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China's Censorship and Cultural Power--Necessarily at Odds?

Abstract

This thesis looks at the censorship practices of the CCP in regards to cultural power. I analyze in depth, Confucius Institutes and the field of Contemporary Art as case studies for cultural power. This paper suggests that our current ways of thinking about censorship and soft power are limited in explaining what is happening with Chinese cultural power. I contend that the CCP is focused on building a global presence and cultural security through its censorship practices. This does degrade China's ability to accrue soft power, but it should not be understood as a failure on behalf as the Party. It is more likely a different agenda when it comes to global cultural power all together.

Keywords

China, soft power, cultural power, art, confucius institute, international relations, Political Science, Social Sciences, Avery Goldstein, Goldstein, Avery

Disciplines

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China's Censorship and Cultural Power--Necessarily at Odds?

By

Juliette Miller

Advisor: Avery Goldstein

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of

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2020

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This thesis looks at the censorship practices of the CCP in regards to cultural power. I analyze in depth, Confucius Institutes and the field of Contemporary Art as case studies for cultural power. This paper suggests that our current ways of thinking about censorship and soft power are limited in explaining what is happening with Chinese cultural power. I contend that the CCP is focused on building a global presence and cultural security through its censorship practices. This does degrade China's ability to accrue soft power, but it should not be understood as a failure on behalf as the Party. It is more likely a different agenda when it comes to global cultural power all together.

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Introduction:

It is commonplace thought that a thriving liberal economy inevitably leads to a strong, liberal democracy. Post World War II foreign policy was oriented towards promoting countries' economies in order to assure democratic order around the globe. Yet, China's thriving economy, but authoritarian government has come to challenge this notion. China's economic growth since the 1980s has not come with the expected democratization of culture. According to 2019 data from the World Bank, it is the largest economy in the world in terms of GDP (adjusting for purchasing power)¹. Meanwhile, President Xi has taken an increasingly repressive approach to governing, choosing to lead with a tightening iron fist.

Freedom of expression surely facilitates a fertile environment in which a nation can explore and grow cultural aspects of its identity. Yet, the ability to exercise free speech through the arts and culture is not universal. In China, the CCP engages in censorship rather openly, it is a fact of life in the country. It may follow logically that this censorship limits the country's ability to develop cultural power. In this paper, I use the term cultural power to refer to a country's ability to diffuse one's *culture* around the world. Culture provides a unique interface for cross border debate and discussion, vital to the socio-political advancement of society. If a country wields cultural power, it may be at the forefront of these discussions, and therefore shape the discussion occurring to further one's interests. Cultural power is a term that should be viewed as more expansive than the more traditional term "soft power." I will also refer to the term *cultural security*. This is the notion that, in the age of globalization, a country manages to maintain a "pure" version of its culture. The idea that China has trouble developing soft power due to its restrictive

¹ https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP_PPP.pdf

political system, is a view often held about China in academia. I believe we must reset the way we think about cultural power, and thus soft power, as it pertains to a nation's interests. Through the lens of contemporary art and Confucius Institutes (CIs), this paper will look at how China actually uses censorship to advance its interest in assuring cultural power around the world, something that may seem antithetical to our notion of soft power.

To what extent do Chinese controls on expression affect the country's ability to wield cultural power? How does the country reconcile the dichotomy between wanting to expand and diffuse Chinese culture and influence, while keeping a finger on every piece of information coming into and out of China? These are all important questions as they tie into our current understanding of what makes a nation a superpower. However, hopefully by the end of this paper, it will become evident that our western-centric tools used to understand a nation's rise to power may be incomplete if not inadequate to describe the changing roles of great powers around the world.

To investigate this idea, I take the example of Confucius Institutes and the international industry of contemporary art to illustrate how China reconciles censorship with its interest in increasing its global cultural power. I suggest that by combining a carefully crafted effort at expanding Chinese culture abroad with censorship efforts within the country, China is *first* trying to ensure its cultural security, *then* its cultural power. This leads to a kind of global cultural presence that is difficult to understand with our current tools of analysis, (notably soft power) but should not be understood as a failure to accrue cultural power.

Terms and Literature review:

Culture is a term that has many facets. In this paper, I will be looking specifically at China's practices in running its Confucius Institutes and its involvement in the international contemporary art scene to understand how culture is affected by the country's censorship practices. Together these two case studies illustrate the way the CCP tries to harness global cultural power while maintaining cultural security. This is seemingly in line with its articulated "soft power" goals. In reality what the country is developing is not "soft power" as defined by Josef Nye, but a unique version of cultural power which is shaped by the CCP's censorship and cultural security efforts. This section will evaluate cultural power through the current tools of analysis we have in the field of international relations, "soft power" and the newer term "sharp power." Then I will go over what I mean by studying censorship in the Confucius Institutes and international contemporary art field, and what that entails for the purposes of this paper.

(A) Cultural power:

1- Cultural power, cultural security

Samuel Clark defines cultural power as "the power to affect the behavior of others by shaping their values, beliefs and perceptions."² This is a vast term with many underlying aspects to it. It is difficult to conceptualize and I would argue, hard to quantify. One concept that often comes up with reference to cultural power is the notion of public diplomacy. Tuch defines public diplomacy as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as

² Samuel Clark, *Distributing Status: the Evolution of State Honours in Western Europe* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016) 44.

its national goals and current policies”³ These two concepts are closely related and will both be referred to in this paper. However, as mentioned briefly above, for the purpose of this paper, I use the term “cultural power” to refer to the ability to diffuse one’s culture globally. I think this allows us to understand *culture* in the realm of international politics without trying to evaluate whether or not it is being internalized by foreigners. I am more so concerned with China’s ability to radiate its culture around the world, than its global cultural *acceptance*. This thesis also grapples with the concept of cultural security. This term does not enjoy a formal definition like cultural power, but, based on the existing literature, I define it as the ability to keep one’s culture free from outsider ideas and values. The quest for cultural security refers to a desire to maintain your culture inoculate and pure, an especially difficult feat in the age of globalization.

2- Soft Power

Cultural power, as I discuss in this paper is often put into the category of “soft power.” Soft power is a term coined by Joseph Nye in the 1990s. It refers to the ability “to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”⁴

A country may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other countries want to follow it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situation in world politics, as it is to get others to change in particular situations. This aspect of power—that is, getting others to want what you want—might be called indirect or co-optive power. It is in contrast to the active command power behavior of getting others to do what you want. Co-optive power can rest on the attraction of one’s idea or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the

³ Hans Tuch, “Communicating with the World. U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas,” *Institute for the Study of Diplomacy Georgetown University*, (1990): 3.

⁴ Joseph Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, (March 2008): 94-109. <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/docview/56824261?accountid=14707>.

preferences that others express ... The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength.⁵

The United States was particularly successful at harnessing soft power in the 1990s and early 2000s as globalization helped spread the American lifestyle and entertainment across the globe. Many started using the term “coca cola-ization” of the world. This ability to attract people with your culture and use it as a way to pursue national interests becomes a novel and important way to wield power on the international scene.

How does soft power tie into China’s foreign policy? According to Justyna Szczudlik-Tata in “Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy,” the Chinese refer to two systems for amassing soft power, strategies of "inviting in" (qing jinlai) and of "going out" (zou chuqu). The "inviting in" strategy concerns activities within China. It mainly consists of creating ideal conditions to attracting foreigners to China. The "going out" strategy, however, focuses on activities happening abroad and is curated for people outside China. She writes that the goal is to reach individuals not interested in China and then to educate them about the country, but also to mold their opinions about China.⁶ She argues that China is acutely aware of the link between developing its soft power and economic advantages. In this view, a strong soft power facilitates economic and trade relationships which are so sought by Xi. This is because your culture is more understood and embraced by outsiders, encouraging other types of exchange.

⁵ Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 31-32.

⁶ Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, "Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy." *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2010): 49.

George Washington Professor David Shambaugh however in his book China Goes Global, argues that China's limited soft power is a sign of its partial power. He breaks down the Nye definition of soft power explained above. For Shambaugh, strong soft power originates in a society attracting outsiders, and it cannot come from a government persuading others.⁷ Thus the billions of dollars the CCP invests in developing its cultural influence abroad is not going to be enough to develop truly impressive soft power. This concept that Chinese soft power is not developed enough to seriously threaten the United States' position as a super power is quite common. Another interesting point of view is that of LSE professor William Callahan. He argues that perhaps we must understand soft power not only as a tool for foreign policy, but also as an issue for domestic politics. He suggests Chinese soft power is developed to help the nation understand how it wants to identify itself. Therefore, rather than looking to attract, China tries to differentiate itself from outside influences.⁸ This idea ties into the thesis of this paper, which is to say that China seeks cultural security first and foremost.

3- New concept of "sharp power"

The next way people think about cultural power and China is with a relatively new term; sharp power. It was coined by Christopher Walker from the National Endowment for Democracy. He describes sharp power as an "approach to international affairs that involves efforts at censorship and the use of manipulation to sap the integrity of independent institutions. Neither "hard" nor "soft," sharp power has the effect of limiting free expression and distorting the political envi-

⁷ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 212.

⁸ William Callahan, "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (November 2015): 220.

ronment. It is sharp in that it seeks to pierce or penetrate the political and information environments of targeted countries.”⁹ Walker and The National Endowment for Democracy, are among the key figures in the discussion of sharp power especially as it relates to China. Their point is that the CCP is using its newfound economic power to manipulate outcomes of situations, a practice referred to as “influencing the influencers.”¹⁰

An example of sharp power in practice is the October 2019 NBA controversy. Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey shared a post on social media in support of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors. In response, Chinese CCTV refused to air two highly anticipated games, causing almost all the local Chinese NBA sponsors to scatter for fear of retaliation.¹¹ In response the NBA released a statement in which they refer to Morey’s post as “regrettable” and expressed their deep respect for Chinese culture and history. (see



NBA STATEMENT

NEW YORK, October 6, 2019 – NBA Chief Communications Officer Mike Bass released the following statement:

“We recognize that the views expressed by Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey have deeply offended many of our friends and fans in China, which is regrettable. While Daryl has made it clear that his tweet does not represent the Rockets or the NBA, the values of the league support individuals’ educating themselves and sharing their views on matters important to them. We have great respect for the history and culture of China and hope that sports and the NBA can be used as a unifying force to bridge cultural divides and bring people together.”

⁹ Christopher Walker "Russian and Chinese Sharp Power Puts Democracies in Peril," *Financial Times*, July 8th 2018, <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/docview/2071757194?accountid=14707>.

¹⁰ “Sharp power; China and the West." *The Economist*, December 16th 2017, p. 13 (US). *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A518798278/UHICu=upenn_main&sid=UHIC&xid=81a11473. Accessed 25 Oct. 2019.

¹¹ Steven Lee Myers and Chris Buckley, “American Basketball vs. Chinese Hardball: Guess Who Won” *New York Times*, October 13th 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/asia/china-nba-censorship.html>.

statement shared by Tim MacMahon ESPN NBA reporter Tweet (@espn_macmahon) This is an example of Sharp Power in practice, as the country utilized its considerable economic might to bend the NBA into abiding by its values. However, this kind of action does not line up particularly with either the concepts of hard or soft power, thus the use of a different term, *sharp* power.

Sharp Power is a useful concept when discussing the intersection of censorship and cultural power. It offers a nuanced alternative to soft power and takes into account the idea of cultural security. “China has a lot more at stake outside its borders today (...) It worries that they will pick up democratic habits from foreigners and infect China itself.”¹² This desire to use sharp power suggests the CCP’s growing need to control not only what Chinese people have access to in China, but also what the Chinese people can be exposed to from outside the country. This ties into the discussion on cultural security, the desire to maintain Chinese culture *pure* and free from foreign interference. This idea is propagated by French university professor Emmanuel Lincot who argues that China is in the quest of “cultural security” (*wenhua anquan*).¹³ He believes that China will use sharp power to keep Chinese culture untainted by foreign values. In this view, the CCP aims to sinicize international culture, and international relations, in its favor. Lincot acknowledges that the world order is not there yet, and notes that China has serious domestic challenges to deal with first. Nevertheless, this literature about sharp power is concerned about its use by China going forward, and sees it as a real threat to democracies. Thus, it is likely that sharp power is a phenomenon in international relations that will be getting more and more attention as Xi consolidates power. There is not a lot of literature out on the topic, and most of it per-

¹² “Sharp Power: China and the West.”

