

ifa ECP Monitor Country Report

China

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1. External cultural policy objectives in geopolitical context

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, China retooled its external cultural policy (ECP) strategy and began to invest large sums in the expansion of its foreign cultural and educational policy as well as its foreign media. The instruments of foreign cultural policy were mentioned for the first time in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2005-2010) (Hefele et al., 2015, p. 63). In 2006, the Chinese Minister of Culture, Sun Jiazheng, confirmed that culture is the “third pillar” of Chinese diplomacy alongside business and politics (Lai, 2012, p. 86). The subsequent 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) also stressed that China is committed to “*strengthening public diplomacy [and] promoting cultural exchanges*” (Barr, 2015, p. 184). This emphasis has continued unabated to the present day. Total soft power funding is estimated at an annual 10 billion US dollars (British Council, 2018), compared to less than half a billion from the US State Department. 98% of the Chinese spending is by the government, indicating a very top-down approach (Ibid.).

China’s focus on a global cultural policy strategy came as a result of increased anxiety regarding China’s rise around the world. Western countries in particular saw China’s rapid economic and political ascendance as a threat to the stability of the international system. An alleged “Chinese threat” was repeatedly mentioned in Western media (Mahbubani, 2019), a trend that continues to this day. At the time, the Chinese government did not feel that it was sufficiently equipped to address these allegations. A central goal of the new initiatives was therefore to help shape the international discourse and change the conversation in favour of China. As part of the media strategy, China seeks to discredit Western ideas and institutions and promote China’s economic and political model as an attractive alternative. This message is addressed both internally to the Chinese population and to people in developing countries and the West itself (Ohlberg, 2016, p. 1-2).

Table 1: Economy of China

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Population (millions) / ranking | 1,398/1 st | 1,371/1 st ; |
| GDP ranking | 2 nd | 2 nd |
| GDP per capita | 9,164 | 7,168 |
| Cultural economy (%GDP) | 4.5% | 3.8% (change: 0.7%) |
| Education economy (%GDP) | 4.2% | 4% (change: 0.2%) |
| R&D economy (%GDP) | 2.2 (2018) | 2.1 (2016) (change: 0.1%) |
| Media economy (%GDP) | - | - |

As the world’s largest country by population and second largest in aggregate economic output, China has substantial economic resources to devote to ECP. Still, it is not particularly wealthy on a per capita basis (roughly 1/6 of the US). It translates its large scale into strong performance in hard power, diplomacy, and world trade, ranking 2nd, 1st, and 1st, respectively.

However, it has been notably unable to effectively wield soft power. Despite significant efforts, China's soft power ranked only 27th in 2019, hardly changed from 30th in 2015.

Table 2: Geopolitical position of China

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Hard power rank | 2 nd | 3 rd |
| World trade rank | 1 st | 2 nd |
| Soft power rank | 27 th | 30 th |
| Diplomacy rank | 1 st | 3 rd |

China has a worldwide ECP footprint, with over 1,500 institutions in 171 countries. As is common in other countries, its geographic focal points for foreign cultural and educational policy are closely linked to its economic geopolitical goals. In the US, one of China's most important trading partners—but also its chief geopolitical competitor—are the most Confucius Institutes of anywhere in the world, and the US is home to the first regional centre, opened in 2013 (Scheng, 2015, p. 136). China is also highly active in cultural policy in Asia. One example is the ASEAN-China Cultural Exchