

# Globalizing China: Confucius Institutes and the Paradoxes of Authenticity and Modernity

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Confucius Institutes, the language and culture programs funded by the Chinese government, have been established in more than 1,500 high schools and colleges worldwide since their debut in 2004. A centerpiece of China's soft power policy, they represent an effort to smooth China's path to superpower status by enhancing its global appeal. Yet Confucius Institutes have given rise to voluble and contentious public debate in host countries, where they have been both welcomed as a source of educational funding and cultural enrichment, and feared as spy outposts, neocolonial incursions, and obstructions to academic freedom. *China in the World* turns an anthropological lens on this highly visible and controversial globalization project in an effort to provide fresh insight into China's shifting place in the world.

Taking the study of soft power policy into the classroom, this article offers an anthropological intervention into a subject that has been dominated by the methods and analyses of international relations and political science. It shows that concerns about Confucius Institutes reflect broader debates over globalization and modernity and ultimately about a changing global order. Examining the production of soft power policy *in situ* allows us to move beyond program intentions to see how Confucius Institutes actually shape day-to-day classroom interactions. By assessing the perspectives of participants and exploring the complex ways in which students, teachers, parents, and program administrators interpret the Confucius Institute curriculum, significant gaps are revealed

between China's soft power policy intentions and the effects of those policies in practice.

*China in the World* brings original, long-term ethnographic research to bear on how representations of and knowledge about China are constructed, consumed, and articulated in encounters between China, the United States, and the Confucius Institute programs themselves. It moves a controversial topic beyond the realm of policy making to examine the mechanisms through which policy is implemented, engaged, and contested by a multitude of stakeholders and actors. It provides new insight into how policy actually works, showing that it takes more than financial wherewithal and official resolve to turn cultural presence into power. The chapter presented here is adapted from *China in the World*.

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We gathered, twenty-six American high school students and three chaperones, at a US airport, sporting matching T-shirts that advertised our group as members of the Chinese Bridge summer program sponsored by Hanban, the Beijing institute that directs the worldwide Confucian Institute programs. We were set to join more than six hundred US high school students on a seventeen-day study tour of China, starting in Beijing and then, in smaller groups of eighty to one hundred, heading to various provinces for an additional two weeks of language and culture instruction before returning to Beijing for more touring and an

elaborate farewell ceremony. Each year, Hanban sponsors five to six hundred US students on a visit to China. While the students on our tour paid for their airfare and a small administrative fee, some of which was used to partially reimburse the travel fees of the chaperones, once they were in China, Hanban covered all expenses, including domestic travel, housing, meals, Chinese language classes, tourist excursions, and cultural performances. Members of our group came from a variety of local schools with Confucius Institutes and had studied Chinese for at least one year prior to our departure. Several had grown up in Chinese-speaking households in the United States and were functionally fluent in the language.<sup>1</sup>

After clearing US airport security, our Chinese Bridge group boarded a plane bound for Beijing. A layover in Tokyo offered one gleeful cluster of students an opportunity to avail themselves of “local” culture in the form of a Japanese McDonald’s, while others gathered around the chaperones in the boarding area and chatted about what to expect when we finally reached Chinese soil. Questions about bathroom facilities dominated the conversation. “Will we be able to shower every day?” one of the students asked, and students groaned when a chaperone informed them that, yes, indeed, they would encounter many squat toilets and reminded them that “you are going there partially for the experience, too.”

It was well after midnight when we arrived at our final destination, a boarding school on the outskirts of Beijing where a massive marble statue of Confucius saluted our entrance to the campus. While students were shuffled off to bed, chaperones were ushered down a dimly lit, cavernous hallway decorated on one side with a mural of China’s cultural glories (including the Potala Palace in Tibet and the terra-cotta warriors) superimposed with images of a rocket, a bullet train, and the vibrantly red 2010 Shanghai Expo China Pavilion. The text

on the mural, in English and Chinese, read “Beautiful China,” providing a gloss for the meaning of these juxtaposed images. Upon reaching a large conference room, we were welcomed to Beijing by an official from Hanban who further elaborated on the mural’s combination of the traditional and the modern. Although “the Great Wall is a famous symbol,” she took care to tell us, “now Beijing is a successful and modern city. It successfully held the Olympics.” Interpreting our presence as configuring desire, she added, “I’m so glad you find Chinese culture so amazing.”



**Mural on wall at Beijing boarding school.  
Photo by J. Hubbert**

As a mechanism of soft power efforts to operationalize culture, the Chinese Bridge program hosts American high school students for a visit to China in the hope of creating a generation of citizens in foreign countries who hold favorable opinions about China and the Chinese state, thereby, as Nye explains, “getting others to want the outcomes that you want” (2004, 5) through cooptation rather than coercion. This article explores the paradoxes of modernity and authenticity that emerged as the Chinese Bridge program sought to create soft power through offering China as a new model of the global through reconfiguring local

tradition in the service of a new kind of global modernity, as the mural on the wall and the introductory speech suggested. We might think of these efforts as an attempt at the hybridity of what Latour (1993) calls the paradox of the modern, in which the modern has always existed in hybrid form. While Latour theorizes this in terms of rigid dichotomies of nature/culture, we might consider how China here invokes tradition in such a way as to conceptualize it as a source of the modern that contests both representations of China as ontologically backward and the West as ontologically contemporary and theorizations of globalization that see modernity and tradition as antithetical and distinctive projections.

Soft power engagements such as CIs reflect not only how nations assess both their assets and their locations in global hierarchies of power but also the complex ways that meaning is actualized by diverse constituencies and representations rather than by policy alone. Thus, although the Chinese Bridge program provides a valuable example of the CCP's attempt to redefine China's place in the world by positioning the nation as an active subject rather than an object of cultural and economic flows, it also demonstrates the paradoxes of authenticity when the international targets of those policies misinterpret or reject the program's reconfiguration of China's changing place in the world because of their own ideas about China and about what constitutes the authenticity of local and global.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, we note that there are different target audiences for soft power efforts and that these paradoxes are "read" differently by distinct audiences. From policy's perspective, such paradoxes are read as "misinterpretations" by the global audience but are countered by a domestic audience whose "appropriate" reading of soft power engagements—China as an emergent embodiment of modernity and the global—encourages national unity and stability, conditions that are central to China's global goals of projecting itself as a peaceful

superpower and to its domestic goals of continued development.

## Evoking International Desire for China

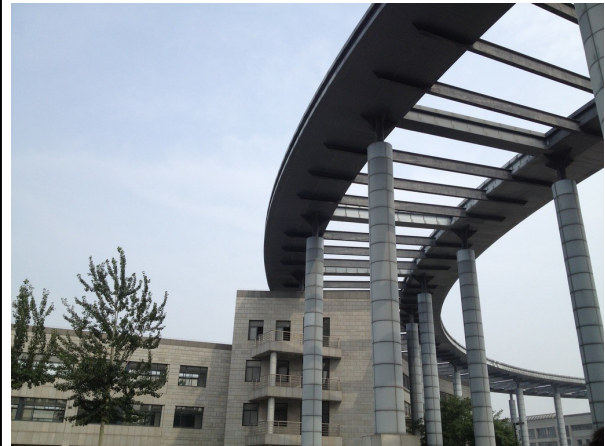
From the very beginning, China's CI program has problematized the assumed processes of globalization, an example of an erstwhile peripheral target of globalization now engaging in the process as a source rather than a recipient. Historically, dominant Western representations of globalization have configured the center or the "metropole," broadly understood as Europe and the United States, as the cradle of globalization and the model of what is considered the cosmopolitan and modern global. The "periphery" then is theorized as the parochial local as well as the object of globalization. The global, in contrast, represents the commonsensical "norm," the unmarked universal that is an "obvious" object of desire (the West), while the local is marked as particular to a place—the counterpart of the global—quaint perhaps, but not an apparent source of universal value and practice.