¹³ Emmanuel Lincot, “La Chine et sa politique étrangère : le *sharp power* face à l’incertitude ?,” *Revue internationale et stratégique*, vol. 115, no. 3 (2019): 39-49.

tains specifically to China. But “sharp power” could become a defining characteristic of authoritarian regimes worthy of broader attention. While the concept is important for the discussion about censorship and cultural power, it does not fully illuminate the phenomenon of China’s global cultural power. At the same time, the authors themselves indicate that the other countries have not yet begun to abandon their own values in favor of the narrative preferred by the CCP. For example, after the October 2019 controversy in China, the NBA also suffered a huge amount of backlash from Americans and specifically American politicians who condemned its actions. Thus, sharp power does not suffice to fully explain China’s exercise of cultural power and censorship efforts.

(B) Confucius Institutes:

Confucius Institutes are ostensibly an emblematic form of soft power as Joseph Nye defined it. This project was developed by Hanban, in 2004¹⁴. According to their website, Hanban is a public institution affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. Their aim is to “provide Chinese language and cultural teaching resources and services worldwide.”¹⁵ The Confucius Institutes were initially conceived purely as an international language outreach program. The goal was to promote Chinese language learning abroad. However, as this project grew, it has become much bigger than simply a language class. According to the UCLA Confucius Institute, today there are over 500 institutes on six different continents. At the 2013 plenum, Xi expressed a desire to “popularize and disseminate Chinese culture in a popular way” He also went on to express

¹⁴ Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, 245.

¹⁵ “About Us,” Hanban, Accessed December 2019, http://english.hanban.org/node_7719.htm.



Organizational Structure of Hanban also taken from their website.

the importance of cultural outreach as a tool to enhance creative influence and public trust. Central Committee member and the chair of the Ideology and Propaganda Small group of the Central Committee Li Changchun has been involved with the Confucius Institute project since its very beginnings. He explains that these Institutes have an important role in the enhancement of

China's soft power and in developing China's cultural brand.¹⁶ Thus,

the Confucius Institutes are a type of cultural diffusion, one that is deeply enmeshed within the fabric of the CCP's bureaucratic web and operates to diffuse cultural power across the globe. This is intended to nurture a kind of soft power I will refer to as formal, since it came to fruition with clear intent and a calculated plan. It is part of the larger scope of China's political aspirations and intrinsically connected to the party and its structure.

¹⁶ Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, *China's Global Engagement: Cooperation, Competition, and Influence In the 21st Century*. (CH 14 Randy Kluver) 399.

(C) Contemporary Art:

The next kind of cultural power I will be examining in this paper are international museums, galleries and exhibition exchanges. These, as opposed to Confucius Institutes, are a more informal type of soft power. They are not as explicitly entangled with the CCP's bureaucratic order as Confucius Institutes are. Yet, they are still an important form of cultural power and effectively, cultural diplomacy. Specifically, I will be looking at the opening of the Centre Pompidou in Shanghai. France's largest contemporary art museum based in Paris has been working on expanding its reach internationally. Currently, it has satellite museums in Abu Dhabi and Malaga, the Shanghai museum which opened in November 2019 is the newest branch the Centre Pompidou has developed. It is in cooperation with the West Bund group, a state controlled operation in charge of developing the waterfront in Shanghai. Together, the Centre Pompidou and the West Bund Group will run the museum for the next five years showing both artists in the Pompidou Centre's existing catalogue and Chinese artists with the possibility of exhibiting in Paris as well.¹⁷

This case study is an example of cultural diplomacy between China and France, but less formally connected with the governments than the Confucius Institutes. For China, this museum is an opportunity to expose more of their artists to the international art community, and rise in the ranks as a relevant player in the field of contemporary art. The opening of this partnership also symbolizes a friendship and working partnership between the two countries apart from economics or military alliances. Its opening coincided with trade talks between Macron and Xi Jin-

¹⁷ Centre Pompidou, "A First Step in the Collaboration Between the West Bund Group and the Centre Pompidou.," 2017.

ping which speaks to the value of culture a tool for other larger discussions that fall more in line with “hard power” aspects of international relations.

For this project, I also interviewed various professionals involved in the Chinese contemporary art world. I talked to people who have experience working in this sector within an international framework. The perspective of museum curators, collectors and artists who all have dealt with the international system of contemporary art in China will enrich this thesis and speak to the arts’ place in Chinese cultural policy as well as the artists’ lived experiences with censorship. In referring to contemporary art, I am specifically talking about pieces that are socially and politically engaged. Contemporary art, in my definition, and for the purposes of this paper, grapples with societal and personal themes. Therefore, in referencing art, I am not talking about decorative or banal pieces but rather serious, established artists who are spearheading important discussions through their work.

I begin with a brief look at how censorship affects this industry in China. It is important to establish that the Chinese government is clearly making efforts to engage with art in order to cultivate a richer cultural environment. A good example of this is Beijing’s 798 district. This is an urban-cultural endeavor that converted an old warehouse district of Beijing into a thriving global cultural center. This project goes beyond simply creating a contemporary cultural space, it is also a welcomed addition to Beijing’s growing economy and a way for China to broadcast a modern urban image the world. Beijing is developing and using this art district as a symbol for both its power and culture. China’s previously underground contemporary art scene had revealed itself to be a lucrative source of revenue. Chinese buyers made up 23% of the 61 billion dollars

of art sale revenue in 2011.¹⁸ The effort in contemporary art is also a useful tool in China's agenda to insert itself onto the global stage as a power player. The government has subsequently gotten more and more involved with the contemporary art scene. "Under the committee's watchful eye, organic growth will certainly not continue. Citing 'safety', the committee has decreed that events and exhibitions need to be officially reported and approved, including contents and locations. Moreover, a new permission system will be enacted to control the admission of newcomers."¹⁹ In regards to the 798 art district in particular, it has gone from an underground art scene to being officially recognized by the government. This naturally comes with extra scrutiny and control.

So what does this scrutiny look like in contemporary art? An article in *The Art Newspaper* explored first hand what art works were refused by the Chinese government and what justification actual artists, gallerists get from the government. "What counts as a problematic work tends, loosely, to be anything explicitly sexually suggestive, some nudes, those with religious subject matter and politically engaged works that might be construed as criticizing the Chinese regime. A foreign exhibitor at one of the fairs says anonymously that they were not allowed to bring a work that joked about global trade and Chinese manufacturing."²⁰ But generally speaking, there are no clear guidelines for what is disallowed. It is very much up to the discretion of the person conducting the approval process. While there is a streamlined official way to submit

¹⁸ Shambaugh, *China goes Global*, 49.

¹⁹ Jennifer Currier, "Art And Power In The New China: An Exploration Of Beijing's 798 District And Its Implications For Contemporary Urbanism", *Town Planning Review* 79, no. 2-3 (2008): 247.

²⁰ Alex Greenberger, "Centre Pompidou's New Shanghai Outpost Faced Censorship: Report," *ARTnews*, November 5th 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/centre-pompidou-shanghai-censorship-west-bund-13513/>.

pieces for audit before a show or a fair, the reasons for censorship are loose and don't have to be exact. There is nothing to be done once a piece has been banned, no other recourse. But censorship by the CCP is not limited to the shores of China itself. For example, Chinese artist Zhang Hongtu's work was exhibited in the US, but was taken out of a publication that was going to be circulated in China. Zhang's pieces often deal with the power of icons. He questions the Chinese

Chairman Mao, Twelve works by Zhang Hongtu (Artnet)



deification of Mao for example in this painted series.

The concern here is not so much *bringing in* ideas that are incompatible with the Chinese view of things. Rather, the CCP wants to censor things that it perceives as potentially damaging to China's image.²¹ The government's censorship of sensitive topics in art is related to its desire to keep a positive image in the media. Thus the kinds of censorship happening in the arts are multiple.

The guidelines are unclear and mainly up to the officials investigating, this keeps the control exclusively within the hands of the CCP. Contemporary art is rapidly becoming an important

²¹ Wan-Chia Wang, "Censorship And Subtle Subversion In Chinese Contemporary Art" (MA, repr., Sotheby's Institute of art, 2014).

source of income and international exposure, effectively triggering the interest of the CCP. This has also led to more stringent controls on the arts. Thus an interesting dichotomy has revealed itself between wanting to promote Chinese contemporary art internationally, but also reeling it in so that it can be completely surveilled.

It is evident that culture and contemporary art in China are playing a rising role in the CCP's effort to promote its global cultural power. However, China is a country that openly engages in censorship. In a world dominated by western democratic values, the CCP's approach could be seen as a roadblock for amassing global cultural power. It is therefore important to look at the censorship apparatus in China and its effects on cultural power in addition to relying on the terms usually used to understand the role of culture in international relations. This thesis looks at two very different kinds of cultural initiatives to see impact of censorship in cultural power and the nature of what has traditionally been seen as "soft power." The CCP uses contemporary art as a way to emanate power and culture, but also to showcase itself on the international stage. Yet, censorship is a part of artistic life in China and it dictates what can be produced or where things can be shown. There is a contradiction between the country wanting to burnish its image internationally through the arts while also fostering a culture characterized by censorship and repression. How does China manage to pursue its global cultural interests despite this censorship?

Culture in China, a historical analysis:

Historically, the Chinese Communist Party has had a complex relationship with culture, art and free speech. At the Yanan talks on literature and art in 1942, Mao delivered a famous speech in which he denounced any art or literature that is not about or created for the proletariat.

He refuted exploring other topics and themes; he pushed for the reeling in of artistic creation in these domains. Mao insisted instead, that art should exist for the purposes of advancing the Party's agenda. "There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine."²² This established the tone that the Party had in regard to art and artists. It was seen as a political tool. Anything else was frivolous and incompatible with China's interests as the party saw them. This is relevant to Beijing's current outlook on art. It has certainly evolved and modernized as time goes by and political systems change, however art remains acceptable to the CCP only if it is produced in a controlled way to further the government's interests.

During the first decade of the People's Republic of China, in late 1956, Chairman Mao in an unprecedented moment, asked the people to write to the leadership with constructive criticism about how the Party was governing. The slogan of the campaign was "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend,"²³ It was a reference to the warring period in Chinese history where Confucianism, Daoism, Legalist and other philosophical schools of thought all fought for the attention of local leaders. In a 1956 speech, propaganda director Lu Dingyi echoed Mao's plan and further explained: "If we want art, literature and science to flourish, we must apply a policy of letting flowers of many kinds blossom, letting diverse schools of thought contend... 'Letting flowers of many kinds blossom, diverse schools of thought contend' means that we stand for freedom of independent thinking, of debate, of creative work; freedom

²² Zedong, Mao, "Talks on Literature and Art" (Yenan Forum, May 23rd 1942).

²³ Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 57.

to criticize and freedom to express, maintain and reserve one's opinions on questions of art, literature or scientific research."²⁴

This radical reversal in attitude towards art required a lot of prompting from the leadership because the arts did not hold that role in Maoist Chinese society; in fact it had been previously discouraged. Thus began the Hundred Flowers Campaign, a government initiative to encourage people to write, create and contribute to debate through the arts. Eventually, the floodgates opened and vast quantities of letters, art and literature circulated with the intention of critiquing the Communist Party. Overwhelmed and threatened by the response, Mao cracked down on these intellectuals by sending them to prison camps or forcing them to retract their work. By June 1957 the Hundred Flowers Campaign was over and China began the anti-rightist campaign.²⁵ This was a violent and radical attack on intellectuals and perceived dissidents. It marked the end of any state-sanctioned intellectual freedom in China and precluded it for the many years to come. The Hundred Flowers campaign has been analyzed in two main ways. Some historians believe it was a way to smoke out possible "dangerous ideas"; others say it was an effort to appeal to intellectuals in order to get them on the side of the government.²⁶ Either way the campaign went awry, and it identified an intrinsic threat that exists in political commentary through the arts that scared the communist party.

Mao's Yenan speech and the Hundred Flowers Campaign symbolize the way in which the Chinese leadership has looked at art and freedom of speech. While perhaps only moments in the grand scheme of China's long cultural and political history, they illustrate the fear the CCP lead-

²⁴ Dingy Lu, "On the Hundred Flowers Campaign," (May 1956).

