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China's Public Diplomacy and Confucius Institute

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CHAPTER 9

China's Public Diplomacy and Confucius Institute

Abstract

Although officially introduced in Communist Party of China (CPC) doctrine in 2012, the concept of public diplomacy (PD) in China has taken various forms: people's diplomacy (*renmin waijiao*), civil diplomacy (*minjian waijiao*), and external propaganda (*duiwai xuanchuan*). In these quasi-PD activities, Beijing has regarded the principle of relationship management as an important means to deal with uncertainty in international communication. Relationship management has largely been a strategic response to international criticism since the Mao era. When China and India codified the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence for trade and intercourse between Tibet and India in 1954, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai implicitly conceptualised the ideas of "doing business" and "making friends." International criticism and negative feedback about neo-colonialist trends in Africa from the beginning of the 21st century have prompted China to use a public-centric approach to African PD in order to enhance its international legitimacy while managing uncertainty. The Confucius Institute (CI) is currently a flagship brand of China's statecraft in Africa through which Beijing advances its reputation among local publics. The Chinese government uses relationship management, relationship synergies, and interpersonal communication, within the framework of CI, to display China's charm and to legitimise its geopolitical presence and its industrial and commercial implantations in Africa.

Keywords: public diplomacy, China-Africa, Confucius Institute, relationship management, uncertainty

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Introduction

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), founded at the end of 2000, is the structural means by which Beijing has institutionalised and strengthened its connections with African states (Naidu, 2007). Within this diplomatic framework, China became, by 2010, Africa's largest trading partner (Wasserman, 2012). Its current investment in Africa has increased by "at least 100 times" since 2000 (Hou & Wen, 2018, para. 8). More recently, both Chinese and African leaders have characterised China-Africa relations as a "golden age" (Ramaphosa, 2018, para. 1; Y. Wang, 2018, para. 9). Expressions such as "good faith," "good interests," "good friend," "good partner," and "good brother" appear in Beijing's official discourse regarding China-Africa cooperation (see Xi, 2018b, paras. 6–7). Chinese scholars interpret "golden age" as a "new, strategic, exemplary, and effective partnership between China and Africa" (He, 2018, para. 2).

However, China's official reports have not eliminated the doubts and criticisms of other nations about Beijing's rapid expansion in Africa, primarily accusations of neo-colonial policies. On the one hand, several Chinese financing projects for African infrastructural development have implicated package deals (Bénazéraf, 2012) in exchange for mining concessions, natural resources, or political privileges (Alden & Alves, 2010). On the other hand, China uses debt to influence African geopolitics (Bredeloup & Bertencello, 2006). For instance, the Djibouti government rents its land to the Chinese army in exchange for "deduction of Djibouti's debt to China" (Le Belzic, 2018, para. 7).

The *Annual Report on Development in Africa*, issued by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, views the increasing international doubt and criticism of China's presence in

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African states as a source of uncertainty about China's public diplomacy (PD) in Africa (Zhang & He, 2015). Generally speaking, Realists in the field of international relations (e.g., Glaser, 1994; Mearsheimer, 1994) interpret uncertainty as a concern about potential conflict or "the condition of insecurity" in the context of anarchy (Waltz, 1979, p. 105). In terms of social psychology, uncertainty is the "confusion of decision making in a complex international environment" (Rathbun, 2007, p. 533) caused by lack of information or an incapacity to filter contradictory information. In fact, excessive information can lead to "capacity limitations of the human mind" (Goldgeier & Tetlock, 2001, p. 83). As a cognitive phenomenon, uncertainty is caused by the inability to acquire and understand all information (Tetlock, 1998). Moreover, uncertainty can transform into anxiety (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001), which is particularly problematic in PD practice.

Zhang and He (2015) argued that "Western" criticism and unfavourable opinions of China-Africa relations not only jeopardise the positive perception of China among African publics but also generate misunderstanding, panic, and fear with regard to Beijing's rise. Both impacts undercut China's PD achievements and soft power building in Africa. To respond to the uncertainty caused by international public opinion, He (2015) suggested developing a "people-to-people communication model" of PD (p. 12) in order to build interpersonal relationships while advocating for "Chinese opportunity" in African societies (p. 16). Wu (2015) insisted on using commonalities between Chinese and African cultures to formulate common narratives and to persuade African publics through long-term interpersonal communication.

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The Confucius Institute (CI) has become an essential means for wielding soft power and reducing uncertainty about intercultural exchange with Africa. As an example of Chinese-Foreign “people-to-people exchange” (*Hanban*, 2015, preface II), CI actively participates in China's cultural diplomacy (Gil, 2015; Zaharna, 2018) and continues to be an instrument of Beijing's PD “charm offensive” overseas (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. ix). In general, CI consists of two major brands. The educational units established on foreign university campuses are known as “Confucius Institutes.” In addition, Chinese education programs promoted in primary and secondary schools as well as in the media are known as “Confucius Classrooms.”

