

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chinese dream, emerging statecraft, and Chinese influence in the Mekong region

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Abstract

It has become known that the Confucius Institute (CI) and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (Qiaoban) are operated as tools of state-led mechanism, or Chinese statecraft with the ultimate goal of expanding China's cultural soft power. Following the direction, Xi Jinping has been pushing the notion of the "Chinese dream," focusing on the realm of Chinese traditional culture and launching a new state-led mechanism. This article examines an emerging state-led mechanism known as "Chinese Homeland Bookstores" (CHBs), which was proposed by a provincial government-financed state-owned enterprise, and recently expanded to Thailand and various Mekong countries. I contend that the entities, such as CHBs and also CI and Qiaoban, are being extensively utilized as part of a larger state apparatus supporting the regime's Chinese traditional culture campaign. However, the CHB case and those of other government-led institutions illustrate how they combine nation-state work with market-oriented business strategies, to effectively promote Chinese culture "going out" with a focus on financial sustainability.

Keywords: Chinese dream; Confucius Institute; Mekong region; Northern Thailand; state-owned enterprise

Introduction

Chinese citizens have been migrating worldwide, seeking prestige, prosperity and a better standard of living. However, the Chinese state has also been actively "going out" into the world, using multi-level state mechanisms in multiple forms and sending official staff and cultural workers to promote Chinese culture and civilization as a potential "alternative modernity"¹ to that of the West. Over the past two decades, the world has learned how the *Hanban* – the Office of the Chinese Language Council International, also known as the Confucius Institute (CI) abroad – and the *Qiaoban* – the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office – operate as a tool of statecraft, with the ultimate goal of expanding and consolidating China's cultural soft power. Following the practices of past leaders, Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 2013, formulated the notion of the "Chinese dream" (Zhongguo Meng, 中国梦), his personal contribution to the ideological arsenal of the Chinese nation-state. Especially since 2016, discourses and practices connected to the Chinese dream have focused on the realm of Chinese traditional culture. In this framework, the Chinese dream becomes a part of cultural soft power, aimed at encouraging cultural self-confidence among China's citizens and improving and enhancing China's international reputation.

This article explores government-led institutions and enterprises that have been operating their nation-state work to achieve the Chinese culture "going out" mission and the latest "Chinese dream" going abroad. In particular, we present an emerging state-led mechanism known as the

¹Nonini and Ong 1997, pp. 3–33.

“Chinese Homeland Bookstore” (CHB), which was proposed by Yunnan Publishing Group, a government-financed state-owned enterprise (SOE). The study applied qualitative methods, including fieldwork in 2019 and data and information collected from at least two sources. Primary sources consisted of formal and informal interviews with managers and staff of the CHB in Chiang Mai and staff and teachers working for the CI and other government-led institutions. Secondary sources mainly included the relevant academic literature as well as news and other documents.

Examining the case of CHBs in Northern Thailand and the Mekong region illustrates how China’s provincial-level SOEs have been engaging in nation-state work to further the Chinese culture “going out” mission and help the latest “Chinese dream” gather momentum abroad. As seen in the case of the CHB – an emerging provincial state-led enterprise – in Northern Thailand and the Mekong region, including the case of the CI in Chiang Mai, these organizations illustrate how the Chinese state has been actively implementing multi-level state mechanisms in multiple forms, sending out official staff and cultural workers to promote Chinese culture and civilization around the world. Such multi-level state mechanisms are seen by this article as a tool of statecraft that has the ultimate goal of expanding and consolidating China’s cultural soft power. However, to assist with the national budget and deficits and to fulfil its mission of helping Chinese culture in “going out” effectively, the case of the CHBs, and the CIs in Thailand, shows how these organizations combine the work of the nation-state’s mission and market value using market-oriented business strategies together. Hence, pragmatism with Chinese characteristics is deployed to conduct nation-state work abroad with a focus on financial sustainability, long-term payoffs and the identification of local profitable activities that present both opportunities and challenges. Given the traditional “ancient China pragmatic thought” in philosophy,² deploying pragmatism practiced by the SOE in the cases here has depicted the practical actions that were utilized in modern China since the 1980s when it was re-opening and political reform. Being as part of the government-led political and ideological instruments in policy-making and implementation,³ pragmatism with Chinese characteristics shown by the SOE, regardless of the political ideology, represented the strategical method in which attributes of flexibility and adaptability, engagement and negotiation, are adopted situationally when facing the challenges in reality and in a particular locality.

Locating the CHB project in Northern Thailand

Xiao Han, the 30-year-old executive manager of the CHB in Chiang Mai, has been in his position since 2017. According to him, the CHB was originally established following a speech given by President Xi Jinping in 2016 focused on the Chinese dream. In Xi’s speech, the national project was defined as “reviving Chinese traditional culture” to highlight China’s cultural self-confidence and encourage its cultural soft power worldwide.⁴ In 2017, Xi Jinping clarified what he meant by this new cultural mission in the new era in a presentation to the nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China. President Xi strongly emphasized cultural confidence and provided direction and guidelines for the continued maintenance of Chinese culture among Chinese citizens.⁵ Following Xi’s directions and guidelines, the Yunnan Publishing Company Group – a provincial SOE working under the China Publishing Group (an SOE at the central government level) – launched a new project, “100 Homeland Bookstores,” which sought to establish 100 homeland bookstores in China and at least fifteen homeland bookstores outside of China to support Xi’s Chinese dream. Originally, the “100 Homeland Bookstores” project was proposed mainly to serve domestic rural and ethnic minority audiences. Later, prompted by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Project, it was expanded to include neighbouring countries.

Interestingly, the name of the bookstore, “CHB” (Zhong Hua Xiang Chou Shu Yuan, 中华乡愁书院) reflects President Xi’s desire to create a national project to revive Chinese traditional culture and

²Wen 2009; Shusterman 2004.

³Yu 1989; Zhao 2004; Pye 1986.