²⁵ Wasserstrom, *China in the 21st Century : What Everyone Needs to Know*, 57.

²⁶ *ibid*

ership has of culture as a means to develop and explore new ideas that do not align with the government's agenda. They also illustrate the power of expression through the arts, and how much of a threat it can be for the CCP when not controlled.

Subsequently, the Cultural Revolution that began in 1966 revealed the way politics could tear yet another large hole in the fabric of Chinese cultural life. The Party explicitly targeted art that was not in line with the CCP's political message preferred by Mao, criticizing such art as bourgeois luxuries antithetical to China's interests. During the height of the Cultural Revolution's violence against potential dissidents, Red Guards would go into homes to destroy, among other possessions, art works, and paint over walls with Maoist quotes instead.²⁷ The repercussions of this era on culture, both physically and psychologically were profound. "The collections of many libraries and museums were damaged, disrupted, or dispersed. Red Guards defaced or destroyed numerous historical sites, religious structures, and cultural artifacts."²⁸ While accurate numbers are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that just between 1966 and 1969, 2,600 people in literary and art circles were tried and imprisoned by the government.²⁹ This violent episode in China's political history is important as a historical precedent that underscored how China's CCP regime perceives art and culture. For authoritarian China, the scary intersection between politics and culture seems always to be on the mind of the leadership, which views freedom of speech in the arts as a threat. Explicitly articulated or not, Chinese society is also haunted by the dark memory of periods of repression and violence that have affected artistic expression. Most importantly, how-

²⁷ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of The People's Republic of China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 181.

²⁸ MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China*, 239.

²⁹ MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China*, 240.

ever, this historical background demonstrates the long tradition of the CCP seeing the arts as a vehicle for advancing the message of the regime, but only when its content is carefully controlled.

Case Studies:

(A) Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes are a carefully censored effort at building China's cultural power abroad. This endeavor is loosely identified as soft power by academics and CCP members alike. However, these Institutes are limited in their abilities to exert soft power, in part due to the specific censorship efforts which characterize them. This case study suggests that while CIs may *look* like soft power, in fact, they are a form of cultural power specific to China, concerned first and foremost with cultural security. This focus actually sacrifices the effectiveness of soft power. The Confucius Institutes are a key aspect of Chinese soft power and spread of culture abroad. However, as any Chinese governmental institution, they are subject to scrutiny from the party. In order to better understand the kind of censorship and strategic messaging going on in Confucius Institutes, I am going to be focusing on two studies done on Confucius Institutes that are the basis for a lot of the existent literature on Confucius Institutes.

The first study is Jennifer Hubbert's "Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom." Hubbert offers ethnographic research on Confucius Institutes.

The research was conducted at a coeducational college-preparatory school on the West Coast that I am calling East River [...] which includes Grades 6

through 12 [...] The research for this article was [...] conducted from spring 2011 to spring 2013. Ethnographic methods included two extended fieldwork trips to the school campus [...] The primary data for this article is drawn from participant observation at East River including focus groups; semi- and unstructured interviews; and everyday conversations with students, parents, administrators, and teachers. At East River, I attended and observed classes at all levels of Chinese instruction from 7th through 12th grades and from introductory to advanced levels [...] I also attended CI cultural performances and local receptions for Chinese delegates visiting CI programs across the United States. [...] In all cases, I promised anonymity to those who participated in this research; all places and personal names (except for public figures) are pseudonyms and any identifying characteristics have been modified³⁰

A second project on Confucius Institutes was conducted by Professor Falk Hartig from the University of Goethe. His findings are published in his 2015 paper “Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China’s Strategic Narratives.” Hartig’s methods are similar to those of Jennifer Hubbert, “I used in-depth semi-structured, or focused, interviews. While sources have been anonymised in order to maintain confidentiality, interviews took place in Australia from 2010–2012, Germany from 2009–2013, the Czech Republic in 2011, South Africa in 2013 and 2014, and China in 2011. I usually interviewed the director, executive officer or executive director of the respective institute as these people are not only involved in day-to-day operations, but also in strategic decisions.”³¹ I will also refer to another paper by Professor Hartig, “Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China,” in which he refers to the materials from the 2009 German Confucius Institute interviews.³² Together, these different studies provide insight into the inner workings of CIs.

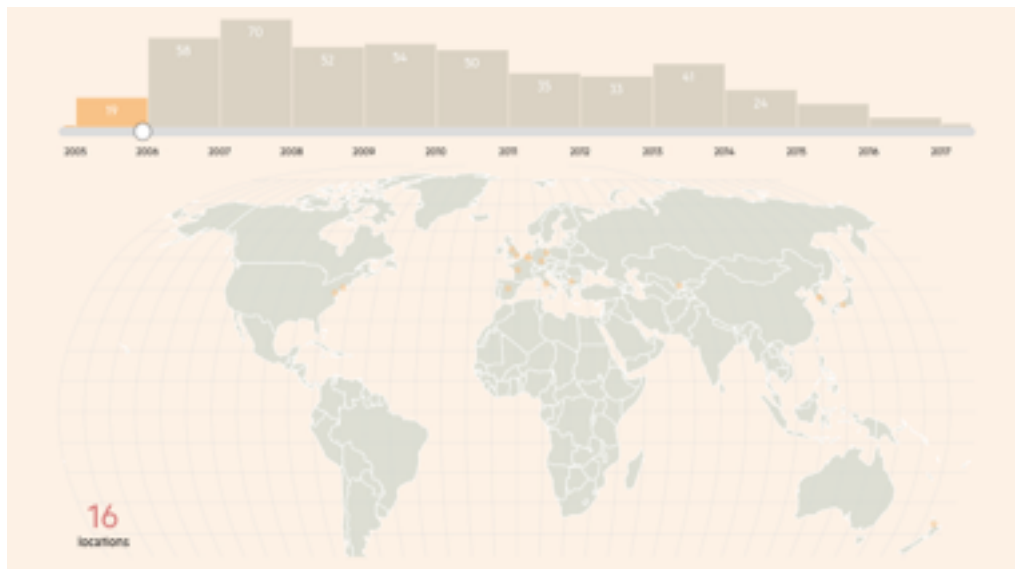
³⁰ Jennifer Hubbert, “Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom,” *PoLAR: The Political and Legal Anthropology Review* vol.37, no. 2 (2014): 332-333.

³¹ Hartig 255

³² Falk Hartig, “Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* no. 17 (2012): 58.

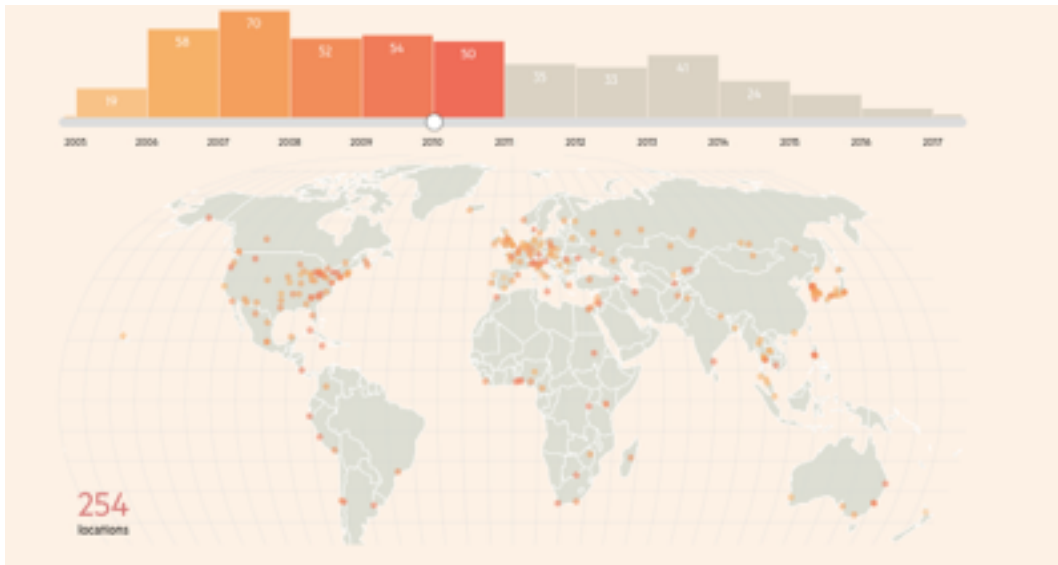
1- Looks Like Soft Power, Sounds like Soft Power...

As explained above, Confucius Institutes represent an effort on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party to help spread Chinese language and culture throughout the world. These effectively seem, to constitute a major branch of Chinese cultural outreach and power. Since their inception in 2006, they have spread around the globe quickly and now boast a global presence in just 10 years. (Following three images)³³

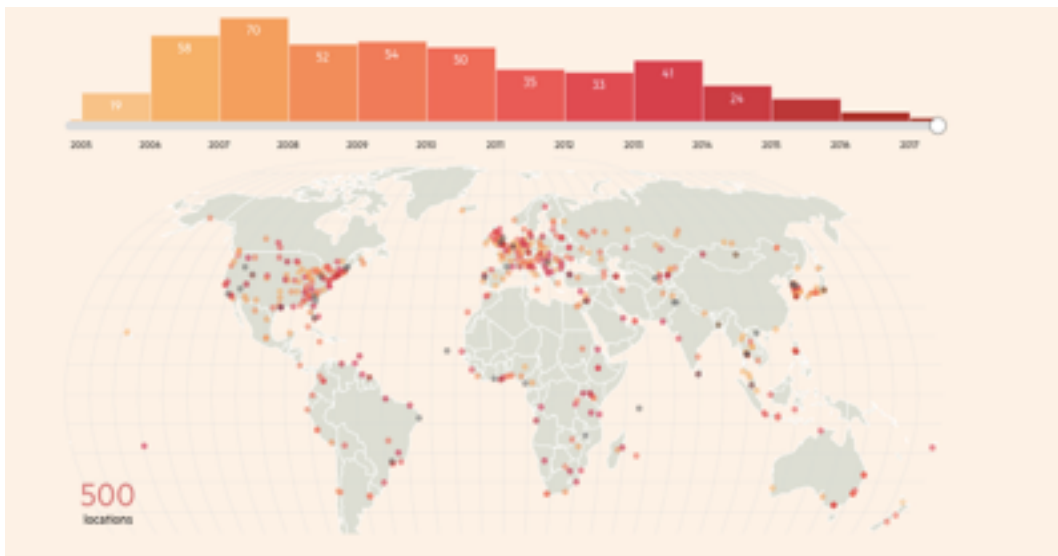


Number of Confucius Institutes Around the World in 2006.

³³ Jane Pong and Emily Fong, "Confucius Institutes: cultural asset or campus threat?" *Financial Times*, October 26th 2017, <https://ig.ft.com/confucius-institutes/>.



Number of Confucius Institutes Around the World in 2020.



Number of Confucius Institutes Around the World in 2017.

Indeed, “Over the last decade, the Confucius Institute has shown remarkable success on paper. As of 2015, it has cooperated with local universities and colleges in 133 countries and regions, and operated 491 institutes around the world.”³⁴ They are spreading, which must mean that they are welcomed into foreign countries to a certain extent. This also suggests that Chinese language and culture is gaining more and more exposure all around the world. In the book *Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington argued that the next great sources of conflict would be cultural divisions. This is where soft power as Nye has defined it and national image in world politics become increasingly important.³⁵ Kluver explains how Confucius Institutes allow the CCP to have more control over the discussions about China that are happening in the countries in which they are present.³⁶ Don Starr adds that Confucius Institutes should make foreign countries more accommodating to Chinese interests by making the culture and language more accessible.³⁷ CIs are effectively using culture as a vehicle to further China’s national interests abroad. In this section, I examine the role of these Confucius Institutes within the grander scheme of Chinese soft power.

All CIs are under the supervision of Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language Council International. Hanban is composed of representatives from twelve ministries and commissions within the Chinese central government, while the Ministry of Education bears the main responsibility. Hanban is responsible for the administration of the institutes, the supply of teachers, and

³⁴ Zhenjie Yuan, Junwanguo Guo and Hong Zhu, "Confucius Institutes And The Limitations Of China’S Global Cultural Network", *China Information* 30, no. 3 (2016): 337.

