

Religion, culture and Confucius Institutes in China's foreign policy

Chan, K-K. and Hunter, A.

Published version deposited in CURVE December 2012

Original citation & hyperlink:

Chan, K-K. and Hunter, A. (2012) 'Religion, culture and Confucius Institutes in China's foreign policy' In E. Kavalski (Ed). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Chinese Foreign Policy* (pp: 135-150). Farnham: Ashgate

<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409422709>

Publisher statement: Used by permission of the Publishers from 'Religion, culture and Confucius Institutes in China's foreign policy', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Chinese Foreign Policy* edited by Emilian Kavalski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 135–150. Copyright © 2012

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

CURVE is the Institutional Repository for Coventry University

<http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open>

The Ashgate Research Companion to Chinese Foreign Policy

Edited by

EMILIAN KAVALSKI

University of Western Sydney, Australia

2012

ASHGATE

- 7 The "New Security Concept":
The Role of the Military in China's Foreign Policy
Yee-Kuang Heng 103
- 8 Economic Development and China's Foreign Policy
Hongyi Lai and Su-jeong Kang 113

**PART III THE INTERNATIONAL IMPACT OF
CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

- 9 Soft Power in Chinese Foreign Policy:
Concepts, Policies, and Effectiveness
James Reilly 125
- 10 Religion, Culture, and Confucius Institutes in
China's Foreign Policy
Kim-Kwong Chan and Alan Hunter 135
- 11 Overseas Chinese and Chinese Foreign Policy
John Lee 151
- 12 China and the Global Surge for Resources
Carrie Liu Currier 163

PART IV CHINA'S BILATERAL INTERACTIONS

- 13 The Relations between China and the USA
Jian Yang 179
- 14 China's Bilateral Interactions with Russia
Susan Turner Haynes 191
- 15 Perspectives on China's Relations with the European Union
Reuben Wong 201
- 16 Sino-Indian Relations:
Peaceful Coexistence or Pending Rivalry
Jing-dong Yuan 211

PART V CHINA'S REGIONAL STRATEGIES

- 17 China's Relations with the Middle East
Niv Horesh 223

Religion, Culture, and Confucius Institutes in China's Foreign Policy

Kim-Kwong Chan and Alan Hunter

Introduction

The perception that China should invest heavily in "soft power" has generated a number of top-level policy initiatives, as well as commentary on them by both Chinese and Western scholars, in the past five years or so (Hunter 2009; Kurlantzick 2007; Wuthnow 2008). Premier Wen Jiabao has been particularly active in promoting Chinese culture, for example making time for cultural visits and discussions during his 2010 visits to India and Italy. The most influential conceptualization of soft power is that of Nye (1990a, 2004), which basically argues that a nation's cultural resources constitute a form of power that complements military and economic power. Soft power can encompass films, manufacturing brands, sports, education, media or music that create a positive image about a nation. Some examples might be, for the USA, the "American dream," Hollywood, and alleged support for democracy; for Europe, art and music, tourism and soccer. Religion can also form part of the soft power assets, for example access to pilgrimage sites.

This chapter focuses on two aspects of Chinese soft power: Confucius Institutes and religion. These examples illustrate two systemic issues: why has China, at least until now, found it difficult to generate soft power commensurate with its economic growth? And what are the implications for China's foreign policy? The next section provides some historical background, and the third addresses a range of current initiatives. The following two sections focus respectively on the Confucius Institutes and religion. The final section provides some concluding remarks.

History

There is much scope for further research on the historical roots of Chinese soft power. A key element of China's current international success has been its prestige in Asia, rooted in a shared, if differentiated, Sinic cultural heritage. China was also engaged for many centuries with the issue of security against perceived and actual threats along its northern and western borders. Perhaps here we find the antecedents of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where economic and cultural co-operation complement security and military initiatives.

