall Sahlins, who is considered to be the movement's originator, advanced the theory that Chinese Confucius Institutions (CIs) are a sort of "academic malware", political apparatus and organs of Chinese government statecraft. Other academia have referred to CIs as espionage outposts and secret agencies, or they have tried to draw attention to their role in enhancing Beijing's soft power (Mosher 2012a, 2012b; Paradise 2009; Zhou and Luk 2016). There is a significant body of literature devoted to analyzing how the Chinese government has enthusiastically used CIs in an effort to create and enhance Chinese soft power (Gil 2017; Hartig 2016; Kurlantzick 2007; Li and Liu 2010; Lo and Pan 2016; Peterson 2017; Song 2017; Zaharna *et al.* 2014). On the other hand, in contrast to the dominant school of thought in Chinese literature and the official discourse of the country, some research published in English has claimed that CIs provide "negative soft power" (Callahan 2015). As an example, Bao brought to light the fact that cultural events that the CI planned and carried out in Bangkok were seen as pompous propaganda and showy performances devoid of significant substance by senior people of ethnic Chinese descent (Bao 2017).

Against the background of media exposure and the political and public debate over the nature of CIs, most research has studied the structure and roles of CIs at macro and geopolitical levels. CIs are one of the most important government-led national projects to promote China's national identity for an international audience, with new ingredients of Confucian discourse and classical culture in practice. However, micros and meso (middle) levels are also important. This research considers what is happening in one CI to shed light on their inner mechanisms and institutionalization as such. It scrutinizes complexities in the practice of CI staff as actors participate in and negotiate concepts pertaining to China and Chineseness in the social arena of a CI. It uses everyday nationalism as a paradigm to conceptualize Chinese identity designed to be seen by foreign audience and to demonstrate the operation of the creation of the Chineseness.

The education practices of CIs are performed by university students and lecturers working as CI teachers. However, more focus is given to China's CI teachers in this article, who serve as China's name cards (Confucius Institute 2018) and cultural Ambassadors (Hualong Web 2018). In order to answer these fundamental concerns, we'll look at how CI teachers go about putting Chinese national identity into practice and why this frequently has unintended consequences. The nation-state concept is essential in further interpreting the theme to be examined in this study.

Definitions of and approaches to national identity

A cognitive shift in "the nation"

When researchers look to define a "nation" or "national identity," or even just to identify homogeneous characteristics of a "people" at the level of a country, they soon discover that "no commonly recognized concept of the country exists" (Anderson 1996). National identity is an umbrella term that includes all of the elements that have changed a "folk" into a "citizen". Indeed, lists of the elements can be continuously extended without end if we are to include every aspect of nationhood. It is possible to think of a nation as a set of interrelated concepts such as "nationality," "identification," "consciousness," and "ideology" (Gries 2004). A cultural matrix for the nation's overall construction also allows its citizens to express their sense of national identity in their daily lives as practitioners.

This study does not intend to examine every possible definition of Chinese national identity, nor compare the various theories, but rather it looks to the scholarship for the "cognitive shift" (Brubaker 2009; Brubaker *et al.* 2004) that drove the elite-led nation-building project to the mundane level of everyday nationhood (Fox and Ginderachter 2018; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Tim Edensor neatly described "a sense of the unspectacular, contemporary production of national identity through popular culture and in everyday life" (Edensor 2002). Echoing Ernest Renan's "everyday plebiscite" (Motyl 2001), Billig claimed that the nation is remembered and indicated in the everyday lives of citizens

through “the forgotten reminders” (Billig 1995) like thinking and using language. “Flagging” (Billig 1995) provided a potential taxonomy of mundane “identity flags” that are unconsciously waved: for instance, the body, food, and the landscape (Palmer 1998).

The more lately everyday nationalism brings the nation down to the mundane level. Nationhood could be constructed by the masses during the processes of talking the nation, choosing the nation, performing the nation and consuming the nation, in which the key issues of what is the nation and when is the nation are emphasized (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

These everyday-based nationalism and nationhood studies have a common place is that to critique the macro narrative on the nation and nationalism. Instead of ideologically deducing the origin of the nation, the everyday nationhood intends to consider the nation as an artificial creation, which formed a post-modernism nationalism theorization (Yan 2008). This study follows this everyday nationhood and the nation in everyday life paradigm to examine the “saying”, “doing” and practicing Chinese identity by CI teachers in a foreign land.