Nowadays, CI is progressively considered an instrument of PD by Chinese politicians and scholars. Zhao (2017a) argued that the rapid expansion of CI has helped the Ministry of Education strengthen and improve the “mechanism of Chinese-Foreign cultural exchanges” (paras. 8–9). Others have argued that CI not only actively participates in the construction of China's international image and the defence of China's long-lasting reputations but also proactively explains Chinese viewpoints among foreign publics (Gao & Guo, 2013; Ning, 2018; Tan, 2016). These roles make Beijing's “discourse power” more appealing worldwide (Gao & Guo, 2013, p. 189). According to the Premier, Li Keqiang, CI aligns with Beijing's diplomatic claims of “mutual respect, friendly discussion, equality, and mutual benefit” to inherit and carry forward China's political philosophy: “harmony is most precious and harmony without uniformity” (2014, para. 3).

Using CI to promote cultural exchange, the Chinese government manages uncertainty among local publics caused by Western criticism of their presence in Africa. Scholars in the field of international relations have conceptualised the expression of uncertainty through

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strained state relations in order to stress how PD actors are challenged by “the construction of political realities (the management of threats) and the construction of political appearances (the management of threat perceptions)” (Schedler, 2013, p. 41). However, the focus of this chapter is uncertainty at the institutional level from the perspective of communication. In previous studies, scholars have discussed the conceptualisation and institutionalisation of PD in CPC doctrine and the political environment in China, underlining the public-centric relationship management approach to the practice. Extending these discussions through a case study of the first CI in Africa, based in Nairobi, Kenya, I analyse how various levels of relationship management in China's PD activities minimise uncertainty among local publics.

Literature Review

PD is “an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public” (Cull, 2009, p. 12). Since PD was officially written into the political doctrine of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, CPC politicians and theorists have worked to conceptualise PD according to national goals. Yang Jiechi, former Chinese Foreign Minister, called PD a “government-led communication effort” on the global stage (2011a, para. 2) that allows China to “establish a favourable ‘soft’ environment to underpin its development and international cooperation” (2011b, para. 2). Zhao Qizheng, the former Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, argued that the basic task of PD is “to explain China to the world and help foreign publics learn about the real China” and “safeguarding national interests” (2012, p. 15). Seeing it as a way to strengthen communication and exchange with foreign publics through various cultural activities, the former CPC head Hu Jintao (2012)

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claimed that PD could promote China's peaceful rise as a global power and the Chinese vision of a harmonious world, as defined by Hu (2005) in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly, signifies "lasting peace and common prosperity" (p. 1).

Although current Chinese conceptualisations of PD practice are widely inspired by Anglo-American public relations literature, media campaign-oriented logic remains the guiding idea in Beijing's international public opinion management (Zhao, 2019). External propaganda (org. *dui wai xuan chuan*) is an alternative expression of Chinese PD (Huang & Wang, 2019; 2020). Carrying no negative connotation, "propaganda" is "positively received even with flowers and applause" in China (Lu, 2015, p. 329). Because it represents the CPC's glorious history of public awakening during the war of national independence, propaganda continues to be seen as advancing the modernisation of Chinese society (Liu, 2013). Therefore, China's PD aims not only to build its reputation on a global scale but also to promote its approach to modernisation, endorsing the peaceful rise of the nation.

Strengthening Chinese PD is critical to the "soft use of power" (Li, 2009, p. 7). Inheriting the idea of soft power from Nye (2004), Zheng and Zhang (2012) emphasised how the mobilisation and application of national influence could transform China's values, statecraft, political ideas, and cultural resources into material and non-material attractions. As demonstrated by Beijing's large-scale overseas investment in the early 21st century, the political slogan "making use of the soft power of education" (Jeng-Yi, 2016, p. 425) has guided China's PD efforts. As Wang Huning (1993), a pioneering researcher of China's soft power, envisioned, "if a state's culture and ideology are attractive, others will automatically follow that" (p. 92). Duplicating the capabilities of cultural diplomacy of the United Kingdom

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(British Council), Germany (Goethe-Institut), and France (Alliance Française), China founded CI in 2004. This non-profit educational institution is an integral part of China's PD (Huang, 2019). Packaging the cultural values advocated by CPC, CI strengthens China's capacity to deploy soft power and project a peaceful national identity to the rest of the world. CI also helps China manage uncertainty about international public opinion of Beijing's rise in a changing world (Chen, Xiong, & Ou, 2019; Zhao & Lei, 2015).

PD research in this changing world is shifting international political communication towards an interpersonal relational approach that focuses on "social structure and identity formation" (Wu & Wang, 2018, p. 244). The administration of Xi Jinping has integrated the myth of "Chinese dream" PD with a view to strengthen the attractiveness of Chinese modernisation. According to Xi, the production and distribution of messages in external propaganda should "adhere to the people-centred orientation" (Xi, 2018a, para. 4) and reflect the "orientation for a blueprint of a beautiful and happy life" (Xi, 2018a, para. 5). Chinese scholars interpret these statements as reflecting (a) the need to strengthen two-way communication and public-centric interaction in PD (Lin & Long, 2014; Wang, 2018), (b) the belief in people-to-people communication engagement (Li, 2019; Wang, 2019), and (c) the intent to mobilise interpersonal communication to enhance promotional value of China stories (X. Li, 2019; Yun, 2019). In fact, institutions and publics have come to play essential roles in PD (Fitzpatrick, 2007), in which building and maintaining relationships is fundamental.