Tribute and gifts were two key aspects of dynastic diplomacy. The tributary relationship fulfilled two functions. Once a foreign ruler agreed to pay tribute to the Emperor in Beijing, he explicitly acknowledged that Chinese civilization was the most advanced in the world, and the Confucian system, with the Emperor at its heart, was its culture. In return for this acknowledgment, such countries would have preferential, if not exclusive, trade rights on various commodities. It was therefore a system for embedding the superiority of Chinese culture and for regulating trade. It had a profound impact on relations with Cambodia, Korea, Japan and Vietnam through much of recorded history, indeed in the case of Korea for almost 2000 years until the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–1895. "Korean and Vietnamese elites in particular accepted the values and ideas of the tribute system. Thus it was a mix of legitimate acceptance and rational calculation that motivated Korea and Vietnam to lend their submission to China" (Kang 2010a: 55).

In addition, numerous smaller states or territories brought tribute to Beijing from all around Central and South Asia. Tribute included gold, horses, slaves, rice, and tropical produce; in return, "Chinese civilization had an enduring and transformative effect on the domestic politics and societies of many surrounding states, and those most sinicized formed a Confucian society with shared norms, values and agreement on what constituted membership" (Kang 2010a: 54). Despite the complete reconfiguration of international relations in East Asia in the past two centuries, many commentators have observed the continuity of Chinese cultural influences, for example, Confucian social philosophy, visual arts traditions, eating with chopsticks, and close associations with Chinese traders.

Complementing the tribute system was the far less attractive issue of coping with incursions, at times invasions, from the many steppe tribes along its western and northern borders (Barfield 1989). One technique frequently adopted through the centuries was that of "gifts," which was a polite name for massive bribes (rice, silk and other commodities), that could place severe strain on imperial resources. In addition to these state engagements, China was of course one of the world's leading trading nations. For example, in the Tang dynasty goods were traded along the Silk Route to West Asia, and by sea as far as Egypt and Somalia.

So until the collapse of Chinese power under the late Qing, we gain a picture of China as a self-confident international power, with trading links across most of the then accessible world, and specific arrangements in Asia to spread its cultural influence or to buy political stability. The Chinese then underwent the many decades of humiliation under successive imperialist incursions and internal

collapse, until 1949. In the West, representations of Chinese-ness degenerated to Fu Manchu and, later, "Yellow Peril." In Asia came the far more destructive changes embodied by the Japanese invasions and, in Southeast Asia, the slaughter of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

For many years after 1949, the new rulers of the PRC followed the Soviet model of cultural politics. Artists and writers were state employees, and required to produce works of "socialist realism," the main aim of which was to galvanize support for communist social objectives. They built a massive state bureaucracy to organize, control and disseminate artistic output, mostly within the remit of the Ministry of Culture (*wenhuabu*). (This ministry could easily have been modeled on the famous "Ministry of Truth" in Orwell's dystopia *1984*, co-incidentally published in 1949, known as the Minitrue and responsible for entertainment and the arts.) Chinese cultural production reached what was probably a historical all-time low in the Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile any remnant of its "soft power" overseas was being further destroyed. For a short period in the mid-1950s, China had initiated a strategy, usually credited to Zhou Enlai, to represent itself as a reasonable, nonaggressive member of the developing world. This vision was articulated most convincingly at the Bandung conference held in Indonesia in 1955. Zhou Enlai survived a US-Taiwan assassination attempt en route to the conference, and once there, positioned China as a developing country, not an exporter of revolution. It was an important conference, with lasting impact on China's self-representation overseas, and the first major meeting of a large number of Asian and African states, most of which were newly independent. It led in 1961 to the Non-Aligned Movement (118 members in 2010) and a New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (launched in 2005 at the fiftieth celebration of the Bandung conference): both very much in line with current Chinese international diplomacy.

This stance was, however, repudiated during the Cultural Revolution, during which China's reputation overseas completely degenerated as its priorities seemed to be to split international communist groups into pro-Beijing (instead of pro-Moscow) factions, and its international publications were confined to a handful of Maoist propaganda journals. During the Cultural Revolution, China's internal politics, as far as they could be accessed by the outside world, appeared to be a complete disaster, also encompassing the destruction of religious heritage. As the new group of leaders around Deng Xiaoping took over in 1978, they inherited a system modeled on the Soviet Union but further degenerated during the Maoist years. They would require a completely new strategy to rebuild China as an international presence. In the 1980s, the leadership was focused on domestic politics and economic growth, and made little impression overseas. This situation was made worse by two PR disasters in 1989: the handling of the Tiananmen democracy movement, and the growing popularity in Western media of the Dalai Lama, who won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Contemporary Cultural Diplomacy

Addressing this unpromising situation, the Chinese government has in fact made substantial progress in utilizing culture and religion as foreign policy tools in the past decade, although it certainly still faces challenges, and there are areas where improvements are urgently needed. This section surveys a variety of areas where cultural diplomacy has been deployed; it makes only passing reference to the roles of the Confucius Institutes and religion, which are considered in detail later. Because of the rapidly expanding fields of activity, it is not possible to say more than a few words about most of them, but in this section we have first listed 13 important areas, with a few words and examples for each. We then provide two analytical tools. It should also be remembered that we are not here discussing more conventional diplomacy—China's formal and informal bilateral, multilateral and UN initiatives, for example—although in reality the two cannot be cleanly separated and indeed are intended to complement each other. Finally, there are no widely accepted ways to “measure” soft power impacts, or “value for money” as the Chinese government might see it, so the listing below is not in order of presumed importance.

Chinese trade/investment/cultural/political presence

The sheer scale of Chinese global outreach far surpasses any previous networks. China has massive investments on every continent, which have inevitably meant interactions with non-Chinese businesses in a wide range of sectors: manufacturing, extractive industries, and trade, for example.

The Chinese diaspora

From the 1950s, China recognized the potential importance of the Chinese diaspora as a component of outreach. Indeed in the 1960s there were vigorous and often vicious conflicts with Taiwanese agents for control and influence. Positive relations with diasporas in Southeast Asia, the USA, Australia, and Europe are now a key strategic target.

Chinese media influence, English-language broadcasting and internet presence

There has been massive investment in the media, including English-language broadcasting and internet presence. The strategy appears to position China as a leading provider of movies, news, popular music, and TV programs in Asia, and to have a strong international presence in English on the internet, for example through the China Daily English-language service. The State Council

Information Office even released an app for iPad in 2011, showcasing some national promotional videos.

Contemporary and traditional culture promoted outside China

China regularly sponsors over 1000 cultural events a year in developed countries such as France and the USA. They range from one-off shows to ambitious, sometimes year-long cultural festivals.

Mandarin as an Asia-wide language

There is overt or subtle influence to improve the uptake of Mandarin as a language of business in Asia. One example is the tendency now for business families to ensure that at least one of their sons is schooled in China.

Chinese universities and schools

Provision of education for foreign students has in fact been in place since the 1950s, when China started to offer scholarships especially to African students in subjects like agronomy and medicine. This provision has escalated hugely in the past 10 years, with students especially from African and Asian countries attending university, and increasingly high school, in China.

Cultural ambassadors

As a particular example of the promotion of culture, the government makes use of stars such as the musician Lang Lang, the actress Zhang Ziyi and the sports personality Yao Ming. They often appear, for example, at receptions and other prestige events in foreign capitals.

Tourism

China has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, and appears set to continue its trajectory. It has many advantages: the obvious economic benefit of a thriving industry, but also the growing familiarization of non-Chinese with the society, which perhaps could lead to a reduction in stereotyping and negative media manipulation. China now has 40 UNESCO world heritage sites, third in the world (just behind Italy and Spain).

Sport

Sport has obviously been a major prestige-winner for China in recent years, with its culmination in the 2008 Olympic Games. China has demonstrated that a “developing” country can become the most successful sporting nation in the world, and also can deliver an impeccable and imposing international event. There has been some controversy about its methods, however, with sports leadership being accused of focusing almost exclusively on elite sports, to the exclusion of grassroots, and also of cruelty in training regimes.

Events in China

Apart from the Olympic Games, China seems committed to hosting a raft of other prestige international events, a recent example being EXPO 2010. About 70 million people attended the event (probably 95 percent Chinese nationals), although their participation was mired in controversy as it was alleged they were virtually forced to attend by their work-units and threatened with loss of salary if they failed to. Other events are still more flamboyant and probably less regimented, for example Dior’s 2008 Beijing extravaganza “Christian Dior and Chinese Artists.”

The Chinese development model

The amazing economic success of China since 1980 is increasingly held up as an example to other developing countries, evidence that there is a credible alternative to the “Washington consensus”. Likewise, China has been happy to present itself as “a friendly elephant” — that is, admittedly large but also peace-loving. In both respects it can implicitly or explicitly present itself in a favorable light compared with the USA, whose hegemony has evidently failed to provide economic growth in most developing countries, and which has a militaristic foreign policy.

Aid and peace-keeping

China is also engaging increasingly with aid, including peace-keeping. China had in fact a record of aid projects, especially in Africa, dating back to the 1950s. These have grown rapidly in scope in the past decade, sometimes working in conjunction with commercial projects. Many hospitals and other infrastructure projects in African countries are now Chinese-funded, and often delivered by Chinese companies. China has also started, with some success, to provide peace-keeping forces to UN missions.

Boycotts of “anti-Chinese” events

Alongside this generally positive investment, the Chinese government has also tried to counter what it considers “anti-Chinese” propaganda. As we will consider in the concluding section, it is probably here that clumsiness and paranoia are visible more easily than sophistication and intelligent analysis. Tibet is often a trigger factor, as exemplified by the PR disaster of the anti-China lobby during the run up to the Olympic Games. Another is human rights: one of the worst Chinese performances in recent years was the attempt to organize a boycott of the 2010 award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo. As reported in a UK newspaper the day before the award:

For a country that spends countless millions projecting its soft-power—reassuring the world that its rise is peaceful and its intentions benign—tomorrow’s event is a horrible embarrassment. At a stroke, much of the work of a very expensive Olympic Games, international Confucius Institutes, student exchange programmes and English-language television channels and newspapers has been undone. (Foster 2010)

Finally in Tables 10.1 and 10.2, we suggest that China has a differentiated strategy for its soft power and cultural diplomacy, taking into account first different regions and, secondly, different social groups.

Table 10.1 Strategy in different regions

Developed countries	Developing countries	Southeast Asia
Art and culture	Sport	Asian values and culture, Buddhist heritage
Improved reputation for good governance	Reputation and models for economic growth	Stable, pro-Asian government
Tourism and mutual understanding	Aid, disaster relief, medical teams	Tourism, education, business exchanges
Peaceful international agenda	Trade, investment	“Good neighbor” (friendly elephant)

Table 10.2 Strategy according to social group

General populations	Elite classes	Political classes
Peace-loving, pro-development image	Perceived as good governance, improving human rights, etc.	State visits and positive media exposure
Popular sports events	Artistic and cultural events, successes	Support in UN and other international fora
Reliable, cheap brands	Growing communication, tourism	Aid and trade deals
Positive media images (e.g. disaster relief)	Lively, successful diaspora	

One of the key new developments of the past decade was a government decision to invest substantially in the promotion of Chinese language outside China. The following section evaluates the mixed fortunes of this initiative, the launch of the Confucius Institutes (*kǒngzǐ xuéyuàn*).

Confucius Institutes

Increasing demand for Chinese language study since the beginning of the 21st century prompted the opening of many Chinese languages classes outside China. However worldwide there was a general lack of standardization and qualified instructors except in some fully fledged university programs. To meet this opportunity, the Chinese Ministry of Education established the Office of Chinese Language Council International, widely known as the "Hanban," in 2004. The Hanban is a departmental bureau under the Ministry of Education to facilitate the teaching of Chinese language overseas, and specifically its primary purpose was to establish Chinese language centers, called Confucius Institutes (CI).