³⁵ Sheng Ding and Robert A. Saunders, “Talking up China: An Analysis of China’s Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language,” *East Asia* 23, no. 2 (2006): 9.

³⁶ Randolph Kluver, “The sage as strategy: Nodes, networks, and the quest for geopolitical power in the Confucius Institutes,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* vol.7, no.2 (2014): 201.

³⁷ Don Starr, “*Chinese language education in Europe: The Confucius Institutes,*” *European Journal of Education* vol. 44, no.1 (2009): 80.

the development and distribution of teaching materials. Furthermore, it co-ordinates the cooperation between partner institutions in China and abroad that run CIs, and provides funding. Although CIs were initially located in colleges and universities, in 2007 Hanban launched the CC program Chinese language and culture programs similar to CIs, but located in high schools and usually linked to a CI.”³⁸ The Confucius Institutes were created with the explicit directive to help spread Chinese language and culture around the globe. Therefore, they are, in appearance, part of China’s effort to enhance its soft power. In 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao explained in a speech on Chinese cultural policy that, "Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world. It has flourished not only through mutual emulation and assimilation among its various ethnic groups but also through interactions and mutual learning with the other countries... We stand ready to step up cultural exchanges with the rest of the world in a joint promotion of cultural prosperity.”³⁹ Similarly, in 2014, Xi Jinping was quoted saying “We must strive to spread contemporary Chinese values, in order to improve our nation’s cultural soft power.”⁴⁰ This kind of rhetoric coming from Chinese officials on the place of the country as a leading cultural power in the world is indicative of their intent to engage with soft power. However, the way China has chosen to share its culture around the world is by retaining control of the narrative being spun. We can refer to this effort on behalf of the CCP to assure curated messaging as using public diplomacy to ‘project strategic narratives.’⁴¹ Confucius Institutes are fundamental in Chi-

³⁸ Falk Hartig, “Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China’s Strategic Narratives,” *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): pp. 245-258, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12093>, p.246)

³⁹ Ding and Saunders, “Talking up China,” 20.

⁴⁰ “Guangming Daily” Jan. 13, 2014, page 7, “Harden our soft power

⁴¹ Hartig, “Communicating China to the World,” 248.

nese cultural power endeavors and a pillar of their public diplomacy, but are marked by a strong desire to control the narrative *first*, to ensure cultural security, *then* the spread of cultural power.

Based on her time spent at the East River Confucius Center, Hubbert writes, “the central objective of the Confucius Institute program is to promote the Chinese language and culture so as to develop and enhance international trade relations, encourage multiculturalism throughout the world, and strengthen educational and cultural exchanges between China and other nations. Yet, Confucius Institutes also have a more political goal: the creation of an improved global image in the face of discourses that pose China as a threat.”⁴² According to the General Principles of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes they: “devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to *deepening friendly relationships with other nations*, to *promoting the development of multiculturalism*, and to *construct a harmonious world* (Hanban, n.d., emphasis added). The reference to the construction of a Harmonious World clearly links CIs to China’s strategic narratives and foreign policy goals.”⁴³ Similarly, Hartig explains that his findings show “CIs are an important tool in China’s public diplomacy that is employed by the Chinese government to communicate with foreign publics” but he nuances his observations by adding that they more specifically try to “communicate certain strategic narratives about China and its place in the world.”⁴⁴

⁴² Hubbert, “Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom,” 332.

⁴³ Hartig, “Communicating China to the World,” 250.

⁴⁴ Hartig, “Communicating China to the World,” 248.

Another key to understanding the role of CIs is that the Party's larger goals have long been to ease the Security Dilemma. The security dilemma is the idea in international relations that the steps a country takes to enhance its security can also inadvertently threaten other countries. Jervis argues that the more ideologically and culturally similar two states are, the less acute the security dilemma.⁴⁵ China, by virtue of the way the Communist Party governs, is both very different and very secretive. This heightens the security dilemma as foreign powers don't fully understand the way the country functions and can be nervous about the implications of their ignorance due to the lack of information made available from Beijing. With regards to CIs, the Chinese Ministry of Culture explained, "Confucius Institutes are meant to show a friendly and cosmopolitan China, to shape a favorable global surrounding for China"⁴⁶ The CCP therefore sees Confucius Institutes (and soft power) as a way to lessen the mystery, and therefore risk derived from ignorance about China. Hartig writes that this is part of a larger, but more subtle narrative with which the CCP has long struggled--a desire to dispel the false impression outsiders may have about the country and in general to teach foreigners more about China.⁴⁷ Thus, it appears that China is indeed trying to cultivate "soft power" since creating a softer more accessible international image is inscribed in its foreign policy goals. In this respect, Confucius Institutes do appear to be a part of Beijing's soft power apparatus with foreign policy implications. The next section explains why this observation is at least incomplete and possibly mistaken.

2 - Confucius Institutes and Censorship

⁴⁵ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* Vol. 30, No. 2. (January, 1978): 174.

⁴⁶ Hartig, "Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China," 69.

⁴⁷ Hartig, "Communicating China to the World," 251.

How does China, through Confucius Institutes, craft an image that is supposed to fulfill the CCP's goals? Specifically by focusing on censorship, it will become evident that the CCP pushes a meticulously crafted message in order to deliver the image they want. This careful messaging reveals a desire to preserve cultural security above all else.

It would be simplistic to reduce Confucius Institutes to some sort of governmental mouthpiece for the CCP. When asked if Confucius Institutes were a kind of propaganda effort on behalf of the CCP, the answer given by a CI director was “‘As long as I am here, we did not get any kind of instruction, which for me is a counterargument to the accusation of propaganda’ (I-A3). Another director said ‘the Chinese don’t dictate to us what we should or cannot do’ (I-A2). A statement that is repeated throughout the institutes is that ‘Hanban doesn’t impinge on our daily work at all’ (I-G6).”⁴⁸ Although run by the government and closely followed by governmental agents, it doesn't not appear that these institutes are given explicit directives from the Party. What can and cannot be discussed is not written out or formalized in any way. In all the research there is no mention of clear rules, laws or guideline by which these Institutes must operate. Thus, the censorship I will be discussing here is more nuanced. It does not entail active measures to remove or misinform the public, as much as a voluntary and calculated omissions by those working within CIs.

This being said, the CCP does use its Confucius Institutes to diffuse a specific vision of China and Chinese culture. Due to the bureaucratic nature of the Chinese political system, the link between Confucius Institutes and the CCP is strong. This marks a distinction from other cul-

⁴⁸ Hartig, “Communicating China to the World,” 253.

tural institutions like the Institute Cervantes of Spain, Goethe Institute of Germany or the Alliance Française of France for example which have more degrees of separation from their governments which delegate their work to independent entities⁴⁹ “Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters is in charge of placing teachers, the development and distribution of teaching materials, [...] The headquarters furthermore approve applications for the establishment of new Confucius Institutes and supervises their operations and ensures quality management”⁵⁰ Hanban also has another important tool to use in the oversight of CIs, funding. “According to one CI director, Hanban’s agreement to the funding depends in the last analysis on ‘whether they actually like the proposal’ (I-A4) and it stands to reason that Hanban may not like a proposal for a project that is deemed inappropriate.”⁵¹ Ultimately, it is up to Hanban to approve or reject an annual budget for these Institutes. According to the by laws of these Institutes, any plans or events the local Institutes want to put on with their budget must be ran by Beijing. Moreover the Party reserves the right to take to court any local institution that does not run their programming by Beijing before putting it on.⁵² The Confucius Institutes are therefore restricted by this check coming from the CCP. This way, the government does have an influence shaping what can be said, and consequently shared, with the globe about Chinese culture and history.

Confucius Institutes are subjugated to this careful messaging and censorship, which work to assure Chinese cultural security in line with their view on cultural power. In Jennifer Hub-

⁴⁹ Hartig, “Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China,” 70.

⁵⁰ Hartig, “Confucius Institutes and the Rise of China,” 59.

⁵¹ Hartig, “Communicating China to the World,” 253.

⁵² Marshall Sahlins, “Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware,” *The Asia Pacific Journal* vol. 12 no.1 (November 16, 2014): 2.

bert's study, she explains how the textbooks are set up to link China's economic development with Chinese culture as opposed to political repression and environmental destruction which some westerners believe. None of the textbooks used in Confucius Institutes mention any particular political system, controversial historical events or position China as a threat on the international scene. Confucius Institutes are part of China's program to "serve China's soft power policy goals by facilitating perceptions that China's increasing international engagement is neither antagonistic to the Western status quo nor repressively authoritarian despite its lack of democratic processes."⁵³ Hartig expresses similar control over the content available for diffusion from the Confucius Institutes. In an interview with a director of a CI, the individual explains: "our independence is limited regarding precarious topics. If topics like Tibet or Taiwan would be approached too critical, this could be difficult' (I-G3). Overall, the general understanding throughout the institutes is 'we take a pragmatic approach to all of this [and if you had contact with China before] you know where your boundaries are' (I-A4). Ultimately, it is up to every institute to define these boundaries and to try to find ways to organize events. As one interviewee remarked, 'if we cover critical topics, it has to be in a balanced way and with the necessary respect towards Chinese sensitivities' (I-G3)."⁵⁴ Both of these studies reveal a desire to offer a controlled narrative of China to the world. The textbooks to be used in these institutes are written and produced by Hanban. They cover all sorts of topics about daily life, culture and history, but have no mention of controversial historical events like Tiananmen Square, and teachers avoid topics that would be considered controversial to the Party. A key part of these interviews that

⁵³ Hubbert, "Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom," 332.

⁵⁴ Hartig, "Communicating China to the World," 254.

comes up often is the section of the director's response that there needs to be "respect towards Chinese sensitivities." Moreover, this close proximity between the CCP and the CIs raises suspicion. They can be understood "as an attempt to present a sanitized version of Chinese society and culture, while excluding any criticism of China or its policies"⁵⁵ This "sanitized" version of Chinese culture introduces the idea that there is a version of Chinese culture that is more acceptable, more presentable to the world.

Therefore, Confucius Institutes seem to conform with the definition of soft power, as Joseph Nye put forward, in the sense that their objectives are clearly to diffuse, and make more attractive, Chinese culture and language around the globe. However, it is also evident the version of Chinese culture disseminated by these institutes is a heavily filtered one. This points to the idea that the cultural power China is growing through Confucius Institutes is made to reflect a certain version of Chinese culture, in line with the way the CCP deems it acceptable.

3- How does this censorship affect Chinese cultural power interests?

It is important not to underestimate the role soft power can play in international politics. But a country that develops and cultivates its cultural power around the world does not necessarily realize its desired policy outcomes, something that soft power should enable. China suffers from this problem. While the country does a lot to beef up its cultural presence around the world, as we have seen with the Confucius Institutes, a BBC poll shows that not one European country has a majority of its population with a positive perception of China.⁵⁶ Therefore, the actual via-

⁵⁵ Kluver, "The Sage as the Strategy," 195.

⁵⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2011/03_march/07/poll.pdf

bility of Chinese soft power advanced by what is often seen as a closed off and controlling regime is unclear. There is a disconnect between the efforts on behalf of the government to open cultural institutions and make Chinese culture more readily accessible around the globe and the desired outcome of these endeavors: increased acceptance of Chinese culture. This table from the

Table 2. Unfavourable opinion of China in different continents, 2005–2015.

Year	Asia	Africa	Europe	South America	North America	Oceania
2005	23.8	–	31.5	–	31.0	–
2006	32.0	32.0	32.8	–	29.0	–
2007	33.1	17.1	43.9	25.0	39.0	–
2008	38.7	29.3	52.3	31.0	40.0	40.0
2009	38.4	31.0	45.7	24.0	39.0	–
2010	36.4	22.7	46.3	31.0	33.5	–
2011	33.4	30.0	41.5	37.0	41.0	–
2012	37.0	28.5	49.1	39.0	38.0	–
2013	39.2	22.9	48.1	22.8	43.3	35.0
2014	38.7	22.6	49.4	30.1	46.5	–
2015	39.2	15.4	43.6	28.4	45.3	33.0

Source: Pew Research Center, Opinion of China, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/24/survey/9/response/Unfavorable/>, accessed 28 June 2016. Cross-national surveys on 'Opinion of China' have been conducted yearly since 2005 in 59 countries. The surveys were conducted in developing as well as developed countries in which Confucius Institutes are located. This project is one of the world's best-known polls on China's image. The surveys posed the question: 'Please tell me if you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable opinion of China'. The label 'unfavourable' combines 'somewhat unfavourable' and 'very unfavourable'. The data shown in this table comprise the average value based on the percentage of respondents in the same continent in a certain year who chose 'unfavourable'.

Pew Research Center also backs the findings of the BBC poll, that the unfavorable opinion of China has actually gone up in almost every region other than Africa and Oceania. This suggests that China has failed to develop a benevolent image around the world despite the rapid expansion of the Confucius Institutes globally.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Yuan, Guo, and Zhu, "Confucius Institutes and the Limitations of China's Global Cultural Network," 351.

The literature highlights a problem with CIs that helps explain to some degree, the reason why China has been unsuccessful in harnessing cultural power towards a more positive global image. The Chinese government faces a credibility problem.⁵⁸ Academic debate emphasizes the idea that Confucius Institutes do not show the *real* China, but rather an *appropriate* version of the country.⁵⁹ Joseph Nye suggests that if a state has a poor reputation for credibility despite one's effort to accrue cultural power, the efforts may prove to be counterproductive in the long run. This is because the information is consumed as propaganda instead of culture.⁶⁰ In our current world order, many belief systems are dominated by the western, democratic view of freedom expression. Therefore, the fact that China is notoriously selective with the information that it broadcasts about its history and culture degrades the CI's fundamental mission. "The rapid proliferation of the institutes is paralleled by increasing criticism from China watchers. Unsurprisingly, the criticisms largely center on Confucius Institutes as proactive agents of the Chinese government, exporting politically correct views about China, facilitating economic expansion, cultivating a benign national image, and thus extending China's influence globally"⁶¹ This credibility problem limits China's potential to effectively communicate their strategic messaging thereby limiting their ability to accrue soft power. It is the active decision to target foreigners with a filtered version of China's past and policies that rubs outsiders the wrong way. Beyond the attractiveness of China, one observable effect of this credibility problem is the ongoing discussion on

⁵⁸ Hartig, "Communicating China to the World," 255.

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ Nye, "Public diplomacy and soft power,".

⁶¹ Yuan, Guo, and Zhu, "Confucius Institutes and the Limitations of China's Global Cultural Network," 337.

college campuses about whether or not these institutes should be welcomed into our Universities. The University of Pennsylvania itself passed on the opening of a CI on campus. International Relations Professor Arthur Waldron is quoted saying; “Once you have a Confucius Institute on campus, you have a second source of opinions and authority that is ultimately answerable to the Chinese Communist Party and which is not subject to scholarly review.” He goes on, “You can’t blame the Chinese government for wanting to mold discussion. But Chinese embassies and consulates are in the business of observing Chinese students. Should we really be inviting them onto our campuses?”⁶² There is a plethora of academic institutions from all over North America and Europe who have either refused or contested the opening of CIs, often citing concerns over academic legitimacy and political ties.⁶³ Ultimately, this desire to control the narrative affects the CCP’s credibility and therefore constrains China’s ability to attract positive attention from people around the world through its intended messaging.

4- *Why Censorship?*

The last section is trying to understand China’s need for strategic messaging in the first place. For a regime that seems to govern with such authority and control, why is strategic messaging abroad so important? One reading of this fear is concern about the large number of Chinese living and studying abroad. According to a report from the US Census Bureau in 2019, the Chinese diaspora accounts for roughly 45 million people.⁶⁴ Chinese living overseas are exposed

⁶² D.D. Guttenplan, “Critics Worry About Influence of Chinese Institutes on U.S. Campuses,” *New York Times*, March 4th 2012.

⁶³ Sahlins, “Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware” 20-29.

⁶⁴ https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2019/demo/Chinese_Diaspora.pdf

to different values and styles of life. Therefore, they can internalize and then spread these other ways of living to people within China via the internet. One way China can counter the spread of these heterogeneous ideas is to diffuse around the world a strategic message. The CCP works hard to control the narrative of China's culture in an attempt to fight the potentially subversive effects of western cultural globalization. This fear ties cultural power and censorship into issues of cultural security. It seems like the risk of not being able to operate throughout every country (i.e. Western campuses where CI's have been closed) is not nearly as problematic as the spread of a tainted version of Chinese culture. Controlling the message is one way the CCP can fight to keep China's culture "pure" and secure from western influence.⁶⁵

In addition, China is still recovering from the Cultural Revolution which turned tradition and culture into the enemy. This phase of China's history considerably affected not only the way the Chinese view their own culture, but also how foreigners understand and consume Chinese culture. For a long period in the country, as explained earlier on, culture was a taboo. The goal was to remove global cultural discourse not encourage it.⁶⁶ Here we return to the credibility problem. Due to the lack of transparency at the time, when the horrific violence and covering up that went on during the Cultural Revolution was revealed to the world, foreigners became even more skeptical about the reliability of messaging from the CCP. Consequently, China's cultural power "measured in terms of how a country is viewed, respected, and ultimately imitated--declined precipitously in the wake of this period of self-imposed isolation from the outside world."⁶⁷ Afterwards, the CCP sought to revive and promote Chinese culture, repairing the vio-

⁶⁵ Ding and Saunders, "Talking up China," 10.

⁶⁶ Kluver, "The Sage as Strategy," 203.

⁶⁷ Ding and Saunders, "Talking up China," 14.

lent tears in the fabric of the country's cultural identity. This helps explain the regime's emphasis on national identity and keeping the country free from the subversive effects of western cultural influence. One reading of the reasoning behind censorship within the space of C.I.s, is therefore an attempt to keep a hold on the "purity" of Chinese culture.

5- Confucius Institutes and Cultural Power

Confucius Institutes are clearly an effort to engage and promote Chinese global cultural power. Their goal is to open China up to the outside world. These Institutes make up one component of the CCP's efforts to combat the security dilemma. The hope is by demystifying Chinese culture there will be less fear around China's intentions and goals in international politics, thereby stabilizing relations. Furthermore, these Confucius Institutes by design, conform closely with the concept of soft power as defined by Joseph Nye. CIs embody a desire on behalf of the Party to spread, and enhance the appeal of, Chinese culture and language around the world.

Judging by the limited effectiveness of Confucius Institutes to improve China's likability around the world, it seems that CIs are a poor soft power tool in action. Issues arise around the tale of Chinese culture the party is willing to diffuse. But CI's may play a different role in advancing the *strategic narratives* that Beijing wants to share with others. This is a form of control to safeguard the information coming out of China and made available for foreigners to consume. However, this censorship degrades in the mission of the CIs by creating a credibility problem. It ultimately hinders the ability of the Party to effectively accrue soft power as defined by Joseph Nye. Yet, this limited capability in terms of soft power does not tell the whole story. Instead, I suggest the CCP has different interests when it comes to growing cultural power. First and fore-

most, China values *cultural security*. Liu Yunshan, the ex-Minister of Propaganda in the CCP was quoted in People's Daily in January 2010 saying: "With regard to key issues that influence our sovereignty and safety, we should actively carry out international propaganda battles against issues such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Human Rights, and Falun Gong. Our strategy is to proactively take our culture abroad... We should do well in establishing and operating overseas cultural centers and Confucius Institutes."⁶⁸ or again in September 2010, we must "make sure that all cultural battleground, cultural products, and cultural activities reflect and conform to the socialist core values and requirement."⁶⁹ This language reveals an urgency in maintaining a specific and curated version of Chinese culture around the world. Liu Yunshan seems to equate the importance of maintaining a strategic messaging battle with Chinese "sovereignty and safety." In Kluver's words, "The CI project has clearly evolved into a strategy to engage this 'global battle for ideas.'" He adds on that the directives from Hanban ask that the Institutes "should conduct research on Chinese culture and 'foster a new generation of sinologists'"⁷⁰ This supports the idea that Confucius Institutes are in place promote a certain version of Chinese culture which would eventually come to dominate the global cultural discussion in favor of Chinese interests.

Thus, perhaps the kind of cultural power being developed through these Institutes is not a "failed soft power" as much as a cultural power defined by a policy of cultural security first. The censorship happening in Confucius Institutes is more of a calculated omission of information to further this larger goal of cultural security. If we reset our thinking on cultural power beyond soft

⁶⁸ "Liu Yunshan: Liberate the mind, innovate," *People's Daily*, January 27, 2010.

⁶⁹ Yunshan Liu, "Thoughts on developing socialism with Chinese characteristics," *People's Daily*, September 7, 2010.

⁷⁰ Kluver, "The Sage as Strategy," 202.

power and cultural attractiveness, then it becomes evident that CIs work to create the kind of cultural power Beijing wants around the globe, one of strategic messaging and cultural security.

(B) Cultural Power and Contemporary Art

This next case study looks at the growing sector of contemporary art as an example of the kind of cultural power sought by China. As mentioned above, contemporary art is taking off in the country, which is becoming a major player in the art world. The point of this case study is to look at how the CCP deals with cultural power within its borders with regards to censorship. We will take a deep dive into the kinds of censorship that occur, and how professionals in the field deal with these issues. Similarly to what is observed in Confucius Institutes, it will be evident that the kind of censorship occurring is mainly in the vein of protecting cultural security. Thus, while censorship complicates professionals' involvement in the field of contemporary art, the structure of the industry in China is designed to pursue cultural power while assuring the CCP's overarching interest in cultural security.

In order to understand the international contemporary art scene in China, I conducted interviews with various actors in the field. I interviewed Chinese gallerist and contemporary art collector Xin Dong Chen. He owns the largest private contemporary art gallery in China, as well as a very large and respected collection of art that he has recently shown in a public museum in China for the first time ever. His perspective is important because he also is involved in bringing Chinese artists to many of the international art fairs, therefore has experience in different environments. His personal goal is to bring Chinese artists onto the world scene and to bring international artists into China. The second person I interviewed is Chinese national Xiaoyu Weng.

She is currently a curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York for the Asian art department. She has past experience curating projects for Chinese Museums. She nuances this discussion around contemporary art by bringing in the perspective of someone who has worked both in China and in other western countries. I also spoke with Marcella Lista, she is the Chief Curator for the Video and New Media Collection at the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Centre Pompidou) in Paris. However, she also is most recently in charge of drawing the general outlines of the Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum Project in Shanghai and curating its opening program which launched on November 8, 2019. In addition, I spoke with French contemporary art gallery owner Nathalie Boutin. She has represented many artists including Chinese artists, and has experience showing the work of foreign artists in Chinese Museums, Galleries and art fairs. Finally I spoke with a contemporary artist, Omer Fast, based in Berlin, whose art has directly encountered faced censorship when being shown in China. Together, these individuals give a broad and varied picture of the field of contemporary art in China. Their interviews revealed a layered reality at the intersection of art and censorship. They offer insight into the differences between a state-sponsored international exhibition and the showings by a private collector for example, bringing to light the CCP's priorities. These interviews also reveal how people in the industry deal with censorship. This research shows that the CCP isn't principally interested in becoming attractive to outsiders, but instead seeks to pave its way in the art scene while getting it to abide by to the Party's preferred rules. Similarly to what was observed in Confucius Institutes, the first goal of the Party when it comes to censorship is to promote cultural security, an even higher priority than building China into a global cultural power. This agenda limits China's ability to accrue traditional soft power.

1- Place Contemporary Art in Culture and Society

Art plays a fundamental role in all societies. Like academia, debate or any form of discussion, it allows for individuals to converse on important topics. There is a long tradition of politically and socially engaged artists using their works to highlight or discuss important societal mores. We can think of Andy Warhol for example, whose work famously tackled the subject of consumerism, capitalism and stardom in America in the 1950s and 1960s. Through his now iconic silk screen prints of Campbells soup cans or Marilyn Monroe portraits, he started a discussion around these topics he found pressing for society at the time. His art was able to direct the discussions happening in the country at large, ultimately shaping the culture and society. Socially engaged, relevant contemporary art and the ability to freely express one's concerns are inextricably intertwined.

As briefly touched on earlier in this paper, China has a distinctive relationship with artistic expression. Under Mao, there was an almost complete rejection of art unless it served the Party's interests. In his famous speech given at the Yen'an talks in 1942 Mao condemned art and literature that are a bourgeois luxury. Instead he insisted that it serve as a tool for the revolution, spreading Marxist ideas to the people and the workers.⁷¹ Notably, while Mao is ultimately getting at the idea that art should be propaganda for the Party's cause, he is also highlighting that art has a capacity to shape society. This shows that culture is a form of power that can be mobilized for winning over hearts and minds. As note above, the next major event in Communist China's relationship with art came during the Cultural Revolution. During this dark period in the country's

⁷¹ Zedong, Mao, "Talks on Literature and Art" (Yenan Forum, May 23rd 1942).

history, all things pertaining to tradition, academic debate and expression is vilified to an extreme degree. This violent rejection of traditional culture caused a very deep wound in the fabric of Chinese cultural life that it is still trying to repair. A key part of understanding the place of contemporary art now, within the grander scheme of Chinese cultural policy is that since Mao's death, the CCP has had a lot of work to do to rejuvenate Chinese cultural life. It needed to reverse the attitude towards culture and openness to the world since in the wake of the damage caused by the Cultural Revolution.⁷²

With Deng Xiaoping's opening of the country in 1979, came more exposure to the outside world and thus different ideas. Chinese contemporary art in the 1980s and 1990s was a mostly underground, unorganized movement that addressed domestic themes. Artists like Huangyong Ping tackled the topic of governmental repression and crackdowns, the pressing concern at the time, from the confines of anonymity and with the looming fear of retaliation.⁷³ This form of contemporary art was not only domestic but also exclusive in the sense that it was underground, therefore only available to those "in the know." However as China's globalization gained momentum and it became an important player on the international stage, its art scene also observed major shifts. The topics of Chinese contemporary art shifted, fundamentally morphing the sector as a whole. Now, as China becomes more connected with the outside and exposed to more people, ideas and values, artists have moved to treat more "globalized themes." For example, issues like terrorism or global warming are much more prevalent in contemporary art in China.⁷⁴ Moreover, as Chinese people acquire more wealth and are more exposed to other countries,

⁷² Ding and Saunders, "Talking up China," 15.

⁷³ Xin Dong Chen interview (Herby XDC interview)

⁷⁴ XDC Interview

China has become a major player in the global art scene. As touched on earlier, Chinese buyers represent a major share of the global art sales. This means they wield a lot of influence in the field. As French gallery owner Nathalie Boutin from gb agency remarks, “if you want to be a leading global contemporary art gallery today, you have no choice but to be present in China.”⁷⁵ Now, not only is Chinese contemporary art itself becoming more international and open, but it also is a powerful hotspot for the global art world. Thus, contemporary art could, in principle, be an increasingly valuable tool for the country’s soft power and general cultural diplomacy efforts.

2- Art and cultural Diplomacy

Similarly to how Confucius Institutes were conceived in part to offset the intensity of the security dilemma by demystifying Chinese culture, contemporary art within the framework of international exhibitions, partnerships and fairs can help lift the obscure curtain that is Chinese society. It has allowed China to engage with other world leaders, further enmeshing itself with our globalized world. I will now go into a deeper analysis of this West Bund Museum in Shanghai, as it is a good example of contemporary art as it connects China and the dynamics of global cultural power.

The Centre Pompidou x West Bund museum opened in Shanghai in November of 2019. According to Marcella Lista, the initial idea of the Centre Pompidou which is to have a cultural presence in China dates back to the 1990s.⁷⁶ This is in line with what the Chinese gallery owner observed about the shift after Deng Xiaoping’s opening to the West, that exposed China to the

⁷⁵ gb Interview

⁷⁶ Marcella Lista interview (hereby ML interview)



West Bund Museum (Taken from dezeen.com <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/11/13/david-chipperfield-west-bund-museum-centre-pompidou-shanghai/>)

global art scene. However, Lista explains that a real opportunity to pursue this idea never revealed itself until recently. She explains that a developer, known as the West Bund Group, is involved in the urban development of an old airport zone along the Huangpu River where many museums are setting up. This partnership allowed for the French Centre Pompidou to expand into China, while having a partner on the ground who was plugged into local affairs. The West Bund group is an entirely state owned enterprise which is responsible for the urban development of the Xuhui District of Shanghai⁷⁷. According to their website, they are guided by the principle of "government-guided, market-based operations." The partnership allows the Centre Pompidou to exhibit for the next five years a complete program in China. The idea is to bring some of the French museum's impressive and respected international collection to China and pursue the Cen-

⁷⁷ "About West Bund Group," West Bund (COMO Network), accessed March 20, 2020, <http://www.west-bund.com/en/index/WEST-BUND-GROUP/Group-Profile/About-West-Bund-Group.html>.

tre Pompidou's larger trans-disciplinary goals. For China, this partnership allows the opening of a Museum by the people with lots of experience in contemporary art who can teach their skills to people on the ground for the future. This fast tracks the process of developing a culture in China around contemporary art by bringing in experts who can right away assure high quality art, and it legitimizes the Chinese institution due to the international reputation of the Centre Pompidou.⁷⁸

When asked what the motivations were on the end of the French museum, Lista replied that she believed this project allowed for a novel experience which is to see the Museum's collection from a new and different point of view. She emphasizes a particular attention to the unique cultural and artistic history of China that allows a novel experience of the art collection. Lista also notes a desire to reach a different audience and engage in a conversation with artists, students and professionals from Shanghai, but also more broadly from all over China. In her opinion as director of this project, the partnership presents a unique opportunity to go beyond one's usual frame of thought and reference. Throughout our conversation, she emphasizes the importance of making this space a place of encounters and active transmission between nations. The West Bund x Centre Pompidou partnership is also the home of workshops on artistic practices and cultural programming. This aspect of the partnership emphasizes art history, children specific programs and more generally other cultural discussions, in the hopes of teaching the Chinese these aspects of the field.⁷⁹ A fundamental underpinning of the West Bund Museum is to bring some of the Museum's *savoir-faire* that the Centre Pompidou has developed over decades to China, and to engage and promote dialogue and collaboration with the Shanghai art scene.

⁷⁸ ML interview and gb Interview

⁷⁹ ML interview

Lista also brought up the relationship between the Centre Pompidou and major institutions in Shanghai, specifically she has in mind Universities and Art schools. These collaborations are then discussed with the West Bund teams and an artistic committee specifically created to oversee this project. All of this is in line with the larger goals of the partnership which are for the Centre Pompidou to expose the Museum's collection abroad and for China to encourage an build up the contemporary art scene in China. This partnership has no main target audience in Marcella Lista's personal view. She sees the space as "geared towards any person who wants to spend time with art. The building itself has in its center an atrium conceived as a public square, with a very generous bookshop where people can sit comfortably to read and spend all the time they want."⁸⁰ This is an interesting note because it speaks to the place of the museum in Shanghai. Instead of art being a weapon, something to shy away from, to hide or condemn, designed for the few intellectuals who were in touch with that side of Chinese society, this museum is designed with the intention of becoming a major organ within the city of Shanghai. This partnership effectively embodies the shift in attitude towards contemporary art in China. Now it is a place of international exchange and dialogue. It is open to the public and feeding a growing curiosity in conversations and diverging ways of doing things. The West Bund x Centre Pompidou project is a key example of China opening up to the world, exposing itself to other cultures, but also allowing its art culture to be studied and understood by foreign countries.

Next, I address one last dimension to this museum partnership which speaks to the importance of cultural power, cultural diplomacy. This partnership is a prime example of contemporary

⁸⁰ *ibid*



Macron at the inauguration of the West Bund Museum (Taken from [artsy.net](https://www.artsy.net))

art being utilized in the name of cultural diplomacy with specific foreign policy goals. West Bund x Centre Pompidou has become a symbol of the relationship between France and China. “This cultural cooperation will enable the Centre Pompidou to be present in one of the world’s richest and most diverse art scenes, and to build bridges with local artists and cultural institutions in France and China”⁸¹ In November 2019, French President Macron was present at the opening of this museum. He was present at its inauguration where he was quoted saying, “long live the friendship of China and France.”⁸²

This resulted in a series of photo-ops, strategically embodying the relationship between China and France. However, Macron was actually already in China, but for a different reason. In November, he was on a state visit in order to discuss much heavier topics with the Chinese government. The discussions included talks on trade in the midst of the ongoing trade war with the

⁸¹ Centre Pompidou, “A First Step in The Collaboration Between The West Bund Group and the Centre Pompidou,” 2017.

⁸² Alex Greenberger, “Centre Pompidou’s New Shanghai Outpost Faced Censorship: Report,” *ARTnews*, November 5th 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/centre-pompidou-shanghai-censorship-west-bund-13513/>.

United States. During this visit, Macron and Xi Jinping signed a trade deal worth 15 billion dollars. These deals revolved around energy, aeronautics and agriculture. They set up for example, various partnerships between Chinese energy companies and French ones like a joint venture between Total and China's Shenergy group.⁸³ Another topic of discussion was the fact that France granted a former head of international police cooperation agency Interpol's wife asylum after her husband was arrested by the Chinese government. Beijing was unhappy with this move and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang called out France for harboring her and accused it of abusing its powers in this case.⁸⁴ The general theme during this visit was to emphasize France and China's respective commitment to multilateral trade deals and general openness to each other. The state visit happened in the thick of the trade war between Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping, as well as the United States' decision to pull out of the Paris Climate Pact. At the same time, the rhetoric coming out of Washington was very protectionist, emphasizing more regulated relations with China. This provided France an opportunity to position itself as the new face of free trade and multilateral cooperation, and allow China to show that it doesn't necessarily need the United States.

The November talks and the press coverage of the event, emphasized the importance of a friendly, cooperative relationship between China and France. In this context, Macron attending the inauguration of the Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum was far from coincidental. The opening of this museum in Shanghai was a way to lighten the discussion around what were oth-

⁸³ Marine Penetier, "China and France sign deals worth \$15 billion during Macron's visit," *Reuters*, November 6th 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-france-macron/china-and-france-sign-deals-worth-15-billion-during-macrons-visit-idUSKBN1XG0NM>.

⁸⁴ Emmanuel Jarry, "France grants asylum to wife of former Interpol chief charged in China," *Reuters*, May 15th 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-interpol/france-grants-asylum-to-wife-of-former-interpol-chief-charged-in-china-idUSKCN1SL00D>.

erwise much heavier subjects for both countries. This shows the importance of softer factors, like culture, in facilitating international relations. It is also representative of China's quest to assert itself as an international leader in culture, through contemporary art. The project itself physically symbolized the growing relationship between France and China as leaders of the globalized world, as the United States retreated inwards. The role of culture, and specifically contemporary art here, was to facilitate the relationship, discussion and interactions of the two nations. It also expanded this relationship beyond simply international economics, thickening the web of ties between these two countries. While Confucius Institutes are a systematic effort on behalf of the CCP to accrue cultural power abroad, developments like the Centre Pompidou show that the CCP envisions contemporary art as a way to enhance its global cultural power through exchanges within China's borders. My interview with various professionals in the field show that the CCP uses censorship to further a certain *kind* of cultural power, one that, above all, aims to build cultural security.

3- Censorship in contemporary art and cultural security.

How does censorship of contemporary art operate in China? The first important point is that the rules governing censorship in China are far from clear cut. Certain topics are considered "sensitive" depending on the issues of the moment or simply the context in which they are being discussed.⁸⁵ There is no clear list or set of guidelines that is distributed laying out the topics to be avoided.⁸⁶ Rather, in contemporary art it seems to be rather intuitively understood. Curator Xi-

⁸⁵ ML interview

⁸⁶ XDC interview

aoyu Weng mentions that when she worked on exhibitions in China, she didn't run into issues of censorship. She says part of the reason for this is that being Chinese, she is in tune with the topics that would be rejected by the bureau. She explains that you have to make a decision and evaluate what you are going to show, keeping in mind the realities of where you are showing them. This makes the censorship within China of art complicated. It is far from being rigid or stagnant, but rather, a process that ebbs and flows which you must be in tuned into.