Chinese national identity and its international dimension

There have been at least two crises of Chinese national identity. The first one is in the early twentieth century when formidable foreign challengers won out over late Qing “supreme culture.” Culture used to be a ruling logic in imperial China. Prasenjit Duara argued that Chinese culturalism is not a form of cultural consciousness per se, but rather a criterion defining China with the specific culture of the imperial state and Confucian orthodoxy (Duara 1993). Chinese identity is based on culture, thus Chinese people would give their highest loyalty to the culture not to their country, and politicians would give their loyalty to Confucian culture, not to a certain regime or nation (Harrison 1969; Levenson 1968). This changed when the Chinese started to realize that their culture, although representing “perfect” virtues, was not able to fight back against Western guns and cannons; they then chose to import Western nationalism to replace traditional culturalism. The Chinese “identity dilemma” is thus not so much a personal identity crisis over what constitutes Chineseness but rather a question of the legitimacy of political authority. Nationhood, as a “weapon,” turned China from a cultural to a political entity (Whitney 1969).

The second crisis was what Zheng called the “moral vacuum” (Zheng 1999, 2006) arising from the neglect of traditional culture over the past few decades. To maintain people’s loyalty and gain a “proper” position in contrast to the rapid growth of economic status in the reordering international society, and to fulfill the “moral vacuum”, the Chinese government gradually abandoned Leninism-Marxism and Maoism for a more open-ended definition of “Chinese characteristics,” or Confucianism based nationalism (Zhang 2004; Zhao 2000; Zheng 1999). Within this newly constructed national identity, the Chinese government made a great effort to put a “Confucian cloth” on the body of Leninism-Marxism in domestic society. Meanwhile, at the international level, the Chinese Communist Party bolstered its efforts to be a secular power player by embarking on a nation-building project – the Confucius Institute – to re-assert an historic self-confidence, reduce the level of “otherness,” and finally build “performance-based legitimacy” (Zheng 1999).

The origin of nation is international; while a country can use nationalism to legitimize diplomatic policies and motivate the masses to serve it, “the goal of any kind of nationalism is to find a political expression in international politics, i.e. becoming an independent member of international politics” (Zheng 2016). Qin Yaqing, president and professor at China Foreign Affairs University, has pointed out that in China’s case this search for an international position has come with a redefinition of its national identity; transforming itself from a revolutionary state to a status quo state, and from an outsider to a member of international society (Qin 2007).

To convey the new Chinese national identity to a foreign audience, Confucius Institute teachers are expected to do so in their daily lives. The social activities of Hanban-delivered Chinese teachers are examined in this research. The role of CI teachers in China’s culture-expanding mission should not be overlooked. Everyday nationhood oriented researches generally focus on the mass media and the

discourse analysis based on structured interviews that emphasized on national identity or other, if there is any of them.

Siting the sites: materials and data collection

CIs function using a partnership model to conduct their operations. Thailand is a context in which the CIs are not excessively restrained by the administrative forces of the university, school or local government. In this context, the CIs have significant autonomy and the teachers are able to exercise agency, which provides a better understanding of how CI teachers implement government policies on their own terms. This ensured that CI teachers could practice nation-ness in their own communities. This requirement was satisfied by the CIs in Thailand. CIs have been quite popular in Thailand, where the Chinese government has shown a great deal of interest.

Pseudonyms will be used for the institutions throughout this paper for reasons of academic ethics. The CI in which we conducted the research is based at A University (AU CI), which is located in the north of Thailand. B University, which is located in China, is collaborating with both of institutions. One of the most prestigious educational institutions in Thailand, A University excels in the medical sector as well as many other scientific and technological disciplines. The Faculty of Humanities is home to a Department of Chinese; nonetheless, there are fewer than 150 students who have chosen to major in Chinese studies. The partner institution, B University, is a Normal University located in western China. Although it does not have a top ranking, it is well respected for its commitment to and success in the field of teacher education, particularly in the area of producing international Chinese teachers. AU CI was awarded “outstanding CI of the year” by Hanban.

Not just in terms of academic and pedagogical practice, but also in forms of social participation and local collaboration, the practice of CIs differs significantly from country to country and from one CI to another. AU CI operates one Chinese culture center on the university campus, two Confucius Classrooms (CCs) in two of the highest-ranked high schools in the city, four community exhibition centers of Chinese traditional culture, and seventeen partner local schools and institutions that serve as sub-teaching and testing centers. The primary research was carried out at AU CI and via its local network so that we could have an up-close meeting with CI teachers acting in their positions as “Chinese national spokespersons” and so that we could provide a detailed account of the phenomenon. In addition to the AU CI and its affiliated CCs, we also visited partner schools that are part of the extended CI network. To round out the research, we conducted interviews with three CI teachers from one independent CC and two additional CIs located in the central and northern regions of Thailand. Directors, government-sponsored international Chinese teachers (also known as GCTs), volunteer Chinese teachers (VCTs), and indigenous teachers are the four different types of CI teachers that work in the sub-divisions and interact with the cooperating institutions. These teachers are selected and dispatched by Hanban. We spoke to all four types of CI teachers, who all teach national identity in their own unique ways, so that we could have a more comprehensive knowledge of local participation.

Field data collection began in March 2017, when we were introduced to the CI director to act as academic assistants and outside observers. As participant observers, we assisted CI teachers with the preparation of exhibitions, cultural activities, and weekly meetings, and was authorized to read all textbooks and teaching materials. We conducted further periods of participant observation from June to December 2017 and from January to March 2018, while also remaining in touch when absent from the field. The data were drawn from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with local teachers, administrators, and CI teachers. To gain a full picture, we interviewed a wide range of informants. One-to-one interviews were held with two directors and 11 GCTs, one-to-one or group interviews were held with 10 VCTs, and we also interviewed five Thai informants: two CC directors, one public school teacher, one owner of a private Chinese training school, and one Thai mother. Each in-depth interview had a duration of over 2 hours. The key informants were chosen through a snowball sampling technique, based on social connections. To gain

knowledge of how the CI teachers are selected and trained by Hanban, one of the authors attended a 42-day training course conducted at B University in June 2017. Here we were able to observe VCTs being trained in teaching skills, Chinese policies and international affairs, and Chinese talents and traditional skills. Field notes and reflective field diaries were taken from daily participation observation. Interview transcriptions were categorized into different themes: life stories, teaching, cultural activities, internal conflicts, etc. English names were employed as pseudonyms for the participants.

The teachers at CI are responsible for “telling” or “teaching” students about China via the medium of the Chinese language and culture. Therefore, the first phase of our study was going to consist of observing the teachers while they were teaching Chinese in their respective classes. However, after a few days of observation, it became abundantly clear that teaching was not a high priority activity in this specific CI, which is not an unusual occurrence among CIs. Therefore, we shift our primary attention to their day-to-day work and the cultural activities that they engage in, since they have asserted that these are their areas of expertise.

The conceptual difficulty that was outlined in the previous section of the literature review presents a challenge for researchers working in a variety of fields who are interested in the country and national identity. Because there is no universal consensus over how to define national identity, one may make the case that our understanding of it will always be restricted. For the purpose of this investigation, we have considered the concept of national identity to be an ideal type that is presumed to include all of its primary components, such as patriotism, nationalism, nation-ness or nation-hood, etc. The sections of the interview transcripts were split into three categories to indicate the different types of work on national identity that was done by CI teachers. These categories include reification of the country, national feeling, and identity play.

National sentiment: why “sacrifice”? For the nation or themselves?

Otto Bauer defined national sentiment as the love for the nation aroused by an enthusiasm stemming from history. It is a national consciousness, a sense of belonging (Bauer 1996), or, as Renan proposed, the desire to live together and the will to perpetuate a national heritage (Renan 1990). In the 1990s, the Chinese government began to promote patriotism through the national education system, which intensively cultivated a national sentiment among its population (Barabantseva 2010; Callahan 2010; Darr 2011). CI teachers in Thailand have this notion of patriotism inculcated in them from a young age when they are born and raised.

CI teachers are made aware of their “glorious mission” using the concept of “Three Passions, Three Emotions” while participating in the pre-service training classes offered by the organization. This was the primary focus of the training initiative that the author was a part of, which included the participation of over one hundred fifty pre-service VCTs. They are expected to attend the training classes in order to strengthen their pedagogical abilities, the means to survive amid different languages and cultures, and the motive of “sacrifice” for their own country and the nation. This is done before the CI teachers are deployed.

Your saying and doing represent China. Therefore, you must stand on the global stage and promote Chinese culture and language, using Chinese voice, telling Chinese stories. You should take the responsibility and the historical mission of the China Dream. You should be ambassadors with a smile, ambassadors of friendship and ambassadors of China's image... (Secretary of the CCP at B University to an audience of pre-VCTs, 7 June 2017)

During the lecture that was being given on the subject of the Belt and Road Initiative during the pre-service training, one of the volunteers posed a question that was met with an unusually prolonged and loud round of applause. She posed the question, “From an individual standpoint, how can one’s national feeling be stated with reference to one’s own prospects?” She went on to explain that while she had “sacrificed” herself to China by working in Africa and then in Asia, the state was not providing her

with any long-term security for her future career despite the fact that she had “sacrificed” herself to China. During another round of Q&A with Hanban, we took notes on each of the 22 questions. Surprisingly, they were worried about issues pertaining to safety, wage, food, accommodation, transportation, and living circumstances in the regions where they worked. The executives of Hanban provided the proper answer to the questioners on the nature of the money that they get, namely that it is not a salary but rather a subsidy. The other trainees were told by another officer, who shown some hostility against them, that their job was not to have a holiday or to have fun; rather, it was to promote the Chinese language and culture. The director also questioned the wording that they employed, such as the phrase “up there,” which was used to refer to CI positions, and the phrase “down there,” which was used to refer to local teaching centers.

The sense of patriotism shown by CI teachers is not founded on an unrestricted desire to “die for the country.” Their self-interest in profit paid by the government serves as the driving force behind their desire to labor for the nation. Nancy explained to us that the objective of CIs is to create a more favorable picture of China in the minds of people from other countries; nevertheless, as a volunteer, her primary motive was to earn enough money to pay for her tuition. She said that a large number of other volunteers share her mindset. Lucy’s reason for wanting to study abroad was to get international experience so that she might better her chances of being accepted into future exchange programs offered by her institution. Susan was one of the two administrators that had the most crucial role in the CI. She said that the reason she reapplied to become a GCT was because she wanted to get more valuable job experience for her future profession. Lydia, the director of an autonomous community center, said that “being successful” was her primary drive. She said that she would not be able to be successful in China, but that she would be able to find chances in Thailand for her future. The desire to live a life that is more tranquil or uncomplicated, freedom from the responsibilities that come with life (such as caring for elderly parents or small children), and advancement in one’s career as a teacher were some of the other reasons given by GCTs.

National habitus: a deep love for the country or a source of controversy?

Even if CI teachers’ feelings about China as a country are heavily influenced by their own personal interests, this does not prohibit them from feeling an emotional affiliation with China as their homeland. In point of fact, their individual identification with the nation has evolved into a deeper and more symbolic level of national sentiment, also known as a national habitus. A national habitus is comprised of the material culture of national identity, epistemologically and ontologically, as well as the unconscious doxa of the community (Orvar 1989). To put it another way, Wodak *et al.* defined national habitus on at least three levels by using Bourdieu’s idea of habitus. These levels include emotional attitudes, value judgments, and behavioral dispositions (Wodak *et al.* 2009). A simpler division of national habitus could be comprised of mental and behavioral dimensions, where the mental dimension addresses beliefs about, emotional attitudes to, or psychological attachments to the nation, and the behavioral dimension reflects the unconscious modal way of doing things (Surak 2013).

The psychological bond that CI teachers have to their students and the country may sometimes be quite heartfelt. For instance, as Nancy possesses a powerful singing voice, her professors have entrusted her with the responsibility of leading the “Dage” (大歌¹ Big Song), which refers to the singing of patriotic songs such as *My Motherland*. She told us that she cried every single time she sang one particular ode, called *The Love for the Republic*. She could especially feel the nostalgia of the old *Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) and was deeply touched to the point of tears. Lucy similarly told us that every time she hears the national song she wants to cry, and this was a feeling she had not experienced in China. Their emotional attitudes to the nation also manifested when they witnessed bad manners on the part of Chinese tourists in Thailand. Six of the interviewees felt apologetic and expressed feelings of sadness or shock upon meeting “bad Chinese,” based on an underlying logic

¹This is not a regular Chinese word but a slang that coined by CI teachers, pointing its solemnity and dignity.

that “Chinese is [supposed to be] Good.” This “Sino-centrism and ... assumption of Chinese priority” (Fairbank 1968), played out through the mental and behavioral national habitus, is a component of the unconsciousness of saying and doing as a “good Chinese.” Zheng and Wang have reminded us to pay close attention to the scholarly tradition of assumed Sino-centrism established by Fairbank, in which Chinese superiority is expressed through foreign relations in the same way that it is manifested domestically (Wang and Zheng 2008). For CI teachers, in Nancy’s words, “China must be the best, because we deserve it” (interview, 11 May 2017). The ontology of “Chinese is good” is expressed by the choice to promote an “advanced traditional culture” and a modern image of China. During an interview with Robert, the Director of the CI, we brought up the narrative that products “made in China” are known for having low prices but poor quality. In response, he became angry and asked us and to invite people who hold such beliefs to the AU CI, where he will show them how modern and powerful China is these days. Other professors also often supported China by asserting things like “the situation in here (Thailand) is far worse,” in order to guarantee that China was always portrayed as being in a more favorable light than other countries.