⁴Ong 2016.

⁵Shen 2017.

particularly to remind overseas Chinese of the motherland of their ancestors. Generally, the CHB project aims to promote and advance Chinese traditional culture to (1) help overseas Chinese keep a sense of their homeland and maintain bilateral communication with it; (2) tell a “good” story about China and spread the Chinese dream; and (3) promote Chinese culture by providing book donations to various localities and supporting Chinese learning in local communities.

It is worth noting that the CHBs’ objectives actually reflect the combined objectives of the *Hanban*, CI and the *Qiaoban*. While *Hanban*, CI aims to teach the Chinese language abroad, encouraging foreigners to learn more about Chinese cultures through language, the *Qiaoban* is far more focused on connecting with overseas Chinese by arranging cultural activities to help them retain a sense of their homeland, specifically China as their motherland. The cultural activities and a built sense of belonging are expected to tie overseas Chinese to China (as their motherland) so that they will make effective economic and social contributions to China.

In the process of establishing fifteen Homeland Bookstores outside China as planned, the Yunnan Publishing Company Group – a provincial-level SOE that operates Xinhua Bookstores and other related bookstores in Yunnan – will guide and manage the bookstores. The fifteen CHBs will be managed by the sixteen different prefectural (Diji) SOEs that run Xinhua Bookstores in sixteen prefectures (Diji zhou and Diji shi) in Yunnan Province. In 2019, at least five CHBs had been established in the Mekong region. Interestingly, three prominent CHBs are located in Northern Thailand, with the two remaining CHBs located in Myanmar and Laos. The choice of locations for establishing CHBs is also interesting: the most common choices include places where the *Hanban* and *Qiaoban* have been working actively for a decade, networking with overseas Chinese and local institutions and authorities. For example, the CHB in Myanmar is located at the Yunhua Normal College in Mandalay, where the *Hanban* and *Qiaoban* have been affiliated with local institutions since the establishment of the college in 2013. The CHB in Laos is located in the Liaodu Chinese School in Vientiane, a school founded by overseas Chinese associations and overseas Chinese descendants.

Of the three CHBs in Northern Thailand, the first is in the CI at the Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai Province, and it is also the largest CI in Thailand. The second, where Han, the manager, has taken charge of administration, is in Chiang Mai, and the third is in a mountainous area of Chiang Mai Province. It is worth mentioning that the third CHB was established in 2017 at the Jiaolian School in the village of Arunothai (known as Da Gu Di, 大谷地 in Chinese), an ethnically Yunnanese Chinese village that is known widely as a “Kuomintang (KMT) village” and is situated in the Chiang Dao District, approximately 100 km from Chiang Mai. This CHB bookstore, along with several Chinese governmental institutes, such as the *Qiaoban* and *Hanban*, is located in the KMT village. There is a political reason for placing a Chinese mechanism in this village – to connect with overseas Chinese communities in this mountainous area, especially given the dozens of KMT villages and Yunnanese Chinese descendants living nearby. The Chinese authorities, through cultural soft power run through People’s Republic of China (PRC)-based education and schooling, wish to win the hearts of these KMT descendants, especially those who still have close ties with Taiwanese networks (Siriphon 2015). The CHB, together with the Jiaolian School (organized under the support of the *Qiaoban* and *Hanban* in Chiang Mai), has succeeded in winning the support of third-generation KMT leaders in the community, one of whom is Wang Minmin, the current principal of the Jiaolian School (2020). Wang Minmin and other leading KMT descendants have helped Chinese officials, authorities and non-state actors navigate Thai legal affairs such as registering the school and the bookstore under Thai law and dealing with Thai authorities. The young leaders of KMT networks in Thailand today are also important facilitators in helping overseas Chinese in Thailand – especially KMT villagers in Northern Thailand – connect with mainland China in ways closer than ever before.

Xiao Han operates the CHB located in a three-story commercial building in Chiang Mai for which Han has signed a long-term rental agreement with the Thai owner. It is located in a commercial business park not far from a large shopping mall. By opening the CHB here, Han hopes to get customers from the surrounding area to visit, while avoiding the expense of renting a much smaller space inside the mall. The first floor of the building is decorated with Chinese traditional style architecture and a big canvas

hung outside upon which is written “Gu Tu Gu Ren Nan Ge She, 故土故人难割舍” – “one cannot easily give up one’s ancestors and homeland.” This slogan captures the objective of the bookstore well. The third floor is used as an office and holds stock and other materials. The first floor is set up to sell many Chinese books, stationery and so on, and the second floor is designed as a tea shop, providing Thai and Chinese customers a space in which to read books or chat while sipping tea.

Interestingly, Xiao Han’s own background also illustrates how *guanxi* or Chinese connections, such as networks of family, relatives and friends,⁶ has played an important role in giving him the opportunity to go abroad. According to Han, after finishing high school, he was granted a BA scholarship from the Xinhua Bookstore Company in Xishuangbanna, where his father had been working for decades. His scholarship gave him the opportunity to study the Thai language and culture from 2008 to 2012 at the Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai. After graduation, he decided not to go back to China but stayed in Chiang Mai, working at a tour agency and other small businesses from 2013 to 2017. Again, through his father’s connections, Han received not-yet-public information about the Xinhua Group’s new CHB project, which included plans to build 100 domestic homeland bookstores and fifteen bookstores abroad. With his political sensibility and business acumen – being well aware of the BRI and the Chinese culture “going out” project designed by the Chinese state – Han decided to submit a tentative plan for a five-year project to open a homeland bookstore in Thailand in 2017. He proposed establishing a CHB in Chiang Mai on behalf of the Xinhua Company based in Xishuangbanna Prefecture. Han waited several months while the proposal passed through the administrative system of the Yunnan Publishing Group, and then the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD) – the highest authority – finally granted approval at the end of 2017. Han was granted a five-year funding subsidy, varying year to year from RMB 800,000 to 3,000,000 (US\$100,000 to 400,000). His tentative project goals are mainly to sell Chinese books, writing materials and other materials related to Chinese culture (at the same price as in China). Apart from this, he plans to arrange Chinese cultural activities (e.g., Chinese painting, calligraphy, games) for customers and to organize summer camps and educational tourism. These cultural activities target both Thai and Chinese visitors and aim to bring them together in co-learning activities.

Pursuing the Chinese dream: the CHB and the vision of Chinese culture “going out”

The establishment of CHBs in Thailand and the Mekong region explicitly reflects the vision of Chinese culture “going out” designed by the Chinese state. Xi Jinping and his agenda for the Chinese dream since 2016, have led to the creation of a national project to revive Chinese traditional culture to highlight China’s cultural self-confidence and encourage its cultural soft power worldwide.⁷ However, the Chinese culture “going out” campaign conducted by the current Chinese regime has actually been in place for several decades under the direction of several government-based institutions, e.g. the CI, the *Qiaoban* and other affiliated mass organizations at various levels, including the Overseas Chinese Commission and the People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. The latest entity, as seen in this article, is the CHB project run by China Publishing Group, an SOE. Although the CHB project is only a provincial-level proposal by an SOE – a much lower institutional level compared to the CIs, *Qiaoban*, United Front Work Department (UFWD) and Overseas Chinese Commission – it illustrates another attempt at furthering the Chinese culture “going out” initiative through an SOE. This shows how various levels of Chinese official institutes, organizations and companies undertake policy implementation both at home and abroad.

As seen by the Chinese culture “going out” campaign, which is part of the Xi regime’s vision of “pursuing the Chinese dream,”⁸ the emerging cultural mission of President Xi is partly a continuance of what past leaders have done since 2001, starting with the Jiang regime. Although the notion of

⁶For example, works of Zheng 1986; Fei 1992; Yang 1994; Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2004.

⁷Ong 2016.

⁸Kallio 2015, pp. 521–32.

“socialism with Chinese characteristics” formulated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s has transformed China’s economic development with a socialist market economy,⁹ it was during the Jiang Zemin era (1993–2003) that the Chinese state pushed the “socialism with Chinese characteristics” campaign hardest to make socialist ideological and ethical progress; this was presented as a new era of an “advanced culture” of socialism (Xianjin Wenhua, 先进文化) in contemporary China. This cultural diplomatic strategy, together with the “going global” strategy initiated in 2002, set forth the mission of “establishing a brand-new image of China”.¹⁰ Building China into an international cultural centre, as one main goal, was expected to be achieved by penetrating the mainstream international community. China has established CIs all over the world since 2004.¹¹ Subsequently, the “advanced culture” mission¹² advanced in the era of Hu Jintao (2003–2013), who emphasized “making the past serve the present.”¹³

There was a much more intensive application of this policy during Hu Jintao’s term after the 2011 Sixth Plenary Session of the Seventeenth Central Committee of the CCP, where the “Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Major Issues Pertaining to Deepening Reform of the Cultural System and Promoting the Great Development and Flourishing of Socialist Culture” was approved. As asserted by Lam,¹⁴ the decision of the CCP Central Committee in 2011 clearly shows that the Chinese regime continues to seek to promote Chinese culture by developing multi-channel, multi-form and multi-level cultural exchanges with the outside world; encouraging people from different cultures to learn from each other; and enhancing the appeal and influence of Chinese culture around the world. In practical terms, the Chinese government has decided to implement projects to help Chinese culture go global and has developed policies and measures to support Chinese cultural products and services in global markets. China also seeks to establish cultural exchange mechanisms, forge inter-government links, conduct people-to-people exchanges, make full use of non-public cultural enterprises and non-profit cultural institutions in foreign cultural exchanges, and support overseas Chinese in developing cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

Such decisions also reveal the underlying significance of the state-led strategy of pushing Chinese culture globally to expand its international influence through external cultural exchanges, propaganda and trade, all of which contribute to building China into a socialist cultural power. Lam¹⁵ identifies three components of these state-led strategies: (1) external cultural exchanges (referring mainly to cultural diplomacy in which the government and private sector collaborate); (2) external publicity about Chinese culture that uses culture as a medium to make use of modern media and as a means to explain China to the world (external publicity presents an image of China as a peaceful, developed nation, a civilized and progressive society, and a reforming and innovative country); and (3) external cultural trade, in which Chinese culture actively competes in the international cultural market and brand-name cultural enterprises are exported to the world.

In the process of identifying Chinese culture, the Party has paid particular attention to Confucian-based traditional culture. As argued by Wu,¹⁶ the use of Confucian rhetoric and the name “Confucius” (Kong Fuzi, 孔夫子), one of the most important and influential philosophers in Chinese tradition, is part of a political agenda adopted by the CCP. Using Confucius’ image intelligently can soften the image of China’s “radical communism” in the international political landscape and be more persuasive in boosting CCP leadership and legitimacy in the cultural sphere. By barely emphasizing direct communist propaganda and instead utilizing the rhetoric and image of Confucius,

⁹Gregor 1999.

¹⁰Wang and Miao 2016, pp. 144–52.

¹¹Liu 2018, pp. 1–16.

¹²Ye 2008, pp. 176–84.

¹³Wu 2014, pp. 971–91.

¹⁴Lam 2016.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Wu 2014, pp. 990–1.

the CCP has managed to appear as truly representative of the “Chinese” and as a leader and organizer of “Chinese culture.”

During Xi Jinping regime (2013–present), the idea of the “Chinese dream” was seized upon and reiterated, becoming part of official Chinese discourse. The concept of the Chinese dream is essentially a “great renaissance of the Chinese people” that Xi Jinping is campaigning for to “revive Chinese culture”¹⁷ in what is called a “neotraditionalist” move (Yang 2017). However, for Xi and his colleagues in the Ministry of Culture, CCPPD and other state-led institutions, culture only serves the utilitarian and politically advantageous purpose of boosting civilians’ faith in “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and, thus, CCP rule. The campaign highlights cultural self-confidence and soft power, which have played a significant role in the nationalistic goal of reviving Chinese values and worldviews.¹⁸

Deploying state-led institutions in the “going out” mission for Chinese culture

During the past few decades, the Chinese regime has had a clear goal for Chinese culture, and several bureaucratic mechanisms in multiple forms and on multiple levels have been sent out into the world. In addition to the CHBs revealing the ambition of Chinese state-owned enterprises to help Chinese traditional culture and language “go out” into the world, two state-led institutions, the CI and the *Qiaoban*, have continually functioned according to the government’s policy and mission, restructuring as needed. The next section will examine how the three state-led institutes and enterprises carry out the government’s political agenda and its “going out” mission for culture worldwide.

CIs: continued controversy over Chinese politics

The *Hanban* headquarters in Beijing was established in 1987 and registered as a non-profit organization with corporate status, but the Chinese government has covered all of the *Hanban*’s expenses for many decades.¹⁹ *Hanban* was created as a national brand, and the CI, under the name *Hanban*, became international with the establishment of the first overseas CI in South Korea in 2004, when Jiang Zemin’s government elaborated its “advanced culture” strategy. After that, CI offices were established in other countries successively, globally broadcasting the new image of “cultural China” and promoting the Chinese language and culture. As part of a global strategy and to expand the PRC’s Chinese-based education to the world, the PRC government has established CIs at many universities throughout the United States, Australia, Canada, Europe and other countries around the world.²⁰ The mechanism and strategy of the CIs represent an effort at telling China’s story to the world. The PRC claims that CIs are modelled on the U.K.’s British Council, France’s Alliance Française and Germany’s Goethe Institute. The first aim of the CIs is to teach the Chinese language and culture to foreigners. Second, the CIs hope to build a more benign image of the Chinese nation, state, and people while creating chances for further economic cooperation through interaction with foreigners. However, Sahlins²¹ argues that CIs across the United States have not been promoting the Chinese language for the same purposes that Western language institutes promote their respective languages. In contrast, the CIs carry out a political mission by spreading knowledge of the Chinese language and culture as a form of nation-state work and promoting China’s political influence and socialist ideology under the guidance of the propaganda apparatus of the Chinese party-state.

The world has seen many international political controversies, which has led to opposition to the *Hanban*, CIs and the many Chinese staff members, officers, teachers and culture-related workers who have been sent abroad from China. In 2018, there were 548 CIs and 1193 CI Classrooms (CCs, smaller versions of CIs) affiliated with local universities, institutions and schools in 154 countries, covering all

¹⁷Rajan 2013; Kallio 2015, pp. 521–32; Lam 2016.

¹⁸Lam 2016.

¹⁹Liu 2020.

²⁰Nguyen 2014, pp. 85–117.

²¹Sahlins 2015.

regions of the world. There were 47,000 full-time and part-time teachers from China and host countries teaching 1.86 million students face-to-face and 810,000 students online. By the end of 2020, China plans to have 1,000 CIs to feed the growing overseas demands for Chinese language instruction.²²

However, while universities, colleges and schools in some countries – such as those in Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa – continue to welcome funding and engage in joint activities and collaboration with the CIs from China, institutes in Western countries, especially the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark, have disengaged with CIs due to issues with academic freedom and political interference. Recently, the province of New Brunswick, Canada, announced the removal of some Confucius programmes from its public schools. In the United States, CIs are now intensely controversial due to legality concerns that arose regarding U.S. federal funding that took effect in 2019 and prohibits universities that host CIs from receiving funding (for Chinese language studies) from the U.S. Department of Defense. The federal funding law has led to the closure of CIs in U.S. universities; for example, Indiana University, the University of Minnesota, the University of Rhode Island, San Francisco State University, the University of Oregon, Western Kentucky University, Arizona State University, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, San Diego State University and the University of Maryland – the oldest CI in the United States – chose to receive U.S. Department of Defense funds rather than keeping their partnership with CIs.²³

The Qiaoban: restructuring China's overseas Chinese affairs

While the *Hanban* and CIs have played a significant role in the PRC's Chinese-based education, targeting foreigners at large, the *Qiaoban* is focused on connecting with overseas Chinese communities outside China. In terms of its historical background, the *Qiaoban* can be traced back to Qing officials of the late nineteenth century and was continued by the KMT government, which established the Overseas Chinese Office, to handle *Qiaowu* or overseas Chinese affairs.²⁴ After 1949, under Chairman Mao, China quickly set up the *Qiaoban*, whose official status is equal to that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the central government. During the Mao regime, the *Qiaoban* formulated policies on how to develop ties with overseas Chinese.

After the economic reforms of 1978, the *Qiaoban*, along with other PRC-backed institutions directed at overseas Chinese (e.g. the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, the National Association of Overseas Chinese, the Dependent Overseas Chinese and the Overseas Chinese Commission), were given overseas missions. According to Guangdong Qiaobao,²⁵ in the 1990s, the *Qiaoban* had over 8,000 branches and affiliated public organizations at various levels, including the Overseas Chinese Commission and the People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. In 2016, there were more than 25,000 overseas Chinese communities, organizations, fellowship associations and chambers of commerce organized by overseas Chinese.²⁶ All PRC-backed institutional organs under the institutions concerned with overseas Chinese affairs currently aim to leverage the Chinese diaspora to drive investment in mainland China, uphold China's international reputation and win back the confidence and loyalty of overseas Chinese nationals (both domestically and abroad). The rhetoric repeatedly promoted by Chinese leaders asserts that "all Chinese under the heavens belong to one big family," and the *Qiaoban* and other PRC-backed institutions working in the field of overseas Chinese affairs have promoted this campaign for decades.

However, the *Qiaoban* was thoroughly restructured by the Xi Jinping government in March 2018. The *Qiaoban* was transformed into a part of the Central UFWD, which was authorized by the Ministry

²²Li 2020, p. 7.

²³Bullard 2020.

²⁴To 2014.

²⁵In a document published on 18 June 1998; cited in Nyiri 2005, pp. 141–76.

²⁶People's Political Consultative Post 2016.

of Foreign Affairs and the State Council of the PRC. The *Qiaoban* merged into the UFWD, receiving direct orders from the Party Central Committee.²⁷

As reported by the Xinhua News Agency (21 March 2018), the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the “Deepening Party and State Institution Reform Plan,” which states the following:

“the State Council taking charge of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office is no longer to be retained. The Central United Front Work Department will replace the brand of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council to manage overseas Chinese affairs in a unified manner, much more extensively with overseas compatriots and relatives of overseas Chinese, and better play the role of mass organizations. This is in order to strengthen the party’s centralized and unified leadership of the united front work overseas. The main responsibility of the Central United Front Department in overseas Chinese affairs is to lead the united front work overseas...The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council’s Overseas Chinese Associations and other responsibilities are reassigned to the Chinese Overseas Chinese Federation, which will play the role of the Chinese Overseas Chinese Federation as a bridge link between the party and the government to the majority of returned overseas Chinese families and overseas Chinese...”²⁸

The document mentioned above illustrates how President Xi restructured the *Qiaoban* and other PRC-backed institutional organs working in the field of overseas Chinese affairs into “united front activities” (Tongzhan Gongzuo, 统战工作) managed by the twelve renewed bureaus with the aim of deepening the CCP’s control of religion and eradicating independent cultures.²⁹ In terms of industry and activities, the UFWD is categorized by several types of work, for example, “international united front work” (Guo Ji Tong Zhan Gong Zuo, 国际统战工作), foreign affairs work (Wai Shi Gong Zuo, 外事工作) and overseas Chinese affairs work (Qiao Wu Gong Zuo, 侨务工作).³⁰

According to Anne-Marie Brady,³¹ the united front activities under Xi Jinping’s guidelines fall into four primary categories: (1) efforts to control overseas Chinese, utilize them as agents of Chinese foreign policy and suppress any hints of dissent; (2) efforts to co-opt foreigners to support and promote the CCP’s foreign policy goals and to provide access to strategic information and technical knowledge; (3) efforts to support a global, multi-platform, pro-PRC strategic communication strategy aimed at suppressing critical perspectives on the CCP and its policies and promoting the CCP agenda; and (4) efforts to support the China-centred economic, transportation and communications strategy known as the BRI. Due to this restructuring, the united front work reveals an important task regarding China’s domestic issues (e.g. religious affairs, independent cultures, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Uyghurs in Xinjiang) and related international politics. Significantly, the boundaries between domestic united front work and internationally oriented work are indistinguishable in the CCP’s propaganda activities of today.

The restructuring of the *Qiaoban* shows the CCP’s increased aspiration to influence overseas Chinese communities and a sense of dissatisfaction with the previous work performed by the *Qiaoban* and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Under the new UFWD structure, two of the twelve UFWD bureaus connected with the former *Qiaoban* institutions have been reassigned to overseas Chinese affairs work. The first is the Overseas Chinese Affairs General Bureau, Qiao Wu Zong Ju, 侨务总局, which has brought in senior staff from the former *Qiaoban*, and the *Qiaoban*’s Overseas Department, which has lengthy overseas experience working in Europe and Africa, has been added

²⁷The Central Government of PRC 2018.

²⁸Xinhua News Agency 2018.

²⁹Joske 2019; Suzuki 2019, p. 89.

³⁰Renminwang, 14 March 2018 cited in Brady 2019.

³¹Ibid.

to the new bureau. The new bureau has specific regional responsibilities that are probably holdovers from the old *Qiaoban* Overseas Department but are more focused on the Americas and the Pacific region. The other newly reassigned bureau is the Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau, Qiao Wu Shi Wu Ju, 侨务事务局, which is responsible for *Qiaoban* media and has educational and cultural responsibilities. This bureau has a new assignment: managing the *Qiaoban*'s international media network, the China News Service, which runs overseas media organizations and directs efforts to influence and promote Chinese language education around the world. Within the new structure, all tasks now also explicitly target overseas Chinese communities as part of the work of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese,³² which supports overseas activities with dozens of previous *Qiaoban* officials with overseas experience who now work at the new UFWD office.³³

The shifting significance of united front work has resulted in an increased number of UFWD officials gathered in more than 40,000 new UFWD cadres.³⁴ When the UFWD was restructured, it was not only the official bureau and state-to-state connections that were reorganized but also multiple levels of people-to-people organizations in the field of overseas Chinese affairs. In addition to the *Qiaoban*, there is the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (CPPRC), a nominally grassroots civic organization that is presented in ninety-one countries worldwide. The CPPRC is a front organization directed by the United Front Work of the CCP and has become one of the most prominent groups representing Chinese diaspora communities and a leading organization mobilizing international Chinese communities in support of Beijing's policies.³⁵ The bureau's changes to the *Qiaoban* and activities of the CPPRC to connect with overseas Chinese and expand internationally can be seen in Thailand, as will be explained in the next section.