Public diplomacy, personal relationships, and uncertainty management

In everyday life, uncertainty is defined as the state of being doubtful. In fact, "uncertainty is a fundamental condition of human life" (Marris, 1996, p. 1) given the

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complexity of the environment in which people live (Murphy, 2000). Uncertainty is also “an individual's inability to predict something accurately” (Milliken, 1987, p. 136). In the communication process, when people experience uncertainty, they often lack specific information (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), are unable to filter equivocal, complex, and variable information (Rathbun, 2007), or have gathered all necessary information but still feel doubtful or insecure in their knowledge or decision making (Brashers, 2001). This “aversive state” of cognition is associated with affective uncertainty, namely anxiety (Bordia et al., 2003, p. 508). This “generalised and unspecified sense of disequilibrium” (Turner, 1988, p. 61) stems from “feeling uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive” about unknown or unpredictable situations (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001, p. 59).

Interpersonal communication or intergroup communication can help reduce and manage uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Gudykunst & Mody, 2001). Relationships develop in this process. Strangers in PD interaction participate in dialogue and experience uncertainty regarding “their own and others' communication methods, goals, plans, affective states, and beliefs” (Brashers, 2001, p. 480). Because PD involves information exchange and meaning creation through dialogue, “participants are committed to each other and care about each other” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 389). When the receiver interprets a message in alignment with the intended meaning of the sender (Powers & Spitzberg, 1986), the two parties minimise misunderstanding (Gudykunst, 2005) and enhance the predictability of each other's behaviour (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Therefore, communication can effectively manage uncertainty and anxiety (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). According to knowledge-based affect theory, trust gradually develops due to increasing mutual awareness and

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understanding in the interpersonal communication process: if the perception of an object or person leads to greater certainty and to “the ability to predict things” regarding that object or person, “positive affect will result” (Demerath, 1993, p. 139).

When interpersonal communication occurs in the process of relationship management between organisations and publics, the former do not have particular powers “to impose their interpretations on the world” (Murphy, 2000, p. 448), and “the public is the locus of the signification process” (Botan & Soto, 1998, p. 37). That is, meaning takes shape through dynamic interpersonal exchange and dialogue (Vasquez, 1996; Botan & Soto, 1998). Chinese PD scholars have placed relationship management within the framework of globalisation and competition (Chen et al., 2019; Tan, 2016; Wei, 2018). For them, the changing world not only represents an intensification of competition among nations but also frustrates, due to public opinion and criticism, the construction of China's international discourse power (Zhang & He, 2015; Zhao, 2019; Zhao & Lei, 2015). Accordingly, the essence of Beijing's PD is the mobilisation of interpersonal communication, within the framework of relationship between organisations and publics, to exchange information and demonstrate China's vision, construct and manage meaning, reduce the doubt and misunderstanding of target publics, achieve consensus with target publics, and validate China's rise (Tan, 2016).

Public diplomacy and ruptured and fragmented relationships

China's PD strategy is thoroughly pragmatic (Deng, 1994). The use of relationship management in PD can be traced back to foreign policy during the early years of the People's Republic of China. The expression “people's diplomacy” (org. *ren min wai jiao*) refers to communicative practices based on the interaction between Chinese and foreign publics.

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Influenced by Maoist thought on ideological conflict, the Chinese version of “people’s diplomacy” believed in the power of the masses (Mao, 1967, p. 167). Conversely, by applying media campaign logic, Beijing’s PD approach is rooted in the functionalist objective of promoting China among foreign publics and “gaining access to foreign peoples, influencing them, and winning them over” (Zhou, 1989, p. 97).

Applying relationship management to China’s foreign policy is an attempt to manage global political uncertainty. The Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, who favoured making friends (org. *jiao peng you*) with foreign publics, principally in Africa and Latino America, first practiced relationship management through a series of non-official exchanges between China and overseas states in the 1950s (Tang, 2011). This approach has allowed China to enhance its international legitimacy and to move past the international political isolation of the Cold War.

Analysing the application of people’s diplomacy in the early days of Chinese foreign policy, Beijing scholars considered relationship management one of the instruments for overcoming ruptured and fragmented relationships (Chen & Zhang, 2011; S. Zhang, 2019). From their point of view, public-centric PD needs to focus on the important status of target publics (Yu, 2019) in “a changing world” (Chen et al., 2019). Furthermore, encouraging individual participation in global governance is an effective way to improve global governance in the face of uncertainty (Thakur, Job, Serrano, & Tussie, 2014). For this reason, former Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi conceptualised Chinese PD by stressing the importance of a public-centric perspective: “listen to the people, consider the demands of the people, and seek public support” (Yang, 2011a, para. 7). In other words, the

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government needs to explain its policies and initiatives to domestic audiences in order to persuade, motivate, and mobilise them to participate actively in China's PD (Zhao, 2012).

Incorporating public-centric relationship management into public diplomacy practice

The current Chinese president, Xi, described international politics as entering the “new era” (2017, para. 1). Liu (2018) characterised this new era as filled with “uncertainties caused by shifting global power politics and reshuffling global governance” (p. 11). The competition of discourse power in PD has made international public opinion management a challenge for China (Tan, 2016). Therefore, the application of relationship management to PD reflects “a people-centric approach for the public interest” (Xi, 2017, para. 4). All PD activities need to “explain and respond” to external misunderstandings about China and to persuade and “guide” foreign publics through long-term as well as everyday communication (Yao, 2018, p. 50–51).

As an institution for telling Chinese stories and exporting CPC values (Sudworth, 2014), CI enhances “the dissemination of culture and knowledge as well as heart-to-heart communication between human beings” (Xi, the Congratulatory Letter signed by Xi Jinping, published by *Hanban*, 2015). It creates harmonious relationships through storytelling and cooperation network building that, according to Chinese scholars, build an “ecosystem” between organisations, publics, and the social-political environment (Chen, 2004, p. 37). This ecosystem nourishes relationships among foreign publics and organisations, strengthens national reputation by communicating Chinese political values on a global stage, and subtly targets publics with common interests.

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The relational paradigm in PD is derived from public relations theory and emphasises that “the purpose and direction of an organisation (its mission) is affected by relationships with key constituents (publics) in the organisation’s environment” (Dozier et al., 2013, p. 85). It stresses interpersonal dialogue designed to promote mutual interest and allows for “effective public relations and supportive public relationships that are built on trust” (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 205). China has progressively applied a co-creational perspective (Botan & Taylor, 2004) to PD, for mutual understanding and for win-win scenarios that are the primary achievements of relationship management. Moreover, “relational constellations shape communication for all individuals” (Zaharna, 2018, p. 321). Inspired by the “relations-as-communication” model, China’s PD stresses relational structure over influence (ibid., 2018, p. 321). As a result, engaging target publics becomes the primary aim of relationship management.

Engagement can “achieve or elicit an outcome at individual, organisation, or social levels” (Johnston, 2018, p. 18). Effective engagement depends on emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions (Chen, 2018). Confucianism considers people to be social, relational beings. China’s idiomatic expression “everyone has a cousin three thousand miles away” points to the “spider web” of Chinese relationship networks. Each individual is a node, and people-to-people connections continually form. Frequent contact and exchange are the cornerstones of strong relationships (Fei, 1992).

Relationship formation is a process through which certainty increases and anxiety decreases (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This process depends on individual self-disclosure (Chen & Chen, 2004). Establishing relationships requires emotional engagement, which

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creates an identification of belonging and appreciation (Finn, 1989). By revealing their background and experience to each other, the two parties of an interaction seek common ground for mutual affective identification. This identification helps establish regular contact, which is triggered by a series of emotional interactions. Moreover, deepening relationships not only require increasing mutual emotional interdependence but also knowledge or comprehension of a theme or opinion (Johnston, 2018) and to generate mutual benefit due to the expectation of reciprocity (Hwang, 1987). The last stage is to maintain and deepen existing relationships through frequent exchange over the long term. In fact, the main purpose of relationship management in China's PD is to gain favourable understanding, actions, and reactions from publics. For instance, through increasing people-to-people exchanges, scholarships, and bilateral and multilateral cultural cooperation with foreign organisations, China and its foreign publics have the potential to reach a "high level of trust" (Yu, 2009, p. 18), mutual understanding, and reciprocal support (Yun, 2019).

Previous findings suggest that positive or favourable emotions linked to interpersonal relationships and PD reinforce the persuasive effect of a nation's soft power (Duncombe, 2019). Emotion "shapes the context of communication in global politics" and facilitates persuasion and engagement with foreign publics (Graham, 2014, p. 524). For this reason, China uses relationship management to minimise the threat of international public opinion on issues of international politics, to defend and enhance its national reputation, and to validate its rise in global power (Tan, 2016).

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Therefore, the aim of the current chapter is to illuminate how Beijing enlists CI to establish favourable public opinion in Africa, especially Kenya, of China's geopolitical and economic expansion:

RQ1. What strategies and efforts have allowed Beijing to manage uncertainty in the PD process?

RQ2. How does CI enhance Beijing's expansion and legitimacy in Kenya?

RQ3. How does CI staff interact and exchange ideas with the Kenyan public in order to tell China's stories effectively?

Method

To address the research questions, I conducted an ethnographic study of the CI at the University of Nairobi (UoN). As the first African branch of CI, the UoN branch is listed as a "Model CI" and "Outstanding CI" by *Hanban*, meaning that its pedagogical and cultural exchange activities are worthy of emulation by other CI branches. Furthermore, Kenya is currently a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partner of China, its diplomatic status second only to Sino-Russian, Sino-Pakistani, Sino-German, and Sino-British relations (Li, 2019). As a strategic destination of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, Kenya has not only received a large infrastructural investment from China but is also China's regional media hub in Africa, reinforcing Beijing's mass communication capacity. For instance, *CGTN-Africa* has operated there since 2012, and *Star Times*, a Chinese digital terrestrial television provider, created a centre there to produce and distribute Chinese cultural products in 2014 (He, 2015; Thussu, 2015; Rønning, 2016). Moreover, China has opened four CIs in Kenya, second only

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to South Africa, Beijing's BRICS partner. For these reasons, the current CI case study has great potential to illuminate China's PD strategy in Africa.

The data comes from ethnographic fieldwork and participatory observation at the UoN CI over a period of one month in the spring of 2018. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 CI heads and employees (i.e., 4/5 employees of this CI), along with field notes, comprise the first major source of data. As noted in the research contract with CI, these participants agreed to be cited by name in a Ph.D. dissertation written in French and to be quoted anonymously in published academic articles (i.e., I-CI-K1 to I-CI-K16). Additional sources, including internal documents, public annual reports, academic and policy publications, and relevant news stories about CI policy, activities, and achievements comprise the second major source of data.