Another example of how layered the issue of censorship is in China is the difference between a private institution and a public one. Marcella Lista explains that a private institution or an art fair, which are considered to be directed towards a professional audience can have more latitude than public institutions. These are considered to represent the more cultural politics of the country and are subjugated to more scrutiny. If we look at the West Bund project for example, Lista points out that the issue they dealt with was the visible nature of the project. This unique characteristic pushed them to be in constant conversation with the Cultural Bureau of Shanghai. The Cultural Bureau's role is to verify the content of a project and all the pieces it will show before a public opening. For each project, a dossier is submitted to the Bureau by the West Bund Museum. In the case of this project, the Centre Pompidou is not in any direct contact with that governmental organ. Lista reaffirms, neither those in charge of specific exhibits nor any of the directors of the institution as a whole have anything to do with the Chinese Cultural Bureau. The usual protocol of a Museum opening in China is to create a "scientific and artistic committee" whose role it is to bring light to and sometimes argue in favor of controversial pieces on a case by case basis, as a sort of intermediary between the government and the Institution. However, the West Bund Museum opened without an artistic committee this November; a decision that

has proven itself to be hard to work with and the partnership is moving towards creating such a committee for future shows. On a larger level, this is how artistic shows come about in China, they are planned, submitted to the bureau for review before a public opening and then eventually decided on by the Bureau as appropriate or not. It is interesting to note that the Centre Pompidou originally did not want to have any direct links with the censorship organs of China. This little detail does speak to the politicization of the project. Its highly visible nature and the fact that the partnership was included in a larger foreign policy scheme by Macron to reiterate the friendship between France and China, perhaps hint at the decision from the Centre Pompidou, which is technically state run, to try to stay as far away from any kind of censorship.

Next, I look in depth at the process of censorship in the West Bund Museum. As touched on above, several months in advance, the Museum submits a presentation of the exhibition project along with the complete list of art works, the artists' biographies and all the Chinese translation of all the text the art works may contain. The procedures are very sophisticated; there are specialists for each region of the world, so that undertones in an art work, in relation to a national issue for instance, can be identified. Approval may be given, but in some cases under the condition that specific works are removed. There is also a delegation from the commission that comes on site one day before the opening to check if only approved art works are on display. In general, a discussion is possible, the Cultural administration may ask to "adapt" a work (exhibiting only part of a work/editing a film), which is of course extremely delicate and cannot be done without the artist's consent, or the curator may submit alternative works. For contemporary art shows, which are the more targeted, there is a popular approach by which artists and museums send in longer lists of works than they actually intend to display. This proved difficult with the

Pompidou collection, however, because it needs to choose very specific pieces from a fixed, existing collection of art works.⁸⁷

The actual censorship that happens in contemporary art in China is specific and driven by the desire on behalf of the CCP to preserve cultural security. This interest is exemplified in comments from a contemporary artist, Omer Fast, whose work was to be displayed not in Shanghai but at the Times Museum in Guangzhou in 2018. One aspect of his installation included a 13 minute film shot in Virtual Reality. The film is in Chinese, narrated by a nine year old Chinese girl who recounts the story of her family. It tells the tale of her dad who in the forest, sees a finger coming out of the floor reaching for a ring. Instead of stealing the ring, he puts it on the finger and runs away. From that moment on his family becomes wealthy and enjoys lots of good fortune. On his wedding night, an ambiguous figure, neither male nor female shows up claimed the man is already married, as he put a ring on its finger. The whole family revolts, especially the Grandmother who humiliates the ghost in an attempt to defend the family. The ghost then “curses” the family by saying that from that moment on everyone can only speak the truth, since they lied about the ring and humiliated the figure in front of everyone at this wedding. The rest of the film shows scene of the family being rude or fighting, because they can only say the exact truth that is on their mind. Fast took this story from an old jewish fairy tale, adapting the piece for China, with a multigenerational aspect to it, taking the viewer from the present to the past and back to the present. He attended the initial private opening of his exhibition which the museum had put on, an invitation only event and then went on with the rest of his travels. The next day, he received a call from the actor who plays the ghost, asking why he was cut out of the

⁸⁷ ML interview

film. Confused, Omer Fast and the curator of the exhibit looked into what this call meant. It turns out, between the private opening and the public opening of the show, the censor bureau had asked the Times Museum to edit out the ghost. Their reasoning was that ghosts do not exist after the founding of the People's Republic of China and therefore cannot be shown to the public. This case illustrates the concept of cultural purity. Here is an example of a piece that was censored by China not so much due to its explosive or critical nature, but more so because of an individual topic that does not align with the image China wants to project of itself. The concern is not that Fast, through his, art would incite someone to overthrow the government, rather it is this infiltration of Western cultural elements into Chinese culture.

Fast's experience reveals an interesting contradiction at the heart of this thesis: how does China reconcile wanting to be a leader in the globalized world including in terms of culture while also seeking to preserve its purity and integrity of its own culture? As a general rule, Lista says that pieces with a narrative structure are more difficult to defend against censorship. Among the projects for the opening show she was in charge of, she recalls an exhibit called "Observations." It was made up of a selection of works from the video collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in order to touch on a very salient issue in China right now, surveillance. According to her experience, the pieces that did not make the cut from the censors were not so much due to political content, but rather for scenes that are deemed "too violent" to be shown. A concept she has trouble accepting. Despite an interest in enhancing its global cultural power, the regime in China is only willing to go so far in making compromises. Most important, the CCP is not willing to compromise cultural security for more cultural power. When asked about cultural security, Omer Fast added a last nuance to this idea. In the case of the Times Museum where his video

piece was to be displayed, the museum has had a complicated history of dealing with the censors in China. It has often been the target in part due to the Museum's inherently controversial programming that frequently deals with societal issues in China. For this reason, China's official press never covers anything that happens in and around the Times Museum.⁸⁸ Fast believes his piece was targeted because the language it used was Mandarin, and it assumed the point of view of a Chinese family, making it "more Chinese" than many other pieces of contemporary art displayed by foreigners in China. This increased the sensitivity in the eyes of China's censors, especially since the work would be displayed within a museum with a reputation for displaying critical art. This concept lines up with the idea that the Party is trying to limit the "cultural corruption" and instead promote a preferred, pure vision of Chinese culture.

How does censorship affect contemporary art in China?

Despite these obstacles, contemporary art is growing rapidly in China. Xindong Chen, a Chinese contemporary art collector and gallery owner set up his first space in 2000. He opened his space in Beijing's District 798, the industrial area turned into a sprawling art neighborhood discussed above. Originally, this area was actually closed off to the public with only professionals allowed to visit this artistic nest, but now it has over 10 million visitors annually from all over the world⁸⁹-- 10 million people, becoming more exposed to art, exposed to ideas, cultures and conversations happening all around the world. Working in contemporary art in China is much more difficult than in the West. Restrictions on free speech require a kind of perseverance that is

⁸⁸ Omer Fast interview

⁸⁹ XDC interview

not needed among professionals elsewhere.⁹⁰ Beyond simply the effects of censorship itself on the content of the shows you can or cannot exhibit, the general slowness of the process is a great detractor.⁹¹ Similarly, Xindong Chen says that you are constantly fighting with the censorship bureau, a slow bureaucratic process that takes up a major part of his days. Marcella Lista also says that when working with artists, in a creative environment, the impossibility of any improvisation due to the looming surveillance is not conducive to her line of work. Furthermore, Nathalie Boutin explains that the idea of working in China can be unattractive due to the amount of extra work she knows it will require. She mentions being discouraged and confused when her artists are asked to change their pieces or flat out rejected by the censors. It is something difficult to reconcile coming from a place where freedom of expression can be taken for granted. She sees these obstacles as an impairment which make her think twice about getting involved in projects in China. This is where China's global cultural power in terms of contemporary art starts to fall short.

There are some ways to navigate this complex system. Ultimately, Chen says he doesn't see it as his job to deal with the censors head on, there are more intuitive, indirect ways of dealing with these limitations. This sounds like what Wen says of curating her shows in China, where she never ended up confronted with many issues of censorship. She attributes this to the fact that she always thinks about what is acceptable and what is not before putting on a show.⁹² In a similar vein, but a different situation, Lista, when asked if she would recommend a foreigner pursue another project in China like hers, explains: "You have to be well aware of the context, the nature

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ ML interview

⁹² Xiaoyu Weng interview (Hereby Weng interview)

of the structure and the partners you envisage to work with. Then, it is necessary to gather as much information as possible from the artists and curators working in China: the line of the party undergoes many inflections depending on the "hot topics" of the country's political and social life." While Lista is coming from the point of view of an outsider working in China, her advice ends up similar to that of the native Chinese who understand the system from an insider perspective. Xindong Chen says the key for working in China is to keep your determinations about your project and hold onto hope. You have to accept that it is a much lengthier, complicated process with real life implications. People do disappear, people are imprisoned for saying the wrong things, and these are not things to be taken lightly. She remarks that she herself has chosen to work outside of China and that this is perhaps indicative of the obstacles that exist when working with contemporary art in China. So it is a careful tango between pushing the boundaries of censorship, trying to expand the content available for Chinese people to consume while also working within the constraints of an authoritarian system. A field which requires extremely dedicated and committed people willing to put up with this dance.

At a larger scale, Marcella Lista says that censorship has evidently affected the project of the Centre Pompidou. Compared to modern art for example, which does not tend to cause any particular problems in China (even though these pieces can be subversive and political in their own way), contemporary art requires education. She believes that this is where there is a lot of work to do in China, and it is where she sees the value in the presence of foreign institutions like the Centre Pompidou. The hope is that they may help diversify the spectrum of artists and art works exhibited in China.⁹³ I discussed this idea with Guggenheim curator, and Chinese native,

⁹³ ML interview

Xiaoyu Weng. There is a certain, colonial undertone to the idea that China *needs* the presence of the more *learned* foreign institutions like the Centre Pompidou to teach them about contemporary art and the “right” way of exhibiting works. This exact project fits into the Chinese fear of being dominated by the West, an existential insecurity of the country’s fall from cultural superiority and into subservience. However, while this is a certainly one of the issues at hand, like everything else in China, it is more complex than that. Weng adds that the local people are very happy to have this new space in Shanghai, and the Chinese people who are positioned to open a space like this in their own country would seldom do it on their own. In fact, as illustrated by the West Bund Museum, they seek out partnerships with the experts. Lista explains that she does not have other experience in curating exhibitions in countries governed by authoritarian regimes, but from what she has seen in China with the West Bund project is that there is a true curiosity coming from the Chinese public. There is less prejudice and an eagerness to experience and discuss art. In many ways, she says that the critical discussions happening between academics and professionals in China, are much more vital than in those happening in the West. In part because contemporary art has the potential in Chinese society to become a conduit for debate in a society that otherwise enjoys very limited freedom of expression.

Censorship and contemporary art come hand in hand in China. It is not an avoidable pairing and will not be divisible for the foreseeable future.⁹⁴ However, globalization and our current world order also makes China a foundational player on the field of contemporary art. The country is growing and asserting itself on the world stage. It is on the path to becoming a superpower and with that comes increasing its cultural power. This means that those interested in contempo-

⁹⁴ Weng interview

rary art in China, must be in tune with the realities of working in the context outlined above. The Communist Party's repressive regime may seem at odds with the values of the West, especially freedom of expression, and with the views of the public in the world's other leading states. This slows down China's ability to grow its soft power as Joseph Nye has defined it in the 1990s. By creating a system that is hard to navigate, bureaucratic and disheartening, many contemporary art professionals are discouraged from working in China. Similar to the credibility problem of Confucius Institutes' strategic narratives, these obstacles restrict China's ability to fully radiate cultural power across the world in contemporary art. This research reveals that the CCP has a larger overarching goal when it comes to cultural power, cultural security. This aim sometimes overshadows the goal of building global cultural power because it makes China a difficult place to work, and therefore unattractive (a key to Nye's idea of soft power) to the larger contemporary art community. It is possible to increase cultural power within the constraints that contemporary art faces in China, but that requires anticipating or coping with the restrictions imposed by China's censorship apparatus that gives top priority to maintaining the country's cultural security.

Soft Power, an Expiring Notion in the context of China's Censorship ?