However, this tribute for China is certainly not shared by the other. In China, the idea of *guojia*, which literally translates to “the state,” has a very broad definition. It does not separate the geographical “country” from the communal “nation,” nor does it differentiate the administrative machinery “government” from the governance apparatus “state” (Xiang 2010). As a result, the inculcated national attitude of CI teachers, which is ingrained inside the national habitus of “China is excellent,” will have the capacity for self-recognition in three dimensions. In this sense, the representation of Chinese national identity may contradict the international understandings of others who look at China in a different way. They have not always gotten the “expected respect and gratitude” (Hubbert 2019). These contradictions reflect beliefs structured by quite different national habitus in different societies.

Identity play of a game of boundaries: Chinese or “fake” Chinese?

Herder defined “groupness” in terms of the sameness among members of the group; hence, “ethnicity” and “homogeneity” are essentially same concepts. Following Barth’s proposal of the “we-they” divide, ethnicity emerged as a means of categorizing people on the basis of the similarities between different groups. Since then, the formation of one’s identity, community, or culture has been understood to result through a negotiation between many parties. On the other hand, the situation in CIs is highly contextualized, and the criteria required to accurately define groupness might vary.

On the one hand, CI teachers are aware that people in the rest of the world, particularly in Western nations, are scared of China, and they acknowledge that this makes them “the other.” On the other hand, if one were to use Chineseness as the point of reference, “whiteness,” “the Westerner,” or “the Christian” might readily be substituted for “Chineseness.” In order to lessen the feeling of “otherness,” it is necessary for CI teachers to devise strategies that either put them in particular groups or take them out of such groups. Most of the time, one must cordially greet the other in order for that person to become a CI member.

A few years ago, in the final section of Chinese Bridge, an international contest of Chinese language and culture proficiency held at B university, officers from Hanban suggested that the American team should at least be awarded a prize as an “excellent team,” because otherwise they would be absent from the final award ceremony because they did not win any prizes in the contests. There is an unwritten rule in CI that the winners of international contests need to be balanced not only in terms of a proficient level of Chinese language and culture, but also in terms of nationality and race. Two African girls with African style braids were flagged as potential winners from the first day they arrived, being perceived to represent Africa appearing on Hanban’s stage.

The AU CI adheres to the principle of “to make the color lovely,” as well (Casey, interview, 6 September 2018; color here means different races). As Director Casey hypothesized, “adding the other” is a strategy that the AU CI may use to entice a more diverse group of people of many various

ethnicities and cultures into their audience. Therefore, having said that, it should be noted that the majority of students in Thailand are Thai. As a consequence of this, they choose to hold their events in international schools or domestic schools with international programs. Casey has informed us that “the color” of P school is really lovely, and she believes that the CI needs to go and perform for them for as long as they continue to be invited. Likewise, Schmidt provided evidence in Canada on “the significance of white bodies to the CI enterprise.” (Schmidt 2013). The participation of “the whites,” which refers to the non-Chinese organizations and their presence is the clearest advertising for China’s economic progress and modernization.

In terms of heterogeneity, it is not just about a division between we and them, but also a divergence between “you and me” (Surak 2012, 2013), in particular via the concept of “who is a better Chinese.” The CI teachers use their own criteria to determine who belongs in the group of “us” and who does not, and they enforce this criterion consistently. Susan told us that because salaries from Hanban are set for the same category of teachers, the competition amongst them is not for money but for “glory,” which is achieved by working harder and serving as a “better” Chinese person.

There are three kinds of “bad Chinese,” representing an otherness within. One is made up of the “pro-Thai” CI teachers. When speaking about the advancement of some CIs in Thailand, Susan gave two reasons: one is the cooperation between Chinese and Thai directors, and the other is the coordination between Chinese directors and Chinese teachers. Susan further explained that, outside of these top CIs, the relationship between Thai and Chinese directors is generally tense. Under such conditions, some VCTs began to be more pro-Thai because they thought it best to compete with a home court advantage. Teachers at high ranking Chinese universities, which usually have several CIs in different countries, prefer to work at CIs established in developed countries. Hanban therefore usually send teachers from lower-ranked universities to work for their CIs in Thailand, which is not considered developed, so there is little collegiate bonding between the director and the teachers. Once a conflict emerges, teachers assigned from other universities will choose to stand with the Thai side, which has more power and can help in “*Gao Shiqing*” (搞事情) doing something to put the Chinese staff in trouble).