A CI can take different forms. Some are enterprises wholly owned by the Hanban; others are joint ventures between the Hanban and partners, such as a foreign university; others are franchise schools licensed by the Hanban. In the case of a joint venture or franchise model, which are the majority of the current operations, the Chinese side will generally provide capital to start the Institute, teaching materials, and language instructors from China to support the program; the local partner will be responsible for operational matters. Confucius Institutes are supposed to be nonprofit organizations, politically supportive to the One China policy, and not involved in religious, political or ethnic activities. There is also a junior branch called Confucius Classrooms (CC), targeting mostly high school Chinese language instruction. Currently CIs and CCs not only provide Chinese language instruction but also promote Chinese culture through various means. Some of the CIs have stated to serve as an academic bridge between China and the local host country. The first CI was established in November 2004 in Seoul, Korea.

Six years later, by October 2010, there were 322 CI in 91 countries and regions, and 369 CC in 36 countries (Hanban 2011; Tables 10.3 and 10.4).

Table 10.3 Figures for 2004

Continent	Spread	Number of Confucius Institutes
Asia	30 countries	81
Africa	16 countries	21
Europe	31 countries	105
America	12 countries	103
Oceania	2 countries	12

Table 10.4 Figures for 2010

Continent	Spread	Number of Confucius Classrooms
Asia	11 countries	31
Africa	5 countries	5
Europe	10 countries	82
America	6 countries	240
Oceania	2 countries	11

Official reports from China present a rather positive image on the contribution of CI to promoting greater understanding of China to the world, especially after President Hu's visit to the USA in January 2011, and his subsequent invitation of US CI students for an all-expenses-paid trip to China. However, other reports on CIs are rather mixed. There have been several positive reviews about the work of the CIs in Australia and the USA (Yang 2010). The CIs in Australia have often become an asset to the local institutions in facilitating Chinese language instruction, and some CIs in the USA have also served as a link between academic institutions in China and in the USA, successfully promoting further academic exchanges.

However several problem areas have been identified. Among them are legal issues, corruption, the quality of the language instructors, and doubts about the longer-term objectives of the CI. For example, all CIs in Russia, as of April 2011, are illegal in the eyes of the Russian Government. All educational institutions in Russia have to register with the Ministry of Education and fulfill the established requirements before they can admit students. However the CIs in Russia failed to submit the teaching curriculum, as well as the qualifications of the instructors, to the Ministry. All of the CIs are currently attached to Russian universities, but they have no legal status, their instructors enter Russia as students with student visas, and the CI programs are not recognized by the Ministry of Education. Most

of the start-up capital from China is unaccounted for, and the CIs are now under investigation for embezzlement (Maslov 2011, personal interview).

Some CIs in North Africa have become private commercial enterprises, despite the claim by Hanban of a nonprofit status. For example, one CI in North Africa was originally linked to a reputable local university. However, staff of the Chinese embassy managed to transfer this CI, along with the start-up funds, to a local language school with a dubious reputation, operated and partly owned by friends of the embassy staff. This CI has become a commercial operation with various functions: running classes on Chinese language and culture, receiving tuition fees from students as well as funding from Hanban, and putting on shows. For example, when political leaders from China visit the country, they will be entertained by local students dressing up to perform Chinese songs and folk dances. This type of CI is not uncommon especially in the developing world.

There are several factors that affect the performance of CI/CC. Firstly, many of the language instructors are newly graduated volunteers. Others are junior faculty members of Chinese universities conscripted by the Hanban and assigned to partners with a particular CI. Both groups usually lack teaching experience, and are inconsistent in their teaching proficiency. Most of these volunteers would prefer to be sent to Europe or the USA, postings that provide a chance to seek opportunities for their future career development. Others would like to have a paid gap year or two to enjoy the adventure of working in a new environment. There is evidently a significant perception gap between the benefits of working in a famous university in a rich country, compared with the disadvantages of being posted to a low-quality institution in a low-income country, where junior Chinese staff often have poor living conditions. Overall, the lack of experience, poor qualifications, concern about conditions, and often questionable motivation of teaching staff can often impact the quality of teaching.