The juxtaposition of the global (bullet trains and Olympic games) and the local (terra-cotta warriors and Tibetan palaces) in the CI official's introduction and the boarding school's mural reflected two mechanisms employed by CIs to challenge these assumptions and establish China as a model for the global. I term the first of these strategies "witnessing the modern," through which summer program students were provided with numerous experiences that allowed students to "witness" the expected tangible results of China's fast-track modernization and its rightful place on the global stage, phenomena that evoked what Tsing (2000a) calls the "charisma" of the global. The second strategy I term the "embodied performance of tradition," in which students were invited to experience China as a model for a singular kind of global through encounters with traditional Chinese culture,

what Schmidt labels a “politics of affect,” through which students are meant to demonstrate an appreciation of China through “mimetic cultural performance” (2013, 661). As we shall see, the first of these strategies replicates dominant concepts of the global—as a place of avant-garde architecture, high technology, and luxury consumption—while the second presents China as a new model for globalization precisely because it has resisted globalization’s homogeneity by maintaining its traditions.<sup>3</sup>

### Witnessing the Modern

After two days in Beijing, the students and chaperones in the summer program were dispatched in smaller groups to various provincial cities, where they were hosted by a variety of universities that had formal affiliations with CIs in the United States. Our cohort was joined by two other groups of American students for a total of fifty students and five chaperones. We were posted to a large city in eastern China where we studied at a small inner-city branch of the university and were housed at a hotel on the outskirts of town, a thirty-minute bus ride away.<sup>4</sup> Our host university had also built an immense new campus in the suburbs, and on our first day after leaving Beijing we were treated to a tour of the grounds and the campus’s new library, a stunning, multistoried granite building replete with floor-to-ceiling stacks of books and the latest in computer technology.



**Newly constructed university campus.**  
**Photo by J. Hubbert**

The university had yet to open fully for operations, and as we meandered through the otherwise silent hallways, one of the CI teachers asked a student why she was not taking pictures of the library. “They took off all the plastic on the computers for you,” she remarked, seeming to suggest that the students failed to comprehend the importance of the occasion. The students, who were no strangers to architectural grandeur and familiar with more bustling libraries, were not entirely clear about the rationale for our visit until I explained that the school was excited to show us their new campus, which was a marked material improvement from the old and somewhat decrepit buildings the university had occupied before. Although our hosts had anticipated that the students would be eager to share pictures of this architectural and technological splendor with friends and family at home, the students were not interested in replicating experiences with which they were already familiar, as their apathy and shuttered cameras suggested.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next two weeks, our excursions to such sites as museums, an airplane assembly



factory, and extravagant shopping malls confirmed our hosts' commitment to our witnessing the modern, taking routes to our destinations that revealed to us newly developed thoroughfares, luxury automobile dealerships, "villa" housing, modernist skyscrapers, and lush golf courses, all internationally recognizable as contemporary manifestations of global arrival. The sites we visited and witnessed through the bus windows reflected common expectations about what constitutes a global built environment, and scholars have noted how emerging nations, as Aihwa Ong explains, "exercise their power by assembling glass and steel towers to project particular visions of the world (2011, 1) that resemble the skylines of "global cities" such as New York and London. Ong also notes how Asian cities have emerged in the twenty-first century as "fertile sites" for architectural experiments that "reinvent what urban norms can count as 'global'" (2011, 2). In twenty-first-century China, billions have been spent hiring the world's most high-profile architects and constructing a skyline that, as noted architect Rem Koolhaas explains, now "rises in the East" (cited in Ong 2011, 2), drawing attention away from New York and London as the foremost sites of architectural innovation and symbols of globalization. These CI tour group excursions reconfirmed the conceptual terra firma of the built environment, offering students an opportunity to witness the monumentalization of space. These particular tours were revelations not of "we can do it differently" but of "we can do modern, and do it as well," pedagogical experiences that substantiated an accepted form of globalization through a built environment that, while not unique or reinvented as a form of difference, was recognizable globally as a contemporary manifestation of presumed globalization.``

Another such CI projection of China's ability to embody the global was through introducing students to the city's "Italian-style street"—a former Italian concession in an old Western

treaty port with Italian-style buildings that had been restored and turned into a pedestrian mall. The introduction began with a film shown in the CI classroom that described the area, which we were to visit shortly, as "a dramatic experience with humanity and commerce, an emotional clash between tradition and modernity, a fantastic journey to search for exoticness and Chinese style." With Italian opera playing in the soundtrack, the film's sepia-toned images on-screen moved fluidly from ancient Italy to ancient China before ending in a burst of color showing China's own version of an Italian town, a scene of well-heeled travelers, late-model cars, and rows of equal-sized Chinese and Italian flags flying side by side that suggested the equivalence of the two nations. Subsequent images featured advanced development and urban renovation, and voice-overs touted the neighborhood as the "largest place of Italian culture in Asia" and as an urban space of "unending prosperity." Employing a language of syncretism, the lecture that followed the film explained that this neighborhood was an example of "Chinese lifestyle European architecture" and a "typical blend of Chinese and Western culture" that exhibited how "China is able to blend different cultures so successfully." During our visit to the Italian town, we witnessed tourists being taken for rides in horse-drawn carriages by drivers wearing American-style cowboy hats and Chinese brides and grooms having their pictures taken wearing Western wedding attire. Dining on pizza and sipping Starbucks lattes despite the heat, the students experienced China as a globalized space of consumption meant to showcase the level of luxury achieved by China's economic boom and the country's ability to globalize in syncretic and imaginative fashion. Ong notes how oftentimes these manifestations of globalization are assumed to "create a global space that effaces national identity," thwart "national sovereignty," and subject local spaces to the "logic of placeless capital" (Ong 2011, 205). Yet, what we see in this case is not merely a reduction of the nation

to the logic of global capital, but more what Ong calls a “play of exception,” in which it is global capital that is the tool for national sovereignty, marking the nation as the manifestation of the global for the sake of local (China’s) political power.

Riding back to our hotel, one of the CI officials sitting next to me reiterated the intended purpose of such tours, exclaiming, “This is a really worthwhile program; it changes students’ ideas about China. They realize that China is much more modern than they thought.” And indeed, students frequently expressed a new awareness. “I’m surprised at how modern China is,” one told me. “I hadn’t expected that.” Similarly, another stated, “I thought China was going to be big and crowded,” then added, with a tone of surprise, “but it’s modern.” CI teachers I talked with in the United States were accustomed to such reactions and over the years had recounted to me the sometimes anachronistic images students and parents brought into the CI classroom. “One parent asked me if we had two-story buildings,” one teacher told me, while another reported having been asked if her parents would arrange her marriage and if women still bound their feet. Although “they know about the Olympics,” this teacher continued, “I think we need to show them the real China, modern China, that it’s like the United States, the modern cities. They are surprised by this.” Yet the summer program students often appended a caveat to their appreciation of China’s modernity, such as one who noted, “But then when you’re sitting on the bus and the guide is pointing out all this modern stuff, you look on the other side and you instantly see all this real poverty. The two are right next to each other.” In these narratives, somehow “real poverty” at home in the United States had less symbolic power. While modern and antiquated were visibly contiguous in both China and the United States, modern rarely emerged for China as the predominant signifier, while poverty never

emerged as an essentialized indicator of the West. And rather than the luxury car dealership, what the students chose to memorialize in their photographs was the urban Walmart, the American purveyor of inexpensive products made in China, thus configuring China as a supplier of consumption for global others rather than a model of the global, the object, not the subject, of globalization. Thus despite the CI’s effort to offer China as modernity’s embodiment, students often continued to perceive it as not quite having achieved the status of the global modern.

### (Mis)Reading the Modern

After several days of such experiences, on a bus ride back to our hotel, students asked me why, if they were there to study Chinese and learn about China, we were spending long days visiting museums and airplane assembly factories and driving by car dealerships and skyscrapers. Less than a week into our seventeen-day excursion, the planned and clearly didactic activities were already beginning to wear on students’ nerves. “My mom tricked me into coming here,” one student moaned, expressing his frustration with a tour that was clearly not meeting his expectations. Attempts by Confucius Institutes to establish appreciation for China by providing evidence that would allow students to categorize China as the unmarked global rather than the particular, traditional local were not read as identification with their norms for the global but rather as betrayal and coercion. “It feels like jail, bus jail, school jail, no opportunities to just wander around,” another student moaned, slumping into a lounge chair in the hotel lobby and pulling out his cell phone to check his texts from home.

The sites that our Chinese hosts had intended to model the irreducibly global—the dramatic architecture and world-class museums—were

instead being experienced by students as forms of censorship and control that reinforced common Western perceptions of China's authoritarian political life. These students equated the "real" China they were being shown with image control, not with evidence of modernity. Rather than reading along with a narrative of spectacle that offered visions of Chinese global commensurability, they had come to view these experiences with disbelief and distrust. As we chatted one day, one of the girls said, "If I had known it was going to be all this museum stuff, I wouldn't have come. . . . It's all image control. . . . I would like to know what China is *really* like, not the PR trip we've been on." While the historical eras and global hierarchies of power are different, China's efforts to fashion a particular image through cultural exchange reflect Soviet-US/European cultural exchanges in the period between the two world wars, in which the treatment of European and American visitors to the Soviet Union speaks volumes to how the Soviet Union understood itself as a global power (David-Fox 2011). Drawing upon the concept of the Potemkin village, originally staged to deceive Catherine the Great into thinking Russia more developed than it was, Michael David-Fox explores how the Soviet Union guided foreigners through a "cultural show" (2011, 98) that staged political lessons for visitors from the capitalist West designed to counter assumptions about Russian backwardness and institute an image of Russia as the path forward for global development. This era led directly into a cultural Cold War period that David Caute characterizes as follows: "Never before had empires felt so compelling a need to prove their virtue, to demonstrate their spiritual superiority, to claim the high ground of 'progress,' to win public support and admiration by gaining ascendancy in each and every event of what might be styled the Cultural Olympics" (cited in David-Fox 2011, 321). Yet while the original Potemkin villages were temporary structures, designed purposefully to deceive, there was nothing

either provisional or intentionally misleading about the monumental built environment featured on the CI tours that caused the skepticism. It was not so much the object but the pedagogy that proved frustrating for the students.

In case the students should miss the intended meaning of these expeditions, the guides and teachers continually engaged in a process I began to think of as the "perpetual presence of the adverb": China had "skillfully" integrated, "rapidly" modernized, "successfully" globalized, they informed us. Teachers and guides also frequently attempted to shape the students' learning by making sure they recognized that the intended objects of attention, in the words of one teacher, were "specific to Chinese culture and can teach us about China." Clearly, our guides believed that China needed to be taught, not merely experienced. This belief—or at least this hope—was expressed by our host university's vice dean of international affairs shortly before we returned to Beijing: "You must feel so proud of what you did in this short ten days. You've learned so many new things and had so many new experiences. It all must have impressed you and left a big impression. You can now see what Chinese culture is like. . . . You can now see what China is really like. It's better to see than to hear."<sup>6</sup>

Confucius Institute guides, who were themselves, as they explained to me frequently over the years, impressed by and proud of how rapidly China had come to embody these markers of the global, were perplexed by the students' responses and questioned me about why the students failed to come to similar conclusions.<sup>7</sup> Interpreting the students' dissatisfaction as a result of their not yet being "used to" China, the response of the guides and teachers, like that of any good host, was to try to provide students with what teachers assumed they were accustomed to in their everyday lives.<sup>8</sup> One day, for example, we

pulled into a deserted parking lot at lunchtime and waited in confusion for fifteen minutes before employees from a local McDonald's climbed aboard with boxes full of Big Macs, French fries, and sodas. But as we chewed on our burgers and sipped our sodas in the parking lot, the student sitting next to me, rather than appreciating these efforts, complained, "I didn't come to China to eat McDonald's; I came to China to eat Chinese food," his earlier dash to the Tokyo airport McDonald's clearly forgotten. During our visit, I often noticed similar forms of hospitality, particularly at mealtimes, when alongside Chinese food, students were offered French fries and milk. When I questioned one of our guides about the ubiquitous French fries and the trip to McDonald's, she replied that they wanted to make the students feel comfortable and "at home." While making the students feel at home was a marker of gracious hospitality, it also demonstrated that China, too, had McDonald's and milk and other recognized forms of global consumption. But many students often found these reminders of home unwelcome, both because they were seeking experiences that were different from home and because these attempts were often perceived as inadequate. The French fries, the students complained, were usually cold, and the milk was always warm, suggesting to the students that despite China's efforts to achieve global commensurability by showcasing its modernization, the nation remained, in Homi Bhabha's words, "almost the same, *but not quite*" (1984, 127). Although China might have gotten monumental architecture and luxury goods right, the same could not be said about the consumption of fast food and dairy products. Hospitality, Andrew Shryock contends (2012, S20), can be seen as a "test of sovereignty," and the students' refusal to submit to the CI guides' assemblage of meaning in these interactions injected doubt about China's ability to be the protective host and to model the global.<sup>9</sup>

The more our hosts provided material examples of China's modernity that were meant to stress China's rightful position on the global stage, the more their efforts were met with skepticism from the students, setting off what Robert Albrow calls "boundary-patrolling" discourses that reify cultural difference and confirm negative stereotypes rather than promote diplomacy (Albrow 2015). Indeed, as we exited a museum after having listened to detailed information on the building's spectacular architecture and world-class status, and on China's history of persecution at the hands of foreign imperialists, two students pulled me aside and asked why the museum tour guide "seems to leave out stuff and make it always seem like they [the Chinese] are the good guys." The students were clearly either ignoring or blissfully unaware of how their own historical textbooks engaged in similar practices. "It's all so controlled," another grumbled. The CI program's categories and opportunities for witnessing the modern had produced "zones of boredom and unreadability" (Tsing 2005, 172). Confucius Institute attempts to relocate the locus of the global, to construct a global marker of appreciation for China through powerful and even charismatic evidentiary moments of categorization and validation, were not read by students as identification but rather as coercion.

### Embodying Tradition

In short, Hanban's efforts to produce soft power sometimes failed to resonate with American students. While Hanban strove to present an image of the Chinese nation as universally modern, student responses suggest that rather than commonality, commensurability, and evidence of China's status as a global power, they sought particularity and what they perceived to be Chinese authenticity. The Chinese Bridge program attempted to fulfill that desire and



advance its soft power objectives with a second strategy of presenting China not only as a worthy member of the global community but also as a superior model of globalization that, by maintaining a vibrant traditional “local” culture rather than succumbing to Western cultural imperialism, rejected the widespread perception that globalization initiates the cultural homogenization of the world.

The form of local particularity emphasized in CI programming and curriculum around the world highlights a China defined not only by its global modernization but also by its long cultural tradition. As Schmidt has argued, Hanban’s presentation of Chinese tradition suggests an attempt to “replace affective economies of fear” regarding China’s place in the world with “affective economies of a beneficial and good PRC” by making Chinese culture fun (2014, 357). I also suggest that this turn to tradition entails an attempt to restructure relations of global and local. As Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have highlighted, “[‘Locality’ is not everywhere, nor for every purpose, the same thing; sometimes it is a family, sometimes a town, a nation, sometimes a flow or a field, sometimes a continent or even the world; often it lies at the point of articulation among two or more of these things” (1999, 294). It is this point of articulation that is important here, for the CIs thus not only posed China as challenging what “counts” for the local and the global; they also suggested a reconceptualization of the relationship between the local and the global.



**Hanban headquarters. Photo by J. Hubbert**

The first stop on the Chinese Bridge program’s tour of Beijing was a trip to Hanban headquarters, an interactive and educational space that offered a glimpse of how local tradition would be rendered and experienced over the next two weeks. In the “Exploratorium” section, an instructional space that resembled US children’s museums by offering opportunities for hands-on manipulation of artifacts and computerized lessons on history, students could don Beijing opera costumes, manipulate beads on a massive abacus, make paper and print a book, and view ink-brush paintings, all either common symbols of traditional Chinese culture or recognized examples of historically advanced technological accomplishments. Students could also take computer quizzes asking such questions as “Which of the following is in Beijing: the Terra Cotta Warriors

or the Temple of Heaven?”—an ostensible geography question that also called attention to globally recognized historic and cultural splendors of China. In a nearby room, students engaged in more applied activities, moving between tables staffed by arts and crafts experts demonstrating how to paint Beijing opera masks, tie Chinese knots, and cut paper into intricate forms, and offering samples for interested students to take home.<sup>10</sup>

The lessons on cultural tradition continued later that afternoon and into the evening. Our visit to Hanban headquarters was followed by stops at a Confucian temple and a Tibetan Buddhist temple, which the tour guide framed as examples of China’s ethnic harmony, cultural focus on education, and religious freedom (the last of these “as long as it doesn’t get too political,” he explained). During our evening lecture, titled “Getting to Know China,” the speaker referenced these afternoon activities and explained that Confucianism is key to understanding Chinese thought, emphasizing its philosophical focus on social order, good government, harmony, education, and filial piety (joking “That’s why we have tiger moms”). Much of his lecture provided background information intended to set the stage for the presentation of cultural traditions that would dominate our activities for the remainder of our visit, including discussions of yin-yang symbols, calligraphy, Chinese food, the Chinese zodiac, and the color red.

What was omitted from this lecture became visible when the speaker ended his presentation with a question-and-answer session. One student, speaking in Chinese, seemed to equate Chairman Mao with the absolute rulers of China’s imperial past by asking why the speaker had excluded Mao from his hurried list of Chinese historical dynasties. His face clouding over, the speaker brusquely responded that the last dynasty had ended in 1911, well before Mao came to power, and that Mao was not an emperor. The student, looking

confused, asked her question again in English, which revealed that she had actually meant to ask why cats (a word that in Chinese has the same sound as Mao) had not been included in the list of zodiac signs. What had been perceived as a challenge to the lecturer’s apparent repression of contentious figures in Chinese history was in fact merely a reference to a cultural product (the Chinese lunar calendar) that is standard pedagogical fare in CI classrooms and was invoked frequently during the rest of our journey.<sup>11</sup>

After leaving Beijing, on most days the students gathered for several hours of Chinese instruction in the morning and after lunch for lectures on traditional culture and historic sites, including such topics as tile-roofed architecture, Confucianism, and the terra-cotta warriors. Following the lectures, local experts would demonstrate China’s art and craft traditions and then set students free to try their hands at cutting “double happiness” symbols from red paper, painting Beijing opera masks, and tying Chinese knots. These activities not only replicated almost exactly those at Hanban headquarters but were staple activities in CIs’ pedagogical method of combining language learning and cultural appreciation activities, and thus the students had “performed” China this way many times before in their CC classrooms.<sup>12</sup>



**Opera mask activities. Photo by J. Hubbert**

As I watched the students perform China through these activities over the span of our visit, it increasingly became clear that the practices intended to promote soft power had actually backfired in several ways. While this may have been a result of cultural differences in expectations—with American students perhaps less tolerant of repetition and uniformity than their hosts expected—their effectiveness also appeared limited by Hanban’s strategy of defining authenticity as “Culture with a capital C,” demonstrated by these projects’ failure to produce the intended admiration and appreciation. “Do we really have to do this?” one student moaned as an instructor pulled out piles of red paper and boxes of scissors to explain traditional Chinese paper-cutting techniques, complaining that “I’ve done this so many times.” To spur interest, one of the chaperones suggested having a competition for the best paper cut, but it seemed to have little effect, as evidenced by a row of boys in the back napping with their heads on the tables. And on opera-mask-painting day, students engaged not only in eye rolling and nap taking, but also, to the displeasure of the teachers, took considerable poetic license with their projects, several of which more closely resembled characters from

*Planet of the Apes* and *Batman* than standard Chinese opera characters. As one student said to me toward the end of our seventeen-day tour, stressing the last word, “I want to come back on a college overseas trip, but not on a Confucius Institute trip. I want more culture, not all this *Culture*.”

Students were eager to experience culture with an anthropological lowercase *c*, a different kind of particularity than was offered by the CI program. The contrast between the normalized “global” Chinese culture presented by the Chinese Bridge program and the exoticized local Chinese culture desired by the students demonstrates the gaps that can occur between soft power policy intentions and their actual effects. The students’ grumbling was not about China itself but about the didacticism and pedestrian classes and art projects through which it was being presented.<sup>13</sup> Their days were structured from morning until night, with neither opportunity nor permission to explore beyond the confines of the mandated tour activities. The frames of reference through which Hanban attempted to advance China as characterizing the global remained illegible to the students, highlighting the paradoxical notions of authenticity that the various actors brought to the setting. Precisely because China has not consistently preserved past traditions within the modern, Hanban could only resort to paper cutting and terra-cotta warriors as emblematic of “tradition.” And yet, the authentic local offered by the CIs through these traditional practices had become so common and normalized—so global—that they no longer constituted a form of essentialized difference or at least the exoticized difference sought by students, as we will see in the following pages.

While the final week of our visit continued this pattern of language instruction, visits to historical sites and cultural monuments, meals with host families, and traditional arts and crafts projects, the afternoons were now dominated by hours of practice for a grand



finale performance that would be presented in Beijing on the last evening of our stay. Local instructors had choreographed traditional and modern dance routines and selected students to perform, dressing them in traditional Chinese minority and Han costumes accessorized with feathered fans and elaborate headdresses. I grinned as I watched one Chinese American student, outfitted in a leopard-print costume, leap across the floor and proclaim himself the “Asian Macklemore,” a reference to the Seattle-based American rapper, and grimaced as I overheard the following exchange between two students: “What do we win if we’re the best group?” “Nothing. They make you stay in China longer.”



**Preparing for the grand performance.**  
Photo by J. Hubbert

During the final performance in Beijing, students from all over the United States came together to perform their routines. One group

break-danced to Taiwanese pop idol Jay Chou’s hit sensation “Qinghuaci” (Blue and White Porcelain), a melodramatic love song that evokes traditional Chinese art forms, while another performed a tightly choreographed paean to filial piety that included prostrations before an immense image of Confucius and was set to a Chinese song about respecting one’s parents and elders. Still others mimicked the elaborate kung fu moves of Shaolin monks set to music. In the finale, all the performers joined onstage to sing and dance to “Beijing Welcomes You,” a theme song of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

These kinds of cultural performances are standard fare in China, similar most notably in the popular *Chinese New Year Gala*, an extravagant dance and musical variety show regularly viewed by more than 90 percent of the population (Liu Kang 2012, 928). Comparable state-sponsored “minority” performances featuring dancers and musicians in ethnic dress performing “traditional” routines are also common, an attempt to demonstrate China’s ethnic heterogeneity and multiculturalism.<sup>14</sup> But the students themselves tended eventually to see these performances as what Dean MacCannell has termed “staged authenticity” (1976, 91), a phrase that implies the opposite of authenticity. Well before our arrival back in Beijing, many of the students in our group had wearied of Hanban’s attempts at inducing students to embody tradition; paper cutting, painting opera masks, and dressing up in traditional and minority costumes were not the form of authenticity they hoped to encounter during their visit, where they sought to learn about what they understood to be “the real China,” not Hanban’s sanitized version.

Ironically, the soft power objectives of the Chinese Bridge program were often more effectively met by moments in which the more blatant attempts to win hearts and minds were trumped by the unplanned and unintended. The unscheduled and unguided evening activities of



the students illuminate some of the disparate assumptions and objectives of the China tour held by students and Hanban officials and teachers. The highly scripted days of the program often ended with students, tired and frustrated, wandering around the hotel hallways in search of experiences that seemed less derivative and universal. Because our hotel was located in a newly emerging area of town that afforded little in the way of entertainment and commerce, I frequently found myself the leader of unscripted nighttime excursions to an adjacent outdoor night market. Chinese night markets are typically informal and dynamic open-air spaces that come to life after sunset. This particular market was tucked into a corner of an intersection of two main thoroughfares and consisted of temporary stalls set up largely by migrants to the region or laid-off local laborers to market their various foodstuffs.

Most of the food at the market was quite unfamiliar to Americans, including baby octopus skewers, deep-fried grubs on a stick, “stinky tofu,” and spicy mutton. Yet, upon our arrival at the market, the students would race from stall to stall, asking questions about the cuisine, pantomiming animatedly when their rudimentary Chinese proved insufficient or enlisting my help with translation, and purchasing various food items, the more unrecognizable the better. Using their cell phone cameras, which were constantly out, they captured images of the sellers, the fare, and fellow students. “This is the real China,” one exclaimed as she stuffed a pungent bite of stinky tofu into her mouth. After our first visit, other students pleaded with me to accompany them to the market upon hearing that this was where one could find what they understood to be a genuine version of China. These market excursions provided students with an opportunity to experience what they perceived as a form of Chinese authenticity, in which snacking on unidentified creatures roasted on a stick delineated the “real.” To students, the value of these encounters rested upon a margin

of essentialized difference that could not be overcome by the host university’s endeavors to improve the image of China by providing them with the global familiar or the prepackaged traditional. Student constructions of authenticity were based on consumption of the forbidden, the off-plan, the exotic unknown. Yet, what they placed value on was not the object of consumption itself, which was typically proclaimed “gross” by those who consumed it, but the *act* of consumption.<sup>15</sup> Here the students performed China for each other and for the recipients of their Instagrams and Snapchats back home, mugging grimaces after ingesting deep-fried silkworm or smirking with octopus legs protruding from the corners of their mouths. Here the exotic indigestible was the object of a desire not to satisfy hunger, but for adventure and difference that reinforced, one could argue, their own sense of cosmopolitanism and globality, and their teenaged pushing at boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

Other visits to various retail outlets illustrated the distinctions between what students and guides considered culture that spoke positively for China. When our guides took us to upscale shopping malls whose luxury rivaled anything in the United States, students would wander around in desultory fashion and complain about the excursion. They appeared to come alive, though, on shopping trips to the informal markets that sold imitation Western products and inexpensive Chinese handicrafts. Indeed, some of the most animated discussions of the trip consisted of “battle stories” about bargaining with merchants for fake Beats headphones and Converse knock-offs. As a student I interviewed in the United States explained, visiting the “fake brands market” was “really cool”: when her group went to the market, “they [the merchants] tried to rip us off, of course.” She found this to be “the funnest part of the trip.” Seeming to reinforce the hierarchies of difference and power the program was intended to refute, the “fun” for this and other students lay in conquering the

local by refusing to pay the higher prices targeted for global tourists, demanding that the market salesperson surrender to their demands to lower the price of their counterfeit goods. Rather than situate China as a model of the modern global, these excursions offered a space for the relatively affluent to enact their self-conceptions as knowing, cosmopolitan travelers not willing to be duped in a market whose flexible pricing was based on one's skin tone or, for the phenotypically Asian students, one's Chinese language abilities.

While students in general complained about the cold French fries, warm milk, lack of hot water, and somewhat dilapidated living conditions, they were forgiving of what they perceived to be the authentic China—symbolized here in exotic foodstuffs and bargaining for merchandise. Even if the food was “gross” and goods were overpriced imitations, they were imagined as involving experiences of the real China. That student assessments of local authenticity reflected not only the object (exotic food or branded products) but the form of its delivery (night markets or upscale shopping centers) was perhaps most visible when the CI offered this same “culture” but in a different format—alien foodstuffs at an expensive restaurant. By the end of our stay outside Beijing, the teachers and guides had become aware of student complaints and responded by trying to add activities to the standard Hanban package in order to counteract students' seeming weariness with the familiar.<sup>17</sup> One of these special activities was a guided boat tour of the city's river that meandered through the downtown region, an experience that one of our guides suggested would allow us to witness the “spectacular sights and impressive development of the city,” while another was an elaborate and costly lunch at a local restaurant that was renowned for its preparation of a local delicacy called *goubuli*.<sup>18</sup> During the lunch, the *goubuli* buns were accompanied by an endless stream of intricate delicacies that were greeted with

vocal approbation by the Chinese guests and skepticism by the students, who found the food unfamiliar in texture and taste and ate very little, to the dismay of their hosts, who had spent a good deal of money on the adventure and gone to great lengths to procure last-minute tables at this popular upscale restaurant. Although the dishes at the banquet were no more “exotic” than those the students consumed so gleefully at the night market, they remained largely untouched and students complained to me that they were being “forced” to attend another boring public relations production. As Mei Zhan reports of a similar incident when soccer star David Beckham toured China and refused to consume the “exotic” dishes of a celebratory banquet in his honor, for the students, this food, in this context, was coded as the “imaginary of a traditional, exotic Chinese culture out of sync with a cosmopolitan world” (2005, 33). In contrast, the teachers and guides who accompanied us were aghast at the waste that sat before them and on the return bus revealed that they had not eaten because their university could not afford the extra expense of feeding everyone. As we got off the bus and the teachers ran into the cafeteria to see if any food remained from lunch, it was clear that the lunch had reproduced differences that confirmed rather than challenged students' sense that China continued to lack the necessary ingredients to be counted as “global.”

Even when the CI offered particularity through opportunities to perform and consume the local, the activities failed to bridge the gap in expectations of the students, who resisted CI offerings of culture as tainted by an attempt to render them malleable soft power targets. These perceptions seemed confirmed when, at the end of our stay in China, students were required to compose final essays describing their experiences and many of them wrote about the excitement over their night market encounters for what they considered to be

authentic China. One, for example, wrote as follows: “One night my friend and I got invited to visit the night market and we really wanted to go. Once we got there, I instantly loved it. Even though there were so many exotic foods and smells, I was out of the hotel and just enjoyed being out and experiencing in person instead of from a bus window. That night I felt adventurous and I managed to try a larva and octopus! It was really interesting and fun. . . . Overall I really enjoy walking on the streets day or night and just feel immersed into the culture because that it is why I wanted to come to China.”

However, when students turned in their essays, CI teachers quickly instructed them to remove references to their night market adventures and instead highlight Hanban-sanctioned activities that reflected the official intentions and values of the Chinese Bridge program. When one of the teachers explained to me that the students “need to mention the extra things that Hanban has done for them,” such as “the special lunch and the boat ride,” and I passed on this request to the students, they moaned, “But the night market was my favorite.” But by then, students had gotten the message that Hanban meant to communicate China as an exemplary peaceful first world nation, not a land of bizarre indigestibles. Along with their required essays, they were asked to hand in a copy of their favorite picture of their time in China, and I overheard two debating which one to chose. One asked the other, “Which official picture are you going to send?”—by “official” clearly referring to a picture that would portray China “appropriately” in the eyes of the CIs. Acerbically, her friend responded, “They want the photo to show the way they want you to see it, and then you need to say thank you.” The tourist boat trip, opera masks, and traditional foodstuffs in an upmarket restaurant intended to improve China’s image had simply fed into student skepticism and perceptions of propaganda and, by this time, a desire for home.

Russell Cobb notes how the word “authenticity” is only “a few linguistic paces removed from the word ‘authoritarian’” (2014, 1), and the paradox of authenticity could hardly be less palpable in these student CI experiences. While students were unable to articulate what, for them, constituted the authentic real of China, they presumed that anything prepackaged by Hanban, precisely because it was prepared, could not count for an authentic China/local that might be understood as an alternative form of modernity. Although students identified their own subject positions as grounded in and attributed to a universal global, China reemerged in these excursions as the parochial local that rendered their own resolute globality possible. In this construction, students embodied the global and China the local, and the CI program, rather than successfully producing a vision of China as an alternative global through invoking authentic tradition, offered the opportunity to produce the students as the “adepts” (Orta 2013, 697) who managed the global. As for students in the MBA study tours in Mexico studied by Andrew Orta, these excursions in China were “value added” projects that boosted their own worth as global citizens (Orta 2013, 697) rather than that of the Chinese nation, precisely because of their ability to recognize and manage the authentic local.

## **Evoking Domestic Desire for China**

The paradoxes of modernity and authenticity seemingly inherent in the CI program did not necessarily mean the China tours were entirely unsuccessful in terms of their goals of soft power production, both because there were always a few students who truly enjoyed their experiences and, as is discussed in this section, because there is more than one type of spectator whose opinion and support are at stake. As student experiences of this tour frequently revealed, the more Hanban’s

instrumentalization of culture became apparent—the less “authentic” and more “authoritarian” it was perceived—the more it fed into students’ worst perceptions about China’s structures of governance and control. However, translating culture into national comprehensive power on the global stage requires more than the acquiescence of a global audience; soft power is not reducible to the realm of international diplomacy. As scholars of soft power have observed in general, power in the global arena also necessitates domestic approval of processes and practices that structure China’s place in the world (Barr 2012; Cai 2010) and as Ingrid d’Hooghe (2014) has observed in particular, Chinese officials recognize that soft power and public diplomacy also serve an important domestic function.<sup>19</sup> Framing the CIs solely as a tool of global persuasion misses an important point about the language programs as a form of *domestic* soft power in which China tells a story to its own citizens about globalization in order, as Shanghai’s Tongji University scholar Cai Jianguo explains of another soft power project, to provide “my nation” and “Chinese people” with the opportunity to “learn from the [2010 Shanghai] Expo through embracing the latest achievements of human civilization” (Cai 2010). Considering soft power from a domestic perspective also allows us to grapple with the rise of China in a more complex fashion than common discourses of a global Chinese threat might suggest.

Before I ventured to China on the Chinese Bridge program, a principal at a high school with a CI reassured me that in his experience, although “there’s a blatant propaganda element to all of this trip” that would “include a lot of cheesy photo opportunities . . . the photos are as intrusive as it gets, no one’s trying to indoctrinate anyone. These photos end up on the desks of politicians, who can say, ‘See what we do.’” What this comment about photos ending up on official desktops suggests is that soft power efforts are intended not only to

provide global audiences with information but also to respond to domestic concerns about authority, representation, and CI program expense.<sup>20</sup> While, for instance, Italy Town might seem to a global audience just another unauthorized reproduction of global products akin to the fake designer handbags that proliferate at informal markets in China, to a domestic audience it might indicate the authenticity of the nation’s globalization and encourage the nation’s citizens to “feel confident in their homeland and [promote] a sense of belonging” (Barr 2012, 82). Chinese scholars have argued that soft power must assume a holistic approach and be developed both internationally and domestically through “making China’s culture . . . attractive to both a Chinese and an international audience (Glaser and Murphy 2009, 20). The soft power of spectacle, in other words, depends as much on the specific audience as it does on the performance itself.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have argued that being “global” means to be perceived as the site of universal desire and value “that needs no justification” (Handler 2013, 186; see also Ho 2009 and Orta 2013). A central facet of reconceptualizing what counts as local and global—as China is trying to do—thus involves the production and materialization of desire, something that is at the heart of soft power efforts. And on our first day in Beijing, we were given several hints of the mechanisms through which soft power productions were also a domestic mode of engagement that sought to show a local audience the world’s desire for China’s globalization. It was also clear that attempts to illustrate desire for China were not entirely directed toward a global audience. The hour-long bus ride from our dorm to Hanban headquarters on our first day in Beijing took us past suburban housing developments with such names as Beijing Riviera and Palm Beach, reproductions of a more commonly assumed flow of desire from East to West. Upon our arrival, however, desire that was represented



as flowing instead from West to East was on immediate and evident display. In the first room of our headquarters tour, glass cases arranged in a maze-like formation led viewers through a display on the history and current state of the CI program. One of the first displays began with a quote from Wang Yongli, current deputy director of Hanban: “China, like an economic giant, suddenly appears in front of the world and everybody is shocked. They want to know the history and the home of this giant.” The global encounter in that case was embodied by a young Chinese teacher assigned to the CI at the London School of Economics, where she tutored “high profile business professionals from London’s bustling economic sector in Chinese for business dealings.” This display’s illustration of the world “working together” presented CIs not as an attempt by China to push its programs onto an unwilling global population but as a response to a demand for Chinese for the purpose of increasing the economic productivity of Europe.<sup>22</sup> The direction of this desire was later reinforced by a display that quoted a statement by the director of an American CI at a major US university that the US government itself was “pushing for students to learn Chinese.”<sup>23</sup> As an affirmation of Hanban’s success in fulfilling that American desire, a nearby poster declared that 82 percent of surveyed Confucius Institute students liked the program, 76 percent believed that learning Chinese would help them in the future, and 75 percent were interested in visiting China. While this display could easily be interpreted as an attempt to convince the American students and chaperones of the direction of desire—we were, after all, the invited guests—in practice it was the Chinese teachers and guides who composed the main audience. Students assiduously avoided the display cases in favor of the more interactive sections of the building, while the CI teachers and guides with whom I toured the building and read the promotional information on display remarked consistently with both surprise and pride at the spread of the CIs

around the world and at how much China had accomplished in such a short time.<sup>24</sup>

This first day at headquarters provided us with a second hint of the mechanisms through which soft power productions were also a domestic mode of engagement in the form of a fifteen-foot banner that identified us as part of the Chinese Bridge program and accompanied us for the duration of our stay in China. The welcome speech that day was followed by the first of many photo sessions of the students with CI administrators and chaperones in which those in front were kneeling and holding the banner. For all seventeen days, we were rarely without a professional photographer documenting our experience in China, the banner unfurled and our visit memorialized at museums, airplane factories, Beijing opera performances, airports, and restaurants and through the images and videos that were reproduced in local media and on the Hanban Web page that evening or the following day.

On our visit to the airplane factory, for instance, our guides positioned us in front of the massive corporate sign outside the entrance gate holding the banner as the official photographer took numerous pictures, simultaneously documenting our American presence and China’s accomplishments in the field of aviation. The next day, one of the young tour guides ran up to me after breakfast and asked excitedly if I had seen the local news that evening, which had featured a story about our presence in the city and visit to the factory that included our picture with the banner. Rather than address an overseas audience, this story offered Chinese citizens the opportunity to behold foreigners appreciating China’s global modernity under the tutelage and beneficence of the CI program. Hanban’s efforts to demonstrate China as an object of desire by inviting six hundred American students to consume its globalization also provided evidence to its domestic population, which might read the very presence of the students as

desire for China.

Yet, as I had suspected from earlier conversations with American CI administrators and as became increasingly evident throughout our time in China, the CI photographers' photos and videos were not randomly composed but highlighted a particular type of foreigner desiring China's global modernity and consequently challenging what counts for the global and assumed object of desire. Although half of the students in our group were phenotypically Asian, the photographers typically focused their lenses on our Caucasian members.<sup>25</sup> This intention could be observed even on our first-day visit to Hanban headquarters, where the opening exhibit of the world's CIs consisted almost exclusively of photographs of European and US CIs. This was augmented by a continuously looping video of the previous year's Hanban-sponsored international Chinese Bridge language competition, which featured only the Caucasian and a few African youth exhibiting their Chinese language skills in performances and "expressing warmly their love of China."<sup>26</sup>

This process of particularizing the ethnically appropriate target of soft power policy began even before the students arrive in China. One of the American CI administrators on the Chinese Bridge trip that summer explained to me that when the program first began, Hanban had been explicit about which ethnic groups were eligible for the program, and another administrator reported that she once had to advocate specifically for the inclusion of a couple of Chinese American students, arguing that, because these particular students spoke better Chinese, they could assist the non-Chinese language speakers. Yet another related a story about the trouble several years ago their group had including a Chinese American student who had been adopted from China. Yet over time, the programs became increasingly unable to fill their available slots with non-ethnically Asian students, and by the

year of my visit half of our group consisted of children of immigrants from China, Chinese children adopted by Caucasian parents, and other Chinese Americans. Nonetheless, the final video montage of our group's activities revealed this preference for the white witness, as nearly all the close-ups were of non-Asian students. Similarly, the two students who were chosen to introduce the final celebratory performance in Beijing that was performed in front of a line-up of dignitaries from central headquarters appeared to be the two blondest, most classically "foreign" girls of the six hundred students invited to China. One who was observably not selected for her prowess in the language, ended her introductory address exclaiming in Chinese, "I love you, I love China."

This emphasis on the white foreigner desiring China projects a particular claim about China's global position, one that upends extant racial hierarchies that undergird global hierarchies of power. Although the Chinese American students in our group were largely invisible in the visual record of the program, they themselves largely rejected the "brother" and "sister" appellations they were subjected to in public markets or in the assumption, by teachers and guides, that they felt some sort of "natural" affinity for China. Their responses to the program instead reinforced their own structural "whiteness" as members of a middle class who failed to engage with the CIs' offerings that were intended to produce appreciation. Playing on this identity, one of the Chinese American students, when called upon in class to write a paragraph in Chinese, jokingly responded in an indignant voice, "What do you think I look like, Chinese?"