Results

CI branches actively participate in Beijing's PD relationship management. Previous findings suggest that the establishment and daily management of CI in host states reflect mature network cooperation and synergy (Zaharna, 2018). If the cooperation and diplomatic connections among Chinese and foreign governments and China's foreign policy represent relationship management at the macro-level to aid CI, then the cooperation and interaction (i.e., synergy) between a local CI and its Chinese and foreign counterparts and partners represent meso-level relationship management. Furthermore, interpersonal communication strategies, intercultural activities, and the Chinese idea of *guanxi* in daily pedagogical practices strengthen people-to-people connections and deploy China's soft influence *via* micro-level relationship management.

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Macro-level relationship management: Foreign policy. Beijing defines CI as a “platform for Chinese-foreign intercultural comprehensive exchange” (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2013, para. 3). Enabled by Chinese and foreign educational cooperation with public and private institutions, enterprises, and governments, China uses CI to promote mutual benefit and “win-win” development (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2013).

Sino-African relations are an important diplomatic relationship in Chinese geopolitics (The MFA of the PRC, 2018). The term “community with a shared future” (org. *ming yun gong tong ti*) is a central theme of China's current PD in African states. As one of President Xi Jinping's theoretical innovations in 2015, this term appears in the preface to China's Constitution in 2018, rounding out the concept of the “Chinese dream” (org. *zhong guo meng*) initiated by Xi in 2012 to restore the past glory of China and the Chinese nation as a regional economic power (Le Belzic, 2013). Following the initiative of Xi Jinping, both “Chinese dream” and “community with a shared future” became officially associated with Beijing's PD in Africa by the end of 2018. As reflected in the title of the Beijing Declaration issued at the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China and Africa are working together to build an “even stronger China-Africa community with a shared future” (The MFA of the PRC, 2018). If the “Chinese dream” is a secular vision and desire to modernise China, “community with a shared future” represents a way to achieve this goal (Song & Zhang, 2017). The latter phrase refers not only to future peaceful cooperation between Chinese and African communities, along with the common economic and political interests of various Chinese and African stakeholders, but also to a “life happier and more fulfilling” for Chinese and African people (Xi, 2018b, para. 14).

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According to international relations scholars (cf. Ruan, 2018; Zhao, 2017c, 2019; Zhou, 2019), codifying the concept of “community with a shared future” as a fundamental element of China's Constitution is not only an important attempt by the central government to manage the uncertain international environment (Ruan, 2018; Zhou, 2019) but also a “China Program of the world order” focusing on “breaking through the ‘European and American solutions’ on global governance, combining Chinese civilization with the trend of the times, promoting the development of different civilizations in compatibility, and strengthening global exchange and mutual learning” (Zhao, 2017c, p. 3). It reaffirms the normative notions of “peaceful development” and “win-win situation” (Ruan, 2018, para. 5) and emphasises “dialogue without confrontation and companionship without alliance” in the context of uncertainty (Zhao, 2017b, para. 4). Zhou (2019, para.5) argued that the concept of “community with a shared future” is the core of China's diplomacy strategy towards major states because it highlights the significance of state-to-state relationships as well as the indispensability of “organisation-to-organisation relationships and people-to-people relationships” to alleviate and manage uncertainty associated with international communication.

As “an active practitioner and facilitator of building a community with a shared future for mankind” (Hanban, 2018, p. 3), CI is the “spearhead” of soft power deployment in Africa (Niu, 2014, p. 66). CI continues to build a strong network in African communities to enhance local Chinese presence (Hartig, 2014; Lahtinen, 2015). As of June 2019, CI had 59 local branches and 41 Confucius Classrooms in 44 states across the African continent.

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At the macro-level, CI is a continuation of China's economic and technological aid to Africa (Sa, 2013). First, China's "cultural exchange," mixed with "educational cooperation" and "educational assistance" to Africa, is prominent in both of China's African policy papers (State Council, 2006, part III, 2015, Part IV). Moreover, the White Paper on *Chinese Aid Abroad* (State Council Information Office, 2011, p. 3) explained the educational assistance model of CI:

China selects volunteers and sends them to other developing countries to serve the local people in education, medical and health care, and some other social sectors. The volunteers whom China sends mainly include young volunteers and Chinese-language teachers.

China's Second African Policy Paper confirms the vital role of CI in deepening China-Africa cooperation:

China will maintain the momentum of high-level contacts, and implement bilateral cultural cooperation agreements and their implementation plans. Encouraging and supporting African countries for Chinese-language teaching, China will continue to set up more Confucius Institutes in African countries, and encourage and support the opening of Chinese cultural centres in Africa and African cultural centres in China. It will support the holding of the "Year of China" events in Africa and the "Year of an African Country" events in China, raise the profile of the "Chinese/African Cultures in Focus" events, and enrich the program of China-Africa mutual visits between

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cultural personnel and the China-Africa Cultural Cooperation Partnership Program, with the aim to achieve better results in cultural exchanges. China stands for respect of each other's cultural diversity, and will promote China-Africa cultural inclusiveness and common prosperity, thereby enhancing understanding and friendship between Chinese and African people. In addition to promoting exchanges between cultural institutions and personnel, China will strengthen cooperation with Africa in cultural industry and personnel training. (State Council, 2015, part V, article 1).