Situating the roles of state-led institutions in Chiang Mai, Thailand

The *Hanban*, CIs, *Qiaoban* and other PRC-backed organizations in Thailand, and in Chiang Mai in particular, have been welcomed by Thai people, and these organizations successfully work with Thai authorities and overseas Chinese in Thailand. Currently, there are approximately 2,000 CI staff members in different positions in Thailand: directors, volunteer Chinese teachers (VCTs), government-sponsored Chinese teachers (GCTs), office workers and assistants. In Chiang Mai Province, there were approximately 200 CI staff members in 2019. Regardless of the controversies around the CIs in Western countries – sometimes seen as “academic malware”³⁶ or part of the “China threat”³⁷ – the 2,000 CI staff working in the sixteen CIs and twenty-one CCs in Thailand, making up 48% of the seventy-seven such institutions in Southeast Asia in 2018, testify to the success of joining Thai educational institutes and local colleges and schools.³⁸

As for the *Qiaoban* in Thailand, in the past, it has collaborated with overseas Chinese communities, schools, institutions and associations. The *Qiaoban* has also extended their curricula and programmes into several levels of the Thai formal education system through collaboration among the *Hanban*, *Qiaoban* and other PRC official organs in Thailand, e.g. the Chinese embassy in Bangkok and the Chinese consulate in Chiang Mai. The *Qiaoban* and other PRC official organs have provided material and financial support to develop local Chinese education. Cultural activities that are part of two different strategies – inviting-in (Qing Jin Lai, 请进来) and going-out (Zou Chu Qu, 走出去) – are being staged continuously.³⁹ The inviting-in strategy provides funding and scholarships for members of the younger Thai-Chinese generation or other overseas Chinese groups to visit China, and the going-out

³²Xinhuanet 2018.

³³Joske 2019; Bowe 2018, pp. 7–9.

³⁴Groot 2016, p. 169.

³⁵Bowe 2018, p. 8; Dotson 2019.

³⁶Sahlins 2015.

³⁷Zhou and Luk 2016, pp. 628–42.

³⁸Confucius Institute 2018, pp. 15–6.

³⁹Liu and Dongen 2016, pp. 805–21.

strategy offers financial support to Chinese staff, delegates, scholars and students to visit Thailand. This activity aims to strengthen economic, social and cultural links between China and overseas Chinese or returnees. All those acting under these state-led institutions aim to support “nation-state work,”⁴⁰ fulfilling political campaigns and accomplishing the agenda of building China’s cultural diplomacy. It is an external propaganda programme expected to boost China’s positive international image. Although the *Qiaoban* was recently restructured into the UFWD, some *Qiaoban* officials working in Chiang Mai have been promoted in rank. They have been reassigned to cover tasks related to economic engagement, media networks, education and culture to promote and connect with overseas Chinese in Thailand in an attempt to persuade them to return to China.

On another level – the people-to-people level – the CPPRC, a civic organization subordinate to the UFWD, is well connected with overseas Chinese in Thailand and is expanding in Southeast Asia. In October 2019, the third meeting of the China Council for the CPPRC in Asia was held in Bangkok, Thailand. The meeting had attendees from all over Southeast Asia, including overseas Chinese leaders from Thailand, such as from the Chaozhou Club of Thailand, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Thailand and other leading Thai-Chinese business leaders. The CPPRC in Asia has members in Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and other ASEAN countries. The next meeting of the CPPRC in Asia is scheduled to be held in Vientiane, Laos, in 2020.⁴¹

According to the China Myanmar Economic Cooperation and Development Promotion Association, these CPPRC meetings aim to build an image of Chinese patriotism and unite people in support of China’s peaceful reunification process. Politically, these meetings aim to get overseas Chinese in Thailand to support “one China” as the official PRC government policy and are by definition opposed to activities seen to “split” China, such as activities promoting the independence of Hong Kong or Taiwan. Economically, the council and association promote non-government trade and culture at home and abroad. Exchanges in education, science, technology, academia, press, publications, sports, art and tourism are encouraged to enhance understanding and friendship on both sides.⁴² As asserted by Wang Zhimin, the President of the China Council for the Promotion of the CPPRC in Thailand, “the organization in Thailand will be consistent with the mission of the one-China principle and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as the Chinese dream and will uphold the ‘Chinese-Thai family’.”

The CHBs and the role of SOEs

Unlike other government-based institutional bodies (e.g. the *Hanban*, CIs and *Qiaoban*), the new CHBs, which belong to an SOE of China, likewise play an important role in exporting Chinese language and culture. It is worth mentioning that the involvement and operation of state-owned enterprises in the Chinese culture “going out” policy has been accelerating since 2017 – the beginning of Xi Jinping’s second term – and they are now engaged in promoting the “Chinese traditional culture in China and abroad” campaign (Lam 2016). Specifically, the bookstore aims to follow the direction indicated in President Xi Jinping’s 2016 speech as a part of the “Chinese dream,” through which the CCP wishes to promote Chinese civilization as an alternative to other powers in the world and to re-establish China’s pride, prestige and “proper place” in the world.⁴³ However, it is distinctively a strategy set by the party-state, pulling physical and human resources into the campaign with a clear political agenda.

According to Xiao Han informed above, in terms of its administrative structure and business operations, the Xinhua Bookstore Group’s head office is run by China Publishing and Media Holding Co. Ltd, a Chinese corporate affiliate of the China Publishing Group Corporation (CPG), China’s largest

⁴⁰Li 2020.

⁴¹CMECD 2019.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Santasombat 2018, pp. 1–3.

and most influential trade and professional publishing group. The CPG owns twenty-eight overseas publishing houses, chain bookstores and offices and its business extends to over 130 countries and regions.⁴⁴ All of these corporates and state-owned enterprises in China's publishing industry have undergone reforms to orient them to a "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics."⁴⁵

According to the Xinhua Bookstore Group website,⁴⁶ the organization was established in 1937 in Yan'an. The Xinhua Bookstore Group's head office is currently the top management institution for Xinhua bookstores all over China, distributing 4.5 billion books and seeing sales revenues of approximately RMB 2.5 billion (US\$356 million) while serving the cultural industry in China. Recently, the Xinhua Bookstore Group has set a new goal to be the leading frontline group for spreading advanced socialist culture and promoting the development of Chinese culture industries domestically and worldwide. The Xinhua Bookstore Group hopes to be a creative and sustainable modern enterprise by designating strategic plans for its capital, production innovation and brand management. To deepen business reforms in the new era, the Xinhua Bookstore Group's head office plans to strengthen management, innovate in its operations, and promote its own steady development, striving for steady economic growth and building the enterprise into a large, modern book-circulation centre for the country and worldwide. One strategy is the use of the "Xinhua Bookstore" trademark registered in China and overseas that especially targets countries and regions with large Chinese populations.

However, the Xinhua Bookstore and Publishing Group cannot separate from the party-state, despite having transformed into a "cultural enterprise" with joint-stock companies focused on profit-driven commerce. Yun⁴⁷ examined China's publishing groups and found that the relationship between the party-state and the official book publishing industry is a very close one, with publishers becoming cultural institutions focused on producing ideological support for the regime by expanding in number and in output. Published books and reading materials are mainly meant to be a mouthpiece for the party along with constituting a profitable and creative part of new socialist market value.

When exploring the CHBs in Chiang Mai – connected hierarchically to the Yunnan Xinhua Bookstore Group, Xinhua Bookstore Group's head office and the China Publishing Group – it is apparent that CHBs have evolved under two levels of higher authority: first, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China, and second, the CCPPD. The CHBs submit tentative plans to the Yunnan Xinhua Bookstore Group, but, as seen in the case of Xiao Han's proposal, these must be finalized by the CCPPD – an internal division of the CCP in charge of propaganda and ideological work, enforcing media censorship and control, giving instructions to the media, and monitoring the content of print and visual media.⁴⁸ If it is decided that a project is relevant to promoting Chinese culture and will not harm the image of China, the Ministry of Commerce provides funding to support the project (*Butie*, 补贴 or subsidy/state aid) is released by the Department of Commerce of Yunnan Province, Ministry of Commerce. In addition to this subsidy and support, the government also provides policy aid for the project. For instance, the approval process and conduct procedures are simplified, and the investigatory process of the funding scheme by China's Banking Regulatory Commission is looser.

Business coping strategies: nation-state work and market value

As mentioned elsewhere, the *Hanban* and *Qiaoban* have been financially sponsored by the Chinese government for decades. These two state-led organs have been funded from the national budget to serve the nation-state's mission.

⁴⁴More details about Chinese publishing groups can be found at <http://en.cnpubg.com/enabout/introduction.shtml> (accessed 29 May 2020).

⁴⁵Yun 2019; Hassard et al. 2007.

⁴⁶More details about the Xinhua Bookstore head office can be found at <http://en.cnpubg.com/enabout/organization/2015/0814/24294.shtml> (accessed 29 May 2020).

⁴⁷Yun 2019.

⁴⁸Wu 2017.

According to the CI's annual development reports (Confucius Institute 2018), the organization's expenditures in 2011 amounted to US\$164,103,000 (RMB 1,066,669,500),⁴⁹ which doubled by 2018 to US\$314,116,000 (RMB 2,041,754,000). The expenditures of the CIs and CCs sponsored by the Chinese government include (1) start-up funds and operational funds for CIs and CCs, (2) the Confucius China Studies Program, (3) model CIs, (4) training for directors, teachers and volunteers, (5) CI scholarships, (6) operational funds for the online services of the CI, (7) Chinese and foreign expert lecture tours, teaching materials, exhibition tours and student performance tours, (8) the development and distribution of teaching materials, (9) on-site supervision by Chinese and foreign experts and (10) bilingual versions of CI activities. GCTs are usually tenured university teachers, contract university teachers and VCTs. VCTs are senior bachelor's degree students or junior master's degree candidates or graduates. Test centres include domestic and international centres, CI centres and non-CI centres.

As for the *Qiaoban*, it is stated that expenditures in 2013 totalled US\$570,068,369 (RMB 3,705,444,400). Expenditures increased to US\$671,308,615 (RMB 4,363,506,000) by 2015. The expenditures of the *Qiaoban*, sponsored by the Chinese government, include (1) general public services, (2) education, (3) scientific technology, (4) cultural activities, P.E. and media, (5) social welfare and employment services, (6) environmental protection activities and (7) housing welfare services (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council 2016, pp. 7–8). Noticeably, the *Qiaoban* can differ from the CIs in sub-institutional settings, where the *Qiaoban* has established sub-offices at different levels of the administrative system, from provinces to townships. Hence, the *Qiaoban*'s expenditure includes domestic social welfare projects.

In addition to facing international political criticism, all of these state-supported bureaus have been criticized from within China for their consumption of large portions of the national budget provided by the Chinese government. Some domestic criticism has been aimed at how the government's financial investment in the CIs has disrupted the domestic budget, leaving it insufficient to provide adequate education and social welfare in China (Starr 2009). Indeed, although the CIs set a financial objective for self-sufficiency within five years of the project's first spending state funds, many CIs have struggled to balance their budgets to cover expenses.

To cope with business operations and deficits, these state-supported organizations need to consider how to conduct nation-state work abroad with a focus on financial sustainability and long-term payoffs, finding more activities that can help them survive economically in the long run. The agenda of "pragmatism with Chinese characteristics" clearly presents in these state-supported organizations. In view of the traditional "ancient China pragmatic thought" in philosophy,⁵⁰ pragmatism with Chinese characteristics that are utilized by these state-supported organizations follows the government-led approach and political instruments deployed since the 1980s re-opening and political reform in policy-making and implementation for building the rising China. Mingxin Pei⁵¹ asserts that Chinese pragmatism deployed at the state-led level demonstrates the combination of authoritarianism, realism and nationalism in which the State could remain the powerful political forces using as Chinese statecraft to maintain political ideologies. As for these state-supported organizations, such pragmatism requires adjusting their goals and outcomes according to opportunities and challenges to particular local situations. Following the pragmatism in which they obtain the rapid and resultful feedback in their practical operations, flexibility and adaptability, engagement and negotiation become the attributes and skills in dealing with local situations when striving for surviving in the locality.

For example, CIs in Chiang Mai are normally funded by grants from China's Ministry of Education worth approximately US\$100,000 (RMB 700,000) per CI, and this figure is US\$70,000 (RMB 700,000) for a CC. Additionally, the local CIs may receive some funding from their host university, sometimes in the form of in-kind resources, such as human resources or the free use of conference rooms or

⁴⁹Currency during 2011–2013 was, on average, 6.5 Yuan/US dollar.