Despite this structural whiteness of the Asian American students, Hanban photographers time and time again overlooked those students who presented less obvious "difference" from the local norm, less seeming need for education about China, and less symbolic power as a CI

soft power policy target.<sup>27</sup> In the displays at headquarters, the promotional videos, and the closing ceremony, it was the white foreigner, the assumed universal norm, who was revealed as appreciating the Chinese other. This marks a reversal of common assumptions of desire that challenges the directionality of globalization and the assumption that global means whiteness. Yet as I sat in the closing ceremony pondering the photography and the performance, the obvious delight of the first two rows of the audience, which were filled with visiting dignitaries from Hanban and other governmental offices, and the massive Chinese couplet that framed the stage on both sides quoting the last line of an esoteric Tang dynasty poem by Shi Jianwu—"Conviction allows one to cope with changes in the world"—it was also evident that the white foreigner was not the only potential target of Hanban's representational efforts. It was unlikely that the students and US chaperones around me could either read or comprehend the couplet's message that the global order was indeed changing and that China was offering a new model for managing that change. Its message addressed not only China's power in the international realm but its national cohesion and cultural significance in the domestic context,<sup>28</sup> offering visions of national greatness in the interest of state power to a local audience.<sup>29</sup> Soft power production in this case is as much in the interest of enhancing domestic governance and civic pride as it is about global competitiveness.<sup>30</sup>

This pleasure among Chinese officials and guests in seeing the students perform Chinese culture so successfully, despite the students' often negative responses to the cultural activities of the Chinese Bridge tour, to a certain extent reflects, perhaps counterintuitively, a measure of success for the CIs in their ability to have globalized China. While student expectations for authentic cultural difference were not met by the paper cutting and opera masks, these practices and

images had become so common and normalized that they no longer constituted some form of essentialized difference. Students had mastered paper cutting and knot tying, they could already sing along to Jay Chou, and they were familiar with the basic tenets of Confucian philosophy that stressed the importance of family ties and education. Thus rather than analyze Hanban's efforts merely as hackneyed attempts to create desire, we can also see how these invocations of tradition are central to China's claims of political legitimacy domestically (Hubbert 2017) and, in the context of the CIs, constitute a key method of soft power strategy for a nation that sees its cultural heritage as a "huge reservoir of great and positive assets" (Guo 2008, 28). Watching students confirm this was clearly a joyful experience for the domestic audience.

## Conclusion: An Economy of Appearances

This chapter has explored one of Hanban's most popular programs, the annual Chinese Bridge travel-study excursion to China for high school students studying Chinese at CIs in the United States. The program seeks to contest conceptions of the global as a fixed space located in the West and to offer contemporary China and its traditional culture as sites for the production and expression of alternative ways of being global. The summer program was not suggesting the universal promotion of Confucius or opera masks—the content itself is somewhat irrelevant—but arguing that a nation may be "global" through the production of the resolutely and authentically "local." Yet the fundamental problem for China's attempts to establish soft power through this reconfiguration returns directly to the product itself and the fraught nature of "culture" as a form of power. For it was clear in the Chinese Bridge program that not all culture is equal and official strategies for the promotion of soft power through Chinese culture collided with

student expectations of what constituted the “real” cultured China. While Hanban sought to remap the United States as China’s frontier zone of possibilities, the students were more likely to see China as their own untamed Wild West, to be conquered as a marker of their own cosmopolitanism, not China’s. Summer programming worked to redefine globalization and position China as a subject rather than an object of cultural and economic flows, and as an initiator of what it means to be global, yet the objects of its soft power efforts often failed to recognize it as such; the officially authentic local sometimes emerged as “jail,” reinforcing perceptions of censorship and political control. And bizarre indigestibles, perceived as the truly authentic, constructed value, but not for China. Similar to how Chinese medicine operates as a “bridge” between cultures (Zhan 2009), the “bridge” of the Chinese Bridge program is not easily spanned. This is because, for “East and West, China and America . . . are not fixed and easily identifiable nodes within circuits of globalization but rather are shifting and uneven spatiotemporal imaginaries produced and refigured through particular translocal encounters” (Zhan 2009, 179).

Yet, it is not merely a “gap” between policy and practice that is at work here, nor a necessary result of a set of practices that produce policy only “in the sense that actors . . . devote their energies to maintaining coherent representations regardless of events” (Mosse 2005, 2). As this chapter has explored, the CI production of power for China occurred sometimes through the nonscripted, ad hoc, off-policy experiences of China, rather than the planned excursions and characterizations, and sometimes had little relationship with policy itself. Rather, these frictions emerge through the inherent paradoxes in the forms of global modernity and authenticity promoted through the CIs and anticipated and experienced by the students, manifest in this case in the illustrations and expectations of global and local on the part of both policy makers and

policy targets.

To invoke, in a modified manner, Anna Tsing’s idea of an economy of appearances—what she defines as the dramatization of dreams that attracts investors (2000b, 118)—here the CI economy of appearances depends upon the simultaneous production of geographic and dramatic performances, the self-conscious making of a spectacle to aid in the gathering of power (Tsing 2000b, 118). Tsing’s discussion of the economy of appearances renders evident how analyses of the global frequently juxtapose both its physical presence and its spectacular conception to an imagined, parochial Other, understood as the “local.” Here, the geographic production of globalization arrives in the form of the Chinese presence of some seventeen hundred CIs around the world, evidence, Hanban’s displays suggest, of the world’s desire. And when CI critics equate the growth of CIs with a necessary diminution of US power, it is presence that is fetishized as performance, marking a successful economy of appearances in which the “self-conscious making of a spectacle” (Tsing 2005, 57) emerges as a form of presumed state power. Yet global presence remains insufficient as a foundation for embodying the global, and China must also dramatize, through the actions of those who are meant to “desire” China, a coherent narrative and practice of globalization to render geographic presence an efficacious source of power. Hanban expects the students to appreciate the glories of China’s ancient past *and* revel in its astonishing modernity and yet fails to grasp the paradoxes in trying to present both simultaneously as markers of an authentic globalization. The oxymoronic goals of convincing a foreign audience of China’s modernity by stressing its glorious past represent an attempt at rewriting the implicit rules of the source and directionality of globalization and its constitution but appear to have in this case reinforced the juxtaposition between the spectacular conception of physical global presence and its imagined, parochial



Other. Victims of Hanban's own "success" at globalizing the CI programs, the authentic ancient, now standard fare around the world, emerged in its origins as a metaphorical cousin of authoritarian politics.

Indeed, after most of the Chinese Bridge's scheduled programs were completed and the only thing left was the farewell ceremony and a bus ride to the airport, students were instructed to complete an exit survey that included, among many others, two questions that asked, "Do you intend to further your study in China?" and "If not, do you plan to learn Chinese in the future?" Interestingly, many of the students answered the first question in the negative and the second in the positive, not intending to study Chinese within China in the future, but continuing to learn the language. While the tour may have frequently rendered the object "China" problematic, "Chinese" may persist as an object of desire. In that case, language remains intact as an intended soft power attraction and route to the global, but sometimes only when divorced from the broader intended object of desire—China—itself. Through attending to both policy strategy and engagements in practice, we can see more clearly not only how China is working to challenge expectations for the global, but also how soft power policy effect is more than the sum of its intentional parts. It also allows us to expand our conception of soft power's audience and hence of soft power policy's effects since policy envisions different communities in relation to different goals and encounters, and "success" may also be defined by the reactions of the domestic audience as well as the foreign global.

## Related article

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Such sponsored trips explain some of the enthusiasm of cash-strapped US school administrators, for they can bolster the students' study abroad and cultural enrichment opportunities at no cost to the school.

<sup>2</sup> I focus here on the disparities between policy intention and policy actualization to highlight the more common results of soft power policy effects. Of our group of twenty-six students, there were two or three who reacted far more positively than the rest to the program's soft power intentions. These students tended to be those who received special validation for their language proficiency or who found themselves the target of attention they were not used to receiving at home because they specifically sought the company of the guides and teachers while other students tended to gather among themselves.

<sup>3</sup> My conversations with CI teachers and administrators also revealed that CIs were intended to enhance China's own globalization process, for example, through fostering business connections that would promote economic development and academic exchanges that would enhance domestic university reputations as "global" universities. Refers to Chinese universities not the American ones, right?

<sup>4</sup> All names and places have either been changed or excised from the text for purposes of anonymity. Many universities in China have similarly moved their urban campuses to or built satellite campuses in more rural locations, both because they need to expand and because the property is far less expensive.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor (2014, 219) invokes the felicitously phrased concept of the "pity of modernity" to illustrate the disappointment of tourists who discover signs of global modernization in the very places they are hoping to find local difference. This describes succinctly the frustrations of the students who went to China predominantly seeking exoticism and distinction, not commensurability.

<sup>6</sup> This reflects a belief that, as one Chinese college president declared, "Many westerners' biases toward China result from their lack of understanding of the essence of the Chinese culture" and that "promotion of the Chinese culture is a good remedy for dissolving the 'China threat' argument" (cited in Lai 2012, 85).

<sup>7</sup> Given what they revealed about their training, they were also likely instructed to respond in such a manner.