The second kind of “you” is the overseas Chinese among younger generations or *Xinyimin* (新移民, new immigrants) (Siriphon 2015) who are anti-China. In Thailand, and SEA more broadly, overseas Chinese make up around thirty percent of the population, although the number would be much higher if it were considered culturally (Nguyen 2011; Zhuang 2009). As the Thai and Chinese governments have launched policies affecting the identity politics of overseas Chinese, different generations of overseas Chinese have adopted various identity techniques to obtain the most benefit for their survival (Skinner 1957). Whether they accept assimilation as encouraged by the Thai government or look to maintain a “double identity” so they do not lose Chinese governmental support, some overseas Chinese choose to take an anti-China viewpoint and to practice in a certain degree of psychological or spoken negativity towards China and Chinese issues. For instance, Susan told us she knew an overseas Chinese vice-president of an international school who is anti-China. The first time he met Susan, he spoke of the “original inferiority” of Chinese people and made other negative remarks. Susan said that she felt such people wish to dispel their own inferiority by slandering China – “假洋鬼子”² (*Jia yangguizi*).

The third criterion for a “bad Chinese” concerns how much one contributes to the CI, the implied response being “the more, the better.” Susan spoke about how teachers pay close attention to, and carefully calculate, how much they have done for the CI, sometimes quarrelling over who has done more than others. CI teachers perceived as not working enough cannot be included as one of “us”. There are no clear rules to regulate extra workloads for different kinds of teachers. In principle, VCTs and GCTs must engage in testing and other activities held by the CI, although this is not always the case. When we began my research, three GCTs ended their service, two of whom had participated

²“假洋鬼子” *Jia yangguizi* is a pejorative Chinese slang term referring to some overseas Chinese who “sellout” China by adopting and worshipping western values. They are shameful and discriminatory to their own Chinese ethnic identity.

in less than ten activities over three years. Compared to some other VCTs who had conducted more than 200 activities, their involvement was very small. Tony, a tenured staff member at B University and a GCT from 2016 to 2018, seldom joined in CI activities after teaching, and even directly refused to take the tester exam to the director. “Nobody can ask him to do anything,” Susan said. At one post-activity dinner, Ms. Casey invited him to join. One girl felt angry and said, “This is our own celebration, what does he have to celebrate? He did nothing, and now he is just coming and celebrating with us? He is not even one of us!” (VCT, quoted in an interview with Susan, 26 May 2017).

While redefining the meaning of otherness by including the other and excluding certain parts of “us,” CI teachers perform their “identity play” by interacting with various groups while promoting certain aspects of national identity. Smith has highlighted the chameleon-like nature of national identity, which not only takes on different hues when combined with class, ethnicity, and religion, but also goes hand-in-hand with a variety of ideologies (Smith 1991). Ms. Casey emerges from the interviews as the master of playing identity games; she keeps “dancing” among different groups by activating differentials of identity.

Based on the calculation of “who is in and who is out,” the AU CI not only welcomes Christian schools by doing “whatever they want us to do, we will just do it” (Casey, interview, 15 August 2017) to achieve a higher number of Chinese test candidates, they also embrace these overseas Chinese as “Married-out Daughters and Sons” (Chan 2009). Casey claims that she is the sister of a local elite of second-generation overseas Chinese who is “*Heibai liangdao dou youren*”, (黑白两道都有人 with social connections to both legal and illegal power players). Overseas Chinese are seen as carrying “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999) or “flexible forms of citizenship abroad” (Barabantseva 2010), which could contribute to a “greater China” (Ong and Nonini 1997; To 2014) narrative.

The relationship between the CIs and the local Chinese consulate has also attracted much attention. There are accusations that the Chinese consulate interferes too much in CIs’ daily work, with a negative influence on CIs’ routine education (for some examples, see Gil 2017). As an administrator of the university, Casey also has to face the administrative obligations to her B university superiors. Most important is her status as having been dispatched by Hanban; in a sense, it is Hanban’s CI, not the university’s. To deal with these subtle relations, Casey has a principle: “not too much, not too little, just enough is good (meeting 1983 on 6 September 2017)”.

The importance of the CIs’ “boundary games” and “identity play” lies in the presentation of internationalization. Unlike other state programs, such as the overseas Chinese Affairs Office, Hanban’s target is “the whites” who stand out more as advertisements for “global harmony” with their newly acquired oriental culture skills – “reorientality,” as named by Schmidt – which will make China comprehensible and ultimately marketable (Schmidt 2013). Accompanying this reorientality is another mechanism may can be called “pragmatic identity politics,” involving the absence and presence of overseas Chinese. In Thailand, overseas Chinese make up 11 per cent of the population (Zhuang 2009), if this number were considered culturally, it would be much higher. In fact, overseas Chinese live in small-scale groups, tightly bonded and existing relatively independently. CI teachers learn the local context well, and make determinations on which groups of overseas Chinese should be included and which should not.