Confucius institutes and contemporary art are two examples of the kind of cultural fabric China is trying to develop in its quest for soft power. CIs embody an active endeavor on behalf of the government to spread its culture and heritage around the world. On paper, these Institutes seem to fit quite nicely with Nye's definition of soft power. China is diffusing its language, history, heritage around the world through these Institutes to be more understood internationally. China's leaders hoped that this project would grow a different kind of power, where instead of get-

ting what they want through coercion, their country could pursue its interests through the sheer power of attraction. However, a credibility problem plagues these institutes and constrains their ability to nurture soft power as Nye defined it. Despite having ever more hard power, China still lags behind other leading states in terms of its soft power. In an article in the *Washington Post*, Nye reflected on a talk he gave at Peking University in 2011. “Great powers often try to use culture and narrative to create soft power that promotes their advantage, but it is not an easy sell when it is inconsistent with their domestic realities.”⁹⁵ This resonates with what is happening at Confucius Institutes. The narrative shared with foreigners in these Institutes is incomplete and this limits China’s ability to develop soft power. The review of the contemporary art scene in China provided above, adds onto this concept but provides a layered picture. Even if it seems that the constraints imposed by the cultural bureau and censors in the country tell a simple story. The difficult “domestic realities” that result from frequent censorship do not actually stop the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art in its steps. Contemporary art in China continues to exist, but within the limits of an insistence on preserving cultural security. What this research has tried to show, is that while leaders often use the umbrella term of “soft power” to denominate cultural power, the kind of cultural power cultivated by Beijing through CIs values cultural security over everything else. This has the unintended consequence to degrade the CCP’s soft power abilities, but this is not the kind of power actually being harvested by the Party in the first place.

⁹⁵ Joseph Nye, “China’s Repression Undoes Its Charm Offensive,” *Washington Post*, 25 March 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/chinas-repression-undoes-its-charm-offensive/2011/03/24/AFdlxRYB_story.html.

In the examples of contemporary art and international exhibitions above, censorship focused on individual topics seen as incompatible with Chinese culture. This limit on freedom of expression should not be seen as something that necessarily prevents China from engaging in public diplomacy. But it does alter the perspective on soft power in the context of China: we need to shift our conceptions of China's interests in terms of culture.

The Chinese approach to image proceeds from the inner world rather than the realm of external expression. China's inner/feeling culture differs from the Western-style external/exploring culture. The Chinese draw a distinction between the internal *neixin* (heart) and external *Mianzi* (face). More than this, the approach to public diplomacy is further confused by the understanding of "power" in Chinese culture. By extension, it becomes even more difficult to work with a concept like soft power.⁹⁶

This is reflected in the way censorship happens in contemporary art. Globalization has lowered the old barriers that national borders represented. As a consequence, international exchanges have become more common. There has been what is sometimes referred to as the globalization of culture, a homogenization and mixing of various traditions and values as the world becomes more and more connected. This homogenization of culture has made the CCP more wary of global cultural and ideological competition.⁹⁷ This fundamentally colors the way Beijing approaches its pursuit of soft power. The CCP sees it not as a tool to radiate Chinese culture in order to be *accepted* but rather as a tool to help fight the unacceptable aspects of the globalization of culture and ideas, to secure a strong, pure Chinese culture.

⁹⁶ Yiwei Wang, "Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese 'Soft Power,'" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 262.

⁹⁷ Kingsley Edney, "Building National Cohesion and Domestic Legitimacy: A Regime Security Approach to Soft Power in China," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 269.

This interpretation provides an answer to one of my original questions. How does a country resolve the contradiction of wanting to be an active participant in globalized culture and still exert control over the information entering and exiting the country? The answer is that the Chinese regime is focused on diffusing a carefully crafted image rather than gaining international acceptance and enhancing its soft power. This focus allows China to “gain the benefits of being open to international cultural influence and exchange without undermining domestic national cohesion or becoming vulnerable to ideological threats.”⁹⁸ The censorship of Omer Fast’s video may conflict with Western our democratic values, making China less attractive and undermining its soft power. But it reflects the way in which China is pursuing cultural power. The CCP is fighting to preserve and protect the purity of the country’s own traditional values and culture while also seeking inserting itself in the international art scene. Similarly, Confucius Institutes, while limited in their usefulness to expand China’s *soft power* (as Nye defined it) because they are plagued by credibility issues, may be useful to the CCP in expanding China’s *cultural power*. The CIs most importantly help control the strategic narrative coming out of China and received worldwide. They help convey an understanding of China’s culture around the globe, rather than allowing potentially hostile foreign narratives to shape that understanding.

Chinese academics who discuss cultural security do not differentiate between culture, values, and ideology.⁹⁹ Cultural power, when understood in the context of cultural security, is an important part of China’s foreign policy. It serves to protect Chinese culture and values from foreign *corruption* while simultaneously helping China to ensure its international relevance. This

⁹⁸ *ibid*

⁹⁹ Edney, “Building National Cohesion,” 282.

differs from the perspective that one would have by analyzing Chinese cultural power sold through the lens of soft power. Barthélémy Courmont, a senior researcher at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, writes, “the nature of the Chinese regime is by itself a limit to the soft power that Beijing seeks to promote. The numerous issues involving human rights, corruption, and the treatment of the opponents are a constant reminder of the true nature of China’s regime. [...] The question whether an authoritarian regime can be attractive and stimulate a desire for imitation can clearly be seen as a major obstacle. But Joseph Nye has not established a direct link between democracy and soft power. So the limits of Chinese soft power lie more in the initiatives and the method – which means the strategy at large – than in the nature of the regime.”¹⁰⁰ This gets at the crux of what we are observing in the context of culture in China, and suggests why the term *soft power*, as Joseph Nye defined it, is not very useful for understanding the CCP’s effort to develop cultural power while ensuring its vision of cultural security. Because Beijing is not willing to compromise on cultural security, it bumps into resistance from cultures who do not understand or accept the Chinese way. Since China prioritizes global cultural power over global cultural *acceptance*, using the familiar lens of Nye’s soft power obscures more than it illuminates.

How does it work going forward?

¹⁰⁰ Barthélémy Courmont, “What Implications for Chinese Soft Power: Charm Offensive or New Hegemony?,” *Pacific Focus* vol.28, no.3 (December 2013): 355.

Once we have accepted that the limitations of Nye's soft power for understanding Xi Jinping's China, where do we go from there? The reality as put forward in the contemporary art example, is that we better understand the implications of the parameters that guide the CCP's policies in an era of globalization. To reiterate the concept of sharp power is defined by Christopher Walker, it is an "approach to international affairs that involves efforts at censorship and the use of manipulation to sap the integrity of independent institutions. Neither "hard" nor "soft" sharp power has the effect of limiting free expression and distorting the political environment. It is sharp in that it seeks to pierce or penetrate the political and information environments of targeted countries."¹⁰¹ While this definition may seem a bit alarmist (and some view it as tainted by Walker's affiliation with the "National Endowment for Democracy") Walker usefully points to a distinction relevant to my reconceptualization of cultural power. At the end of the day, despite France being a proponent of democratic values like freedom of expression, the Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum continues to operate within the realities of censorship. Not only does it still operate, but it actually has played an active role in French foreign policy, as a symbol for the friendship between China and France in the wake of American isolationism. Gallery owners and Chinese museum curators feel the effects of censorship and admit it can limit their mission. Yet they still continue to work with and inside China mainly due to its increasingly wealthy population and growing interest in the field. In this regard, China's cultivation of cultural power rather than soft power, plays a role in helping China make its way to the top of the global cultural hierarchy, but on the CCP's terms.

¹⁰¹ Walker, Christopher. "Russian and Chinese Sharp Power Puts Democracies in Peril." *FT.Com* (Jul 08, 2018). <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/docview/2071757194?accountid=14707>.

There is another subtlety to this refinement of China's approach- its exercise of cultural power is most effective when it is not explicitly or overtly part of a Party plan. Confucius Institutes for example still fall short of their cultural goals because they are seen as too clearly tied to the Chinese government. It is, therefore, less likely that foreigners will distinguish between what is being taught at CIs and the Chinese Communist Party's formal agenda. Contemporary art, on the other hand, elides this concern because of the lack of formal directives coming from the CCP. The lack of fixed guidelines and clear cut rules for censorship makes this space seem navigable. However time consuming and exasperating compared with working in a more liberal setting, ultimately it remains possible for work within the contemporary art in China to go on. When asked about why he chooses to stay in China despite the difficulties of censorship, gallery owner Xindong Chen explains that every once in a while, when you push back against the censorship bureau, you can actually make a case for a piece. The cultural bureau knows very little about contemporary art.¹⁰² By challenging these censored pieces you are at the very least engaging the government in a form of discussion and reflection. And sometimes, at your own level enacting a small change in attitude towards a topic.

This idea that there is hope for change through educating the people about contemporary art, is something I came across many times in my research. Marcella Lista also spoke about the need for Chinese people to learn how to consume contemporary art, as well as curator Xiaoyu Wen who expressed her desire for the younger generation of Chinese people to have a better understanding of contemporary art beyond its commercial value.¹⁰³ This tiny bit of wiggle room in

¹⁰² ML interview

¹⁰³ ML & Weng Interviews

the way the CCP controls contemporary art is actually what allows it to be successful in its broader cultural policy goals. The hope for educating people about how to understand contemporary art, whether grounded in reality or not, is the very thing that makes professionals willing to comply with the repressive attitude of the CCP. This is fundamentally different from Confucius Institutes who propagate the CCP's agenda with little room to adapt. The limitations of Confucius Institutes leave little room for change. One implication of the contrast between the management of CIs and the more flexibly managed contemporary art scene in China is that the CCP might better reconcile its interests in cultural security and international recognition by allowing for the ambiguity of rules that are somewhat vague, and refraining from too formal institutional controls. The lack of explicit directives in regulating China's contemporary art scene has succeeded in keeping people motivated and engaged. The CCP is able to maintain control over the kind of art shown in China through censorship while still nurturing an important and respectable position in the world as a cultural leader.

Conclusion:

This paper has looked at the effects of censorship on China's quest for cultural power. Through the lens of Confucius Institutes and contemporary art in China, the idea was to explore whether a repressive regime can still cultivate soft power. We started off with one central contradiction-- how does China reconcile wanting to open up and interact beyond its borders while keeping a hand on all the information out there either entering or exiting the country? The hypothesis was that the CCP uses censorship and control to *first* ensure cultural security, and *then* spread its culture around the globe on its own terms. The thesis examined Confucius Institutes

and the contemporary art scene in China to understand how the country's cultural outreach is affected by censorship efforts. Contemporary art in China and Confucius Institutes both employ censorship to control the narrative about Chinese culture. Censorship is designed to preclude China's culture from being *polluted* by ideas, values and other elements of cultures that the CCP rejects, thereby assuring cultural security. However, China remains to engage with the world and push itself forward as a powerful cultural entity.

Joseph Nye's definition of soft power is, perhaps unintentionally, linked with the notion of democracy. This partly accounts for its inability to capture what is happening as China's Communist Party relies on censorship and a hard line on freedom of expression while seeking to enter the ranks of global cultural leaders. China tends to conflate cultural influence with national pride,¹⁰⁴ therefore not the *attractiveness* to foreigners that Nye emphasized. The CCP's emphasis on cultural security leads it to engage in a fight to spread its version of the Chinese tradition around the world, while preserving the purity of that culture at home. The CCP's censorship practices in contemporary art and in Confucius Institutes exemplify these efforts to engage with the globalized world on their own terms. Beijing is not building soft power, but it is building secure cultural power, a distinction that has not been captured in much current research.

Finally, I note that this thesis has closely examined censorship in China in order to demonstrate the coexistence of a repressive regime towards freedom of expression and an effort to augment international cultural influence. It is also worth mentioning, however, Western, more "liberal" countries also engage in censorship. It is rarely undertaken as openly as in China, but it should give pause to those who only condemn China's practices while holding up the West as the

¹⁰⁴ Weng interview

embodiment of “correct” democratic values. Xiaoyu Wen, Guggenheim curator told me the story of an exhibition she had been putting together for the museum. She wanted to include an artist whose work included content that could be considered misogynistic. However, this exhibit was on track to be shown at the height of the *Me Too* movement. The Museum asked her to remove this artist’s work from her show, because the content was deemed too politically sensitive for the time. Even if not as common in the West, such censorship serves as a reminder that restrictions on freedom of expression exist outside China. It would be hypocritical to write about the place of Chinese censorship on the world stage without acknowledging that these types of problems also exist in liberal democratic countries.

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