Second, since the CI/CC are usually managed by local partners, the success of a CI in that particular locality is heavily reliant on the competency and the objective of the partner. The Hanban has made efforts to train CI heads. The curriculum of a week-long program at one of the recent training sessions suggests that, other than a course on "How to promote CI from a marketing perspective," all other courses are on Chinese culture, geography, foreign policy and current development with a view to promoting a positive image of China (Ta Kung Pao 2010). There is not a single course on the administration or teaching of language programs. Furthermore, the often less than transparent financial status of CIs (nonprofit on paper, yet seemingly commercial in partnering models) would not discourage local partners from grasping this opportunity to run a language school that can make profits through subsidies as well as tuition fees.

Third, the Chinese language curriculum issued by the Hanban may not fulfill standard academic requirements. For example, courses may not gain credits in universities as they may not meet local academic requirements, such as the qualification of the instructor or the evaluation criteria. Such issues can render study at a CI just an extracurricular activity, rather than a program integrated into the academic life of the hosting institution. Further, the noncompliance with local

legal requirements can further marginalize the CI as merely an interest class rather than a formal academic institution.

Finally, the CI initiative does not escape the strong Soviet-style bureaucratic apparatus. Although nominally educational, the CIs are also influenced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Propaganda Department of the CCP. The Chinese leaders who visit CIs tend to come not from the Ministry of Education but rather from other influential units such as the United Front Work Department or from Foreign Affairs. The Ministry of Education seems to have been given an operational mandate, but with little control over the CI's role in the context of the Government's foreign policy, and with little flexibility to re-focus its objectives or to re-evaluate its programs. Also the strongly governmental nature of the Hanban and CI shapes its program as part of the government's propaganda effectiveness: the ultimate objective is probably more to promote China's political interest than Chinese language and culture, or at least to do both. Overall, despite some useful achievements in language teaching, CI may share the fate of other soft power initiatives: strong government control leads to lack of credibility and makes observers skeptical about long-term objectives. One thing can be stated with confidence: a Confucius Institute is an institute with little to do with Confucius! (See Su [2011] for a brief overview of the use of the Confucius "brand" for a variety of PR purposes.)

Religion in Foreign Policy

China's religious policy can be briefly described as a containment of religious groups and activities within a controlled framework. There were periods when religion was totally suppressed by the Chinese authorities, owing to the "extreme leftist" policy. Religion was allowed to re-surface in the Chinese society after 1979, but subject to tight controls. All religious organizations are supposed to support the government and its political interests (Chan and Carlson 2005). In this political context, religion can be co-opted by the state as an instrument to serve the interest of China's foreign affairs policy in terms of soft power; however, the different religions in China are required to play a differentiated role *vis-à-vis* China's foreign policy.

Buddhism is widespread throughout China, with a history of more than 1500 years. Many neighboring nations such as Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Korea share this religious tradition with its rich heritage and culture. Buddhist groups from these nations have conducted religious exchanges for hundreds of years. Early in the PRC, Premier Zhou Enlai used this Buddhist connection to extend diplomatic gestures to nations in Southeast Asia. A recent commissioned research in China also suggested that Buddhism is one of the best religions among others in China for the Government to use as a powerful soft power tool for the projection of China's influence in the world, just as China did to Japan and Korea using Buddhist influence for more than 1000 years (Chen 2009).

Pursuing this agenda, the Chinese Government held the first World Buddhist Forum in China, probably the largest Buddhist gathering ever. The purpose was to portray the Chinese Buddhist community as the leading element of Buddhism worldwide. The event took place in 2008, the same year in which China hosted the Olympics, as an important soft power projection in the area of religion. In 2009, the Chinese authorities organized the second World Buddhist Forum, with a slightly nuanced agenda. This Forum was hosted both in Mainland China and in Taiwan, a significant gesture of China's unification with Taiwan. Both events carry strong political and diplomatic tones, and both events were far beyond the resource capacity of Buddhist organizations, which suggested that they were heavily sponsored by the civil authorities. Both could be considered a success as China seemed to gain sympathetic support from Buddhist nations, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand, at least on the governmental level. Further, Buddhist groups in Taiwan seemed to be happy to co-sponsor with China, an important sign among the Taiwanese population, which is heavily influenced by Buddhism.

This success is, however, probably more than outweighed by the issue of Tibet. The continuing policies on Tibet, and the usually clumsy demonization of the Dalai Lama have created a negative attitude towards the PRC among a large proportion of the US and European public, possibly more than any other issue. Ironically, Tibetan Buddhists in exile have been extremely successful in deploying "soft power" against the Chinese (Namgyal 2011), for example in the protests against the Olympic torch relay in 2008, which completely outclassed the Chinese media orthodoxy. However such protests also seem to have made the Chinese government at present completely intransigent toward the exiled Tibetan leaders.

One of the highest priorities of China's diplomacy is to strengthen relations with Muslim nations, for several reasons: energy security, gaining large infrastructure contracts, border security (Central Asia), and prevention of cross-border insurgencies. In order to gain support from Muslim communities, China has long supported believers who want to go on the Hajj, and in recent years has stepped up efforts to increase charter flights, supply medical personnel for each charter flight group, and expedite passport and visa applications with the Saudi authorities. Chinese Muslims are also involved with many of the construction and commercial projects of Chinese firms operating in the Middle East and North Africa. In general, there has been a strong emphasis on strengthening the ties between China and these Muslim countries. However, the strong security measures against the Uyghurs (a Muslim community based mainly in Xinjiang Province) by the Chinese authorities have created some negative perceptions in the Middle East especially. For example, the Turkish population used to have a strong pro-China stance in the 1990s and early 2000s; this has turned into a predominantly anti-China sentiment in recent years as many Turks sympathize with the Uyghur cause, sharing a similar Turkic language.

It seems that China's soft power initiative via Islam may not necessarily result in the consequences it desires. The ethnic tension between Han and Uyghurs may be as important as, if not more important than, the religious factor. Handling these sensitivities in Xinjiang, and overseas perceptions of Chinese policies towards

Muslims, is a tough challenge for the leadership, and has already cost two top officials their positions: provincial party leaders Li Zhi and Wang Lequan were, unusually, dismissed from their positions in Xinjiang for failure to resolve the issues. Tibet and Xinjiang are case studies of the dilemmas facing the government in addressing ethnic and religious affairs, under the watchful eyes of the international media and overseas religious communities.

As a religion introduced more recently by foreigners to China, Christianity is often caught in diplomatic crossfire between China and other nations. The Sino-Vatican relation is at the intersection of foreign affairs and religion. The Chinese authorities regard the Sino-Vatican normalization more as a political and foreign affairs issue than a religious matter, as China's demands are more political than religious in nature: they include cutting the Vatican's diplomatic ties with Taiwan, and demanding political loyalty from the Chinese Catholic Bishops to the Chinese government rather than to the Pope. China takes the Catholic Church in China as a kind of hostage to negotiate with the Vatican on these issues.

As for the Protestant Church, the widely reported arrests of Christians from unregistered churches often becomes a thorny issue in Sino-US relations, as the USA incorporates human rights and religious freedom issues into its foreign affairs policy. In response, China has tried to increase its media presentation showing positive developments for Christianity in China, for example organizing road shows in Europe and the USA that highlight the printing of Bibles inside the PRC. These shows target mainly Church groups who are already sympathetic to China, a sort of preaching to the choir. Its often archaic and Communist-China style of promotion hardly reaches the ear, much less the heart, of general Western audiences. Against the strong media report of abuses against Christians, China's weak response does not challenge the US media portrayal of China as human rights hell.