Materialization of Chinese national identity

He said that while planning the event, its organizers should “intensively portray the spirit of our enlightened civilization.” You should also symbolize the benefits and the glory that our nation has to offer. What the heck is going on? What really is the heart of sophisticated culture?! (Lucy, interview, 3 June 2017)

Lucy is the one who designs the majority of the collaborative activities since, in contrast to the other teachers, she is quite skilled in the use of information technology. She was venting to us about how the new director always puts pressure on her to plan events while not giving her with any specific suggestions or

guidance in this regard. She has to be given very specific directions since she cannot just translate abstract ideas into concrete actions on her own. According to Nancy, the mission of CI is to construct a better image of China for people who are not from China. The way that CI teachers accomplish this mission is by reifying China, which means that they transform the abstract concepts into “things,” such as the Chinese national symbols of *qipao* (a type of traditional dress), pandas, *jiaozi* (dumpling), or taichi.

National symbols

Resonating with the ideas of Ernest (1983), Hall (1996) defined a nation not only in terms of its political formation but also in congruence with “a system of cultural representation” (Hall 1996) through which an “imagined community” is interpreted. He argued that national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within, and in relation to, representation. In this sense, a nation is a symbolic community, or a set of meanings represented by national symbols.

National symbols – flags, anthems, coins, ceremonies, language, and behavior – send out a specific meaning to their receivers, reminding people of their common memories and cultural kinship, and instilling a sense of common identity and belonging (Smith 1991). CI teachers are extremely careful about employing national symbols because their responsibility to showcase “authentic” Chinese language and culture to an international audience exposes them to socially-regulated forms of communication and interaction. The images and stories that are presented are intended to be recognized as legitimate representations of the nation-state.

The Chinese government insists that China is a socialist country in its preliminary stage, but what cannot be denied is that within this there are at least three reconciling discourses of national identity. These are the values of traditional Confucianism, or neo-Confucianism (Tu 2000), the legitimacy of socialist revolution through Marxism, and the idea of capitalist modernity for nation-building seen as proceeding through economic development (Chen 2013). Based on these three ideological discourses, the choices of CI teachers as to which kind of national symbol should be represented is highly conditioned.

The first principle is to avoid discussion of political ideology. The CI teachers who we met were all hesitant of broadcasting the values of socialism. When the interview moved to a topic related to political ideology, they would emphasize that the CI is just a language training school and they are merely language teachers. Even Tony, the “outsider,” became vigilant when he heard the word “ideology” mentioned during an interview for this study. When we asked what kind of ideology is being sent out by his textbook, he was surprised and suggested that the “ideology” to be found could only be broadly defined as standardized knowledge or representation, not “political socialist ideology.” He also told us that what he was teaching had no relationship to any specified CI design, and emphasized that his class was a purely academic activity. We then asked him how he would discuss Chinese history with his students without recounting the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, which is beyond Hanban’s “safe side of the fence” of sensitive topics (Hartig 2016). Again, expressing shock, he told us that the 1960s is only a very short period of Chinese history, and not a decisive period or an essential topic to teach his students, who have only a limited knowledge of history. “Ideology avoid-ness” (Ning 2016) is a mechanism employed by CI teachers, with the materials that they select addressing traditional Confucianism and capitalist modernity. The objective criteria are to reify the abstract notion of China into a constellation of national symbols.

However, the capabilities of each individual teacher put a limit on the range of alternatives available to them for representation. Casey noted that some privileged VCTs were experts in calligraphy or held other traditional talents, and as a result, they were able to utilize these abilities to portray the most exemplary aspects of Chinese culture. The teachers who were not as fortunate did not have any special talents may end up with a paper-cutting of a panda and a Chinese knot with two layers to demonstrate in all cultural shows because all CI teachers are required to learn these two basic skills. In this case, traditional Chinese culture may be diluted in a paper-cutting and a Chinese knot.

The majority of the CI teachers’ representations of the national emblems they selected to represent were done so via cultural activities. There are two distinct categories of cultural pursuits: static displays

and dynamic activities. The second category includes things like contests, galas, and cultural encounters. When describing cultural displays, CI teachers often use the term “bai taner,” (摆摊儿) which literally translates to “peddling.” As “peddlers,” they make a medley of Hanban’s “culture package,” which comprises books, movies, pamphlets, photos, Chinese artifacts, and musical instruments, by selecting the pertinent materials according to the audience. The “culture package” also contains artifacts from China. CI has a performance team that is known as the “Chinese Style Performance Cruise.” This crew is responsible for dynamic activities. Performers for this group are handpicked from among Chinese students studying at University, with the goal of ensuring that “where there is a stage, there will be a performance” (Casey, weekly meeting on 6 September 2018). There is a wide range of performances available, the most common of which include singing and dance, as well as a display of various musical instruments and traditional garb; further alternatives include a tea ceremony, calligraphy, or the art of ink painting.