Therefore, the establishment of CI is fundamentally based on China's foreign policy, which sets the diplomatic orientation for deepening "friendly relationships with other nations" (*Hanban*, 2018, pp. 2–3). Although CI is a non-profit cultural institution, it is repeatedly mentioned in official Chinese documents, illustrating its importance to PD. As Bao and Xu (2018) argued, CI is a "window" through which China can build educational partnerships and promote China's claims about mutual benefit and win-win partnerships with target publics in Africa.

Meso-level relationship management: Network synergy. The *Hanban* officially promotes the CI global expansion model as a "model of transnational education cooperation" (Yan & Ruan, 2013). This model is based on the cooperative logic of "joint venture set-up" (Hartig, 2016, p. 8), which refers to a "1+1 pairing" of any Chinese public university with a foreign academic host. In general, the Chinese side gathers materials and pedagogical resources for CI, selects and trains Chinese language teachers, and provides activities and start-up funds. The host is responsible for teaching venues and human resources.

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The cooperation model advocated by CI “weaves a network of cultural institutes that quickly outpaced other countries” (Zaharna, 2018, p. 324). This network reflects the meso-level relationship management of CI in China's PD. The “1+1 pairing model” involves mutual visits, cooperation, and interaction among various officials and individuals from China and overseas, allowing China to build relationships with target publics and to engage them to participate actively in Beijing's PD project. Moreover, a particular Chinese university often partners with a number of foreign host institutions, creating additional links in the network (Zaharna, 2018). The diverse relationships generated by the pairing model result not only from the creation of a CI branch in the host foreign university but also from daily CI operation.

Synergy is essential to meso-level relationship management. According to the CI Charter, *Hanban* is “responsible for the management and guidance of Confucius Institutes around the world” (*Hanban*, n.d., section III). The Annual CI Conference in China provides a platform for the exchange and collaboration among CI administrators around the world. Hartig (2016) defined the conference as an internal convention that welcomes CI teachers and directors, presidents of host universities from around the world, high-level administrators of host states, sinologists, CPC senior officials, representatives of Chinese universities, Chinese educational and cultural officials from different provinces, and CI business partners and sponsors. The aim of the convention is “to recall the past year and to discuss future developments of CIs” (Hartig, 2016, p. 10). CPC senior officials often deliver opening speeches that showcase Beijing's PD initiatives, policy trends, policy positions, and rhetoric. According to Lahtinen (2015), the CI Conference encourages collaboration and exchange

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among CI branches from around the world and enable participants engage in “unofficial, confidential discussions in smaller groups and between individuals concerning the organisation and management” (p. 3). Furthermore, *Hanban* implements a joint conference for regional CI branches, allowing high-level CI administrators from each continent to meet on a regular basis. These closed-door meetings also address CPC deployment of CI work and communication on specific continents.

According to the CI Charter (*Hanban*, n.d.), one of the most important missions of CI is to organise events in the host country that engage various local partners. Such network collaboration often involves the Chinese embassy, host universities, public institutions in the host state, Chinese-funded enterprises and local companies, and Chinese-sponsored local media. These complex relationships demonstrate the “holistic integrative logic” of the engagement process (Zaharna, 2018, p. 320). CI is positioned at the centre of its networks and integrates diverse collaborators and resources in order to promote Chinese culture and enhance China's reputation. In a series of campaigns to promote Chinese culture and language, synergy is evident as the amplifier of the attractiveness of China and Mandarin. One example is the annually-held Chinese language competition known as *Chinese Bridge*. This competition for college students in each state and region is supported by local Chinese embassies, sponsored by *Hanban*, Chinese universities, and local Chinese-funded enterprises. It is organised at overseas universities and covered by both Chinese and overseas media. Winners travel to China to participate in the global finals and receive scholarships to study in China.

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The CI at UoN was established through Sino-African cooperation between Tianjin Normal University, which provides teaching resources, and UoN, which provided administrative resources (I-CI-K1) by the end of 2005. Meanwhile, *Hanban* provides funding, pedagogical resources, and teaching equipment (Sa, 2013). As a “Model Confucius Institute to illuminate,” according to *Hanban*, this CI branch features pedagogy for international and intercultural cooperation and communication strategies and tactics that other branches imitate. Each year, the institute welcomes 400 students from all levels: undergraduate degree programs, training programs, special interest courses, etc. (I-CI-K1). Its pedagogical team included twenty employees during the 2017-2018 academic year, including one Chinese dean, one Kenyan co-director, three Kenyan administrative assistants, three Kenyan senior lecturers, two Chinese senior lecturers, and ten Chinese volunteer language teachers. All Chinese staff were selected, recruited, and salaried by *Hanban*, while Kenyan employees were hired and paid by UoN.

This CI branch conducts Chinese language education, in cooperation with the Chinese embassy and Kenyan government, to train diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officers from the Kenya Revenue Authority, and staff from the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (I-CI-K1, I-CI-K5, & I-CI-K6). Moreover, the language centre organises various cultural events that promote China to local publics. It hosts at least 50 cultural events or professional receptions each year to attract publics from various communities in Kenya: the Chinese New Year Party, the China Enterprise Recruitment Fair, and the “Chinese Bridge” proficiency competition for foreign students. For instance, CI of UoN hosts job recruitment fairs for Kenyan students at the end of each year. This event is considered one of the most

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important ways to demonstrate China's attractiveness in Kenya (I-CI-K1). Chinese-sponsored media and the local embassy have framed this event as a fulfilment of diplomatic social responsibilities in Kenya (Liu, 2017; Wang, 2018). The event is frequently co-organised by the coalition of CI, UoN, the Chinese Embassy in Kenya, the Kenya-China Economic and Trade Association, the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce in Kenya, and Chinese-invested companies in Kenya; it has also received support from local elites such as university presidents and the local parliamentary president (Liu, 2017).

In fact, meso-level relationship management promotes a synergy that aggregates available resources to co-create and co-strengthen the influence and attractiveness of CI in the host state. Meanwhile, synergy between CI and local partners not only makes China's soft use of power in PD more flexible and effective but also helps Beijing gain the trust and support of local audiences, generating the Chinese image of responsible "benefactor" (Thussu, 2015, p. 36). As one Kenyan lecturer working for CI said, "China has really helped us a lot. Actually, China is here. We can all see a reality: China is building a business there and saying: 'we bring people, technology and standards [to Kenya]. Then, our people are going to train you and let you do it on your own.' It is the most advanced country in the world in terms of technology. We [Kenyan people] have so much to learn from China" (I-CI-K4).

Therefore, the meso-level relationship management of CI governs a complex partner network using holistic logic to guide organisational communication. As a result, local CI branches can engage various stakeholders and resources. The diversity and richness of CI network integration and synergy is evident on several levels. First, it appears in the "1+1 pairing" model as reinforcing exchanges between China and overseas educational partners

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and in the management of the internal CI network. Through the CI Conference and the Regional Joint CI Conference, all information related to local CI branches can be shared; the Chinese government's latest CI policies and strategies are likewise promoted and deployed through these meetings. Second, CI integrates resources from various fields in the host African states, and, by doing so, not only promotes Chinese language, culture, and tradition but also provides employment guidance to CI students. Innovative communication strategies clearly reflect the resource synchrony and network synergy of CI. Students from different cultures not only learn Chinese through language programs and have opportunities to be exposed to Chinese culture through various events but also address employment problems through CI networking after graduation. The strong network of CI transforms one of the most daunting languages in the world into a useful and attractive skill and aims to strengthen China's reputation as a kind, peaceful, and friendly benefactor in the host society.

Micro-level relationship management: persuasive storytelling. If macro-level relationship management involves the China's foreign policy, and meso-level relationship management involves the ecosystem and the network synergy of local CI branches, then micro-level relationship management involves the daily communication activities of CI employees in the classroom.

Applying the Confucian view that people belong to an interdependent social network, Chinese *guanxi* could be considered a privileged personal relationship between professionals who are seen as representatives of an organisation in their relations with the outside world. Indeed, the agents and actors of an organisation are hybrid agents who have the ability to tele-act while representing the organisation (Cooren, 2006). Thus, individual and organisational

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relationships intersect, and *guanxi* becomes a dynamic social process, based on trust and dialogue, that aids relationship management.

Micro-level relationship management is reflected in the activities of CI employees that promote Chinese culture, aiding national reputation management. CI at UoN is a strong example. The selection of Chinese teachers for this branch is handled by *Hanban* in Beijing, and the local Chinese lecturers recruited by UoN have academic qualifications from China. Based on my observations, newly recruited teachers and volunteer teachers for CI participate in a compulsory training program organised by *Hanban*. This program covers language-teaching techniques, language learning methods, and intercultural communication. During this training, which lasts from three to six months, the Chinese government asks CI staff, in subtle ways, to promote and defend China in their daily work. Several teachers who have participated in the program stressed two general rules: (a) respect the cultures, traditions, religions, and beliefs of the host state and (b) avoid talking about China (e.g., cultural revolution) or the host state's sensitive political issues (e.g., social movements) (I-CI-K1, I-CI-K2). Such self-censorship assures the transmission of "correct" and positive messages through the pedagogical and cultural activities of CI and establishes a harmless and de-governed image of CI in the local society. Scholars (e.g., Thussu, 2015; Huang, 2019) have recognised that this agenda aligns with Beijing's initiative for PD: to disseminate positive content and prudently avoid devaluing topics related to Kenya in order to maximise local support for CI.

CI aims to influence its students through socio-cultural and everyday teaching activities. CI teachers establish close relationships with their students by spending time with

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them in and out of the classroom. This strategy allows teachers and students to form personal relationships, through which they can exchange ideas and suggestions in a more relaxed and accessible settings. More importantly, teachers have the potential to engage their students and welcome them into the network of China's "unofficial ambassadors." In the interview process, several teachers explained that they preferred to discuss cultural issues in the classroom rather than deal with grammar issues and language teaching. Because they can start on the common ground of Chinese and Kenyan culture to tell stories and attract students, they can more easily build personal relationships with them and shape their understanding of China. The pedagogical relationship is a friendly, interactive way to deliver messages that endorse or defend the reputation of China, as the following examples show:

Our purpose here is to make them feel good about us. We must first integrate into Kenya's daily life. They believe that Chinese people have a high income and living standards. In my class, when I mentioned that I often go to the Maasai market and often take "Matatu" to join the university, such interaction could make students feel closer to me. (I-CI-K2)

We can't talk about politics in the class, but we can talk about culture. When Kenyan students questioned why the Chinese government does not advocate religious beliefs, I told them, Chinese people learn Confucianism. Just like the first verses of the book *Three Character Classic*: "People at birth are naturally kind-hearted" (org. *ren zhi chu, xing ben shan*). The Confucian doctrine teaches people to be good and kind to

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each other. It is similar to that of their religion to each of them. Chinese people believe in their ancestors and respect the Confucian moral rules. (I-CI-K5)

Moreover, the practice of PD is carried out intentionally or unconsciously in micro-level relationship management. For instance, some teachers use photographs of China from 30 or 40 years ago to contrast current and former Chinese society. Chinese political words and positions are easily identifiable in one teacher's interview responses:

My comparison with China's current development and its backwardness is not to increase my sense of pride but to make an emotional appeal with my students: "we were really poor and backward so many years ago. We were also building our own through continuous efforts after the 1978 economic reform designed by Deng Xiaoping. We are here to help you to build better cities and countries." (I-CI-K7)

By providing social and cultural activities, CI teachers seek to build personal relationships with their students in order to share stories about China. The purpose is not only to strengthen the connection and interaction between students and teachers but also to endorse and defend China's national interests, implicitly spreading Chinese political ideas through storytelling. In this way, micro-level relationship management has the potential to achieve mutual trust and understanding between teachers and students, but it can also subtly shape views of and attitudes toward China.

Discussion

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Through the lens of relationship management, this chapter examined how CI actively participates in China's PD in the age of uncertainty, widely demonstrating the principles of Xi Jinping's public-centric approach. First, the relationship begins with diplomatic connections and economic partnerships between China and foreign publics. By reshaping the rhetoric of China-Africa relations in foreign policy and stressing the concept of "community with a shared future" and the prospect of China-Africa prosperity, Beijing strives to create a harmonious and convivial atmosphere in its African dealings. Second, the relationship is structured using a multi-faceted cooperative network. Through interactive mechanisms within CI and partner institutions, the relationship strengthens reciprocally. Furthermore, internal synergy, based on common interests, can reinforce Beijing's direct and indirect management of CI. Meanwhile, the innovative network, resource integration, and synergistic strategies can advance the reputation of CI as an open and inclusive cultural institution located overseas. Third, the relationship bears political fruit through daily teaching and cultural interaction. Chinese language teachers build and maintain personal relationships through interaction and storytelling, deepening mutual trust and persuading target publics to believe that China's peaceful development in African states and Beijing's aid are based on long-term friendship between China and African states, the CPC and its African counterparts, and the Chinese and African people (Huang & Hardy, 2019). Therefore, China's relationship-centric PD through CI forges friendly, extra-professional relationships between the Chinese and Kenyan people involved in the institution.

From a communications perspective, an individual's sense of uncertainty might be mitigated through a relationship management approach to PD. In fact, "relationships are both

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the producer and product of human interactions and the cognitive activity of interacting individuals" (Anderson, 1993, p. 2). The so-called "public-centric public diplomacy" in China is an attempt to coordinate a triangular approach to emotion, cognition, and behaviour in interpersonal communication. In fact, behavioural changes result from real experiences and feelings during human interaction (Poplimont, 2013, p. 18). Relationship management and interaction within CI's network aims to empower relevant actors to circulate narratives formulated with positive emotional appeals and shared or universal values (Huang & Hardy, 2019). In doing so, CI facilitates "a tuning of individual vibrations into an all-embracing collective harmony of all interlocutors" (Lardellier, 2003, p. 121). In other words, communication activities organised in a CI establish a common ground co-created by the interlocutors of the interpersonal communication process. It allows people to "focus on what unites them or brings them together, even if it means ignoring points of disagreement" (Huang, 2019, p. 47). Moreover, CI enhances "the feeling of union and the sentiment of communion of all communication participants" while reducing individual anxiety (Lardellier, 2003, p. 121).

Furthermore, relationship management is gradually transforming into a beneficial resource, generating extensive political capital that China can use to wield soft power and advance a personable, peaceful, and attractive national reputation. In fact, CI activities are crucial to China's foreign policy, as they reframe Chinese expansion in terms of fruitful relationship rather than regional hegemony. Moreover, the application of relationship management to African CI demonstrates Beijing's initiative to manage political and economic uncertainties caused by its criticism and the doubt that oftentimes follows. The purpose is not

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only to soften China's comprehensive presence and rise in African states but also to shape a political environment in which China self-defines as a peace lover, international friend, and a quality partner. This self-conceptualisation endorses Beijing's initiatives for a new world order characterised by multilateralism and China's global development (Huang & Wang, 2019). It amplifies CPC rhetoric about the mutual benefit and win-win of China-Africa cooperation. By applying relationship management to PD practices, CI enhances Beijing's international discourse power and legitimise its rapid rise and expansionist geo-political ambitions.

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