⁵⁰Wen 2009; Shusterman 2004.

⁵¹Pei 2006, pp. 1–25.

offices. In the past decade, CIs in Thailand have developed an innovative agent-based test system that markets Chinese language testing. This has been one popular way of implementing the Chinese government's policy aimed at putting Chinese education "into the local system" (Li 2020). The CIs in Thailand use their "field experience" to figure out localized and sustainable ways to fulfil their mission while also coping with the challenges of the scarcity of Chinese staff and the occasional non-cooperation of local partners. The CIs have created a new strategy of "policymaking from below" that helps them adapt to local situations and actual circumstances as much as possible, which is a good example of pragmatism and appropriateness for different localities.

With this kind of innovative strategy, CIs in Thailand have recruited local schools and Thai institutions as sub-contracted test centres, a move that can extend the pool of licensed Chinese language proficiency programmes. Through this "practice from below" operation, the more that localized Thai institutes become involved in Chinese language proficiency testing, the more local schools, teachers and students will host and take examinations for which they can obtain different kinds of rebates, such as rebates for testing fees, scholarships and summer camps (Li 2020). The CIs, in turn, receive revenue and other related benefits from the so-called Chinese proficiency examination industry. It is no wonder that Thailand has the world's highest number of HSK centres (as of 2018) in terms of population density and land area; of the 742 HSK centres worldwide, Thailand has seventy-seven, while Japan has only forty-eight and South Korea has thirty-seven (including the first international CI in Asia).⁵²

In addition to activities for which they receive rebates, CIs have also initiated other "brand" projects that they hope will help promote the Chinese language and culture at different levels and in different dimensions. For instance, the new Confucius China Studies Program supports doctoral students and young leaders in building a better understanding of China. The "Chinese Bridges" contest, a large-scale Chinese language proficiency competition, is a common and wide-reaching project involving competitions, performances, sight-seeing, opportunities to observe different forms of culture and camping. Chinese learners of different ages, from primary school to university, are invited to join the final round of the competition in the "real China." Some scholars⁵³ refer to CIs as "gas stations" and "service areas" that have become "multipurpose hubs" able to carry out diverse nation-state projects (such as the BRI or other Chinese outward-facing programmes) whose ultimate goal is assisting with and facilitating transnational practices promoting Chinese culture.

The CHBs of the Xinhua Publishing Group – the new vehicle driving the nation-state mission – and the five-year project to provide the CHBs with full financial support from the Xinhua Publishing Group at the provincial government level continue. Xiao Han plans to operate the bookstore, decorate the building, hire local staff and run cultural activities each year. In these early operational projects, Han is supposed to spend the budget effectively and efficiently and attempt to create other cultural activities that can earn income. This is because, after a five-year project, the bookstore is supposed to be self-funded. In the beginning, the bookstore would sell Chinese books, textbooks for Chinese learners and other writing and cultural materials (for the same price as in China). In addition to their regular work and activities at the bookstore, Han's team arranges Chinese cultural activities, for example, Chinese painting, calligraphy and games, providing these activities for Chinese learners in Chiang Mai or others who are interested in Chinese culture.

Although CHBs can obtain financial support from the state-owned enterprises of the Xinhua Group and the Yunnan Publishing Group (the two companies make profits from thousands of bookstores and business in China), as Han mentioned, the SOEs must be profitable because they need to earn revenue in each country to cover additional costs and expenses. As a result, Han plans some activities out of necessity to serve market demand and meet his income requirements. These include organizing summer camps for Chinese learners, arranging educational tours in Thailand, creating co-learning platforms for Thai and Chinese individuals to communicate with each other, and

⁵²CTI 2018.

⁵³For example, Wang (2016a, Wang 2016b).

publishing Chinese textbooks and lesson books to sell in Thai schools and classrooms. This help Han covers his budgetary needs. As his store has been in operation for several years now, Han has learned that he cannot make much profit from these cultural activities, but at a minimum, he can recover his costs and produce outcomes that serve the national goals. However, the case studies, especially CHBs conducting their work in an early stage, reveal both opportunities and challenges in carrying out nation-state work abroad with a focus on financial sustainability and market value, which may not always go as expected.

Conclusion

This article examines China's government-led institutions and enterprises that have been conducting nation-state work to promote the Chinese culture's "going out" mission and to help spread the latest "Chinese dream" abroad. The case of CHBs – an emerging provincial state-led enterprise – in Northern Thailand and the Mekong region and the case of CIs in Chiang Mai illustrate how the Chinese state has been actively implementing multi-level state mechanisms in multiple forms, sending out official staff and cultural workers to promote Chinese culture and civilization to the world. Such multi-level state mechanisms are seen by this article as a tool of statecraft, with the ultimate goal of expanding and consolidating China's cultural soft power. However, to cope with economic budget limitations and deficits and to effectively fulfil its mission of promoting Chinese culture "going out," the CHBs and CIs in Thailand must simultaneously combine the work of the nation-state's mission and achieve market value using market-oriented business strategies. Hence, these state-supported organizations have presented how the "pragmatism with Chinese characteristics" is deployed to conduct nation-state work abroad with a focus on financial sustainability and long-term payoffs while finding appropriate and profitable activities in the face of local opportunities and challenges. Irrespective of the philosophical pragmatism and the idealistic notion, pragmatism with Chinese characteristics is a realistic approach in which these state-supported organizations deploy to obtain rapid and resultful responses in their practical operations. The attributes of flexibility, adaptability, engagement and negotiation are undermined in their attitudes and actions when striving for surviving within local situations. However, the case studies, especially CHBs conducting their work in an early stage, reveal both opportunities and challenges in carrying out nation-state work abroad with a focus on financial sustainability which the outcomes may not always go as expected.

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