The process of materializing Chinese national identity is a practice that is carried out by CI teachers. This practice involves the transformation of Chinese national identity into things that serve as neo-national symbols with either traditional or modern elements, the peddling of packages of Chinese culture, the conducting of activities under the theme China and Thailand are one family, and the recording of all of these things in photographs. They choose Chinese national symbols in the same way that traditions are created, and they establish guidelines for what may and cannot be portrayed as having Chinese characteristics. Clifford Geertz argued that the best way to understand culture was not as a set of complexes of concrete behavioral patterns, but rather as a set of control mechanisms, such as plans, recipes, rules, and instructions for the governing of behavior. In other words, culture should not be understood as complexes of concrete behavioral patterns (Geertz 2003). The preferences of their audience and how well they are able to execute their abilities have guided the CI teachers in the development of a new culture, which they have created via their ideas and designs. CI teachers have “invented” a new culture through their plans and designs, led by the preferences of their audience and how good they are at performing their skills.

CI teachers themselves are not unaware that their cultural activities can constitute “fancy performance without much content” (Bao 2017, p. 21), even if their Thai students often have a higher tolerance of repetition and uniformity. More than once my respondents judged their own Chinese cultural activities as “meaningless” and “boring,” and one even told us she felt “desperate” when she had to teach meaningless Chinese knotting and paper cutting to her students who have just arrived after long journeys: “They are from hundred miles away, and I can only teach them this!? It is unfair!” (interview, 15 February 2019, VCT Mindy). We now have to ask one necessary question: why would the CI feel that it must continue these “low-end” cultural activities?

The first reason would be the official policy of the Chinese government to employ tradition in an attempt to construct a de-politicized national image. However, the problem, as Lucien Pye has pointed out, is that the traditional culture of China has been severely damaged while the modern culture is derogatory to Chinese nationalism (Pye 1993). “Tradition continuance” was broken by the New Culture Movement. Tradition, in its original meaning, should be followed by most of the population, but in China tradition is something that needs severe protection and that only a few people can play or perform. This is why following the Chinese government’s policy of emphasizing tradition leaves Hanban’s official traditional culture activities with “low-end” paper cutting and Chinese knotting skills.

The other reason is the CI teachers themselves. They may have been too highly “praised” when viewed as capable of acting as secret agents, and the expectation that they could serve as national spokespersons may be too high. By making this point, we do not mean to degrade the CI teachers but simply to point to their personal identities as common Chinese people. When my respondents expressed sorrow for repeatedly conducting cultural activities, we asked them what they would do to reveal the “real” China to students, were they to be given the choice. Their revealing answers were “I don’t know,” and “I am incapable of any excellent traditional culture.” “A lack of outstanding teachers and suitable teaching materials and methods and the quality of administration” (Jeng-Yi 2016) have indeed been noted by many scholars in the field of international Chinese studies.

Conclusions

We have underlined, in contrast to other academics who concentrate on the soft power wielded by Confucius Institutes (CIs) in service of the state, the nuanced practice of Chinese national identity that can be found at one Confucius Institute and via the ties it has in Thailand. Soft power, as conceived of by Nye, is the capacity to achieve one's goals not by force but rather through appeal (Nye 2005). The Chinese government launched CIs as a kind of soft power, although its desirability has been called into question on several occasions since their inception. To paraphrase one of the teachers at the CI examined in this article, "what you did reflected 'what China is'"; meaning is formed in "doing," not only in "speaking."

This article has focused on the agency of CI teachers who present China to their local students according partially to their own understandings of Chinese culture, state, and nation, in the practice of everyday national identity. The national habitus of CI teachers, which can be summed up by the phrase "China is excellent," provides an emotional form of national pride that can be called upon to make China evident in the teachers' teaching and activities. The local social involvement of CI teachers is indicated in three ways. The first is their emotional affiliation that conveys their symbolic national habitus, which presumes a priority of China. The second game is one of pragmatic identity politics. In this game, teachers construct a "Chameleon-like national identity." The third is the materialization of the country, which is heavily conditioned by the fractured traditional Chinese culture as well as the CI teacher's own (sometimes limited) personal abilities. This materialization of the nation is highly conditioned by the traditional culture of China.

The goals of a policy are not necessarily the same thing as the results of the policy. The agency of teachers establishes and alters the cultural environment inside CIs and their activities.

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