<sup>8</sup> CI teachers I interviewed in the United States who had acted as chaperones on these Chinese Bridge summer trips sometimes expressed frustration with the lack of appreciation expressed by the American students and chaperones. One invoked a comparison with gift giving to express his sense that this behavior was inappropriate. “When you receive a gift, even if you don’t like it, you don’t criticize it.”

<sup>9</sup> The presence of such markers of the global, as the McDonald’s that dot the landscape and internationally lauded contemporary architecture, reveals an environment ripe for the global production of soft power; indeed it is globalization that enables the production of soft power and demands it assume a prominent role in international relations (Nye 2004). Yet, as Kalathil argues (2011), this same environment also has the potential to reveal the gaps between soft power narratives and perceptions of “reality”: the contiguous modernity and poverty and the cold French fries became instead experiences through which students refuted efforts to equate globalization with being a model of or for the global.

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt’s 2014 essay provides an extensive description and analysis of the Exploratorium.

<sup>11</sup> Several years later, I was reminded of this incident of misinterpretation while observing a CI class at a high school. While discussing the AP Chinese test’s culture section, the teacher reminded the students that the exam always included questions about China’s dynastic history and then sang them a song that listed all the emperors as a mnemonic device. This time, the song included Mao Zedong.

<sup>12</sup> Albrow explains how oftentimes cultural diplomacy fails as a strategy for effective intercultural dialogue because the intended audience “watches the show but is seldom an active participant in it” (2015, 385). Through directly engaging the students in such activities, Hanban attempted to promote a more embodied mimetic experience, calling literally upon students, in their reenactments of the past, to “understand” China through rehearsing a select form of cultural practice. This is meant, as Schmidt explains, to “elicit a feeling, a happy feeling which makes the PRC happy by association [and] . . . in which China is a ‘good’ and happy, and most importantly, benign place” (2014, 372). Schmidt’s analysis ends at the level of potential, and she warns us in her conclusion, citing Berlant (2010, 116), that “shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world,” a cautionary but prescient speculation that, as we move through policy analysis into the realm of engagement, this becomes apparent.

<sup>13</sup> Hua and Wei offer similar analysis from their research in a CI in the United Kingdom. Students confronted with these forms of traditional culture in the classroom similarly assessed them as inauthentic and felt that only when they could visit China itself would they encounter “authentic Chinese” culture (2014, 333).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Gladney 1994; Litzinger 2000; and Schein 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, as hooks suggests, locating value in the body of the “eater” of the Other ([1992] 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See Clifford 1992 for a related discussion of traveling, cosmopolitanism, and assumptions of difference.

<sup>17</sup> Earlier and later conversations with CI teachers in the United States reinforced this recognition that Chinese Bridge programming was not achieving its intended results. One Chinese teacher who chaperoned a group a year after I attended was quite frank with me in his assessment: The students had no interest. When we went to Hanban headquarters it was

pointless. Students just laid on the floor, some actually slept. Hanban is stupid. Hanban wants communication and conversation but I couldn't really see what the goal or the point of the visits to places like headquarters would accomplish. It got better when we left Beijing and students were allowed to go out with Chinese students. Really what this all does though is help the American students treasure their own lives in the United States. . . . They complain about the United States a lot and then they realize there is this whole other reality to the world that makes the United States look really good. I had students actually say this to me. It makes them feel really lucky and then they stop complaining. This first sentiment, that the programs were not enticing to an American student audience, was also invoked at a 2012 House of Representatives hearing on public diplomacy and China that frequently addressed the CIs. One of the panelists, Robert Daly, then director of the Maryland China Initiative at the University of Maryland, College Park, noted that the language programs "tend to deal in culture as decoration, culture as celebration, culture as friendship ritual. If we are going to criticize their programs, one of the things we can throw at them is that they often, actually, can be sort of dull and uninteresting in those ways" (US Congress 2012, 37).

<sup>18</sup> At lunch, our leaders explained the history behind the unusual name of the restaurant's feature dish. According to local lore, *goubuli* is said to derive from the childhood name of the dish's creator, who had been nicknamed "Doggy" (Gouzi) by his parents to protect him from bad luck, for why would evil gods desire to harm a child named for a dog? When the child grew up to become a renowned chef, his steamed buns were so popular that customers had difficulty placing orders. They hence joked that Gou does not pay attention (*bu li*) and the buns became known as *goubuli*.

<sup>19</sup> Hongying Wang argues that China's government promotes global soft power projects, such as the CIs, largely to bolster domestic legitimacy (2011, 52). Michael Barr likewise concludes that soft power deployment at home is as critical as its projections abroad for national development (2012).

<sup>20</sup> CI teachers in the United States frequently complained to me about the expense of the language programs when, as they argued, rural education in China was so deficient. Graan argues that nation-branding efforts, similar to soft power projections, also allow the state to respond to domestic challenges to its authority (2013, 165).

<sup>21</sup> Barr, for example, argues that Chinese soft power engagements are important for its drive to instill loyalty to the party and strengthen its legitimacy (2012, 81).

<sup>22</sup> This perspective attempts to reaffirm the program's constitution, which declares that CIs "devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language." The constitution and bylaws can be found at [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_7880.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm).

<sup>23</sup> In a later conversation with the director of this particular CI, she explained to me that her program turned down the teachers offered by Hanban, agreeing to take the money on condition that the university hire its own faculty. She also noted that her organization has taken three hundred American students to China but has avoided the Chinese Bridge program, traveling independently instead. Calling her program a "square peg in a round hole," she shared that an upcoming CI-sponsored film festival at her school was showing a series of films that introduced China in a less-than-flattering light. Her point was to affirm that while the Chinese government funded the CI, the programming at her institution was solely under the purview of the American directors. This was an unusual arrangement. Most

programs have a Chinese administrator who coordinates activities.

<sup>24</sup> Beyond Hanban headquarters, Chinese media frequently cite what they describe as a global demand for learning the Chinese language as evidence of the world's attraction to China and the rationale for the spread of CIs. Reporting on this supposed international demand for Chinese instruction, an article in China.org, a Chinese government-authorized Internet portal, stated that "Nancy Jervis, vice president of the China Institute in New York . . . spoke of her disbelief that the 'Chinese language could become so popular'" and that "France, exhorted by its China-loving President Jacques Chirac, has seen 110 of its top universities open Chinese departments." This interest had also spread far beyond the West, according to the article, which claimed that "Chinese teaching is also a pillar of Sino-African cooperation," as illustrated by a group of African universities and student organizations that had "addressed a letter to the Chinese ambassador to Liberia wishing to soon be able to learn Chinese language and culture" and "sent up a clamor asking for a Confucius Institute" (Li 2007). According to one author, even the Swedes, who are "normally keen on protecting their own language . . . have shown great enthusiasm in learning Chinese and have admirably opened their arms to the Confucius Institute" (Guo 2008, 33) (although the Swedish CI discussed by this author has since been shut down). The underlying assumption of these claims is that the popularity of a nation's native language corresponds to an inherent interest in and admiration for that nation. These assertions of desire mirror the protestations of a China fever discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup> Stambach notes a similar experience at a CI in the American Midwest, in which Chinese students were recruited to attend a CI cooking class but excluded from the "series of photographs" chronicling the event that were "a means of documenting the work of the Confucius Institutes to Hanban administrators" (2014, 81).

<sup>26</sup> This was a line spoken by one of the American students in the video. Fallon (2014) offers an interesting analysis of a Hanban-sponsored Chinese language skit performed by foreigners very similar to the one featured in this film. She argues that in featuring the Caucasian students wearing traditional Chinese clothing, it is as if China "absorbs" them into its culture, thus challenging typical racial hierarchies, while the African student in traditional native African dress, and the only foreigner not in Chinese clothing, sings about how learning Chinese will provide opportunities for her future, thus placing China in a superior position as the benevolent provider.

<sup>27</sup> Ebron (1999) analyzes similar processes in homeland tours for African Americans.

<sup>28</sup> Li makes a similar point (2009, 28).

<sup>29</sup> See also Zhang and Li 2010. Indeed, domestically, the Chinese government portrays the global spread of CIs as a national cause, designed to strengthen China's sense of self-esteem (Wang and Adamson 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Zhou and Luk, for example, see the CIs as playing a role in "strengthening national identity, national dignity and national cohesiveness" (2016, 7). The presentation of national culture thus emerges as a resource for the national solidarity of the domestic audience.