The small Chinese Orthodox community (fewer than 20,000, mostly Russian descendants) was until recently thought to be of no value to the government, and was deliberately left to die off, as the government prohibited the training of young priests. However, with the improvement of Sino-Russian relations, the Moscow Patriarchate's open support, as a moral obligation, to the Chinese Orthodox community, and the personal and repeated intervention of Russian Presidents, the Chinese Government has relaxed control over the Orthodox in China. They have permitted the building of new Orthodox churches, allow Russian Orthodox priests to co-celebrate some liturgies, tacitly allow young Orthodox to study theology, and are now even negotiating the possibility of Russian bishops ordaining new Chinese Orthodox priests so that the Orthodox Church may continue to survive. All these extraordinary measures are clear political gestures to support diplomatic relations with Russia via a particular religious group. If the Chinese Orthodox Church did not have such a political patron, increasingly important to China, this religious group may well have disappeared into obscurity.

A parallel case is the promotion of ties with Israel. The Chinese government recently initiated measures to preserve several Synagogues in Shanghai as historical monuments, to support the studies of Chinese Jews and Judaism, and is allowing

expatriate Jewish communities in China to use the Synagogue in High Festivals. These are all political gestures to gain favor from Israel as well as the powerful Jewish community in Diaspora. These examples illustrate that religion, even one that is extinct in China, can still be useful in foreign affairs.

Conclusion

After this survey, it is interesting to ponder why it appears so difficult for the Chinese government or society to generate soft power commensurate with its economic might. We have shown a rather large number of contemporary initiatives, but none of them seem quite able to escape the dead hand of a Soviet-style propaganda ministry product. China still clearly fails to compete with Western media and soft power, and even with Asian neighbors such as Japan and India. Apart from generic failings, there have even been some specific complete PR blunders, like dealing with the Dalai Lama, Liu Xiaobo, Tiananmen dissidents and Tibetan protesters. One wonders why the Chinese government which has been so successful in many other respects, appears to be failing in this area. Will Confucius Institutes follow the same pattern?

Likewise, China clearly uses religion as one of its tools in its foreign policy. However, other than the Russian Orthodox and the Jewish cases through which it seems to have made some gains with Russia and Israel, China has been a major loser in the international community/media regarding its religious freedom for Tibetan Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants and the Uygur Muslims. It seems that religion is more a liability than an asset as a soft power tool for the Chinese Government.

The explanation lies perhaps in a combination of several factors. First, soft power in its current form—that is, based on brand recognition and celebrity-obsessed media—is a relatively new concept for Chinese leaders, most of whom grew up in a completely different kind of society. This leadership is generally not at all familiar with the norms of the media and public opinion in other countries. Second, Chinese art, culture, and religion are deeply impacted by the Soviet legacy of conformism and caution. There have been huge gains in freedom of expression and freedom of religion, and the authors do not subscribe to the exaggerated portrayal of China as a human rights hell. Nevertheless, Chinese artists and religious personnel have to work under conditions of censorship or self-censorship, in an environment where creativity can be risky. Meanwhile, as in many bureaucracies, the *apparatchiks* are primarily concerned to preserve the status quo and their position in it, and may avoid authorizing innovative art or new thinking in religion. Third, the USA in particular finds the Chinese reputation vulnerable to media attacks, and some political or business interests may find it convenient to feed numerous anti-China stories into the international media, a skill that they have developed to a far higher level than their Chinese counterparts.

Finally, the Chinese government may simply feel on balance that China does not need to make huge efforts to develop its soft power, or cultural and religious

diplomacy. A rather skeptical attitude was expressed in a publication reserved for internal circulation among high-ranking cadres:

In conclusion, appreciation of Chinese Culture and interest in learning Chinese language would not automatically increase their [European] support for or understanding of China's policy. It is impossible to ascertain to what degree we can achieve our political objectives by projecting our cultural soft power. (Gao 2010: 41)

After all, the economy is speaking for itself. Most analysts agree that domestic stability and continuing economic growth during this period of remarkable social change are right at the heart of the Chinese political agenda. It may be that international perceptions of its culture and religion rate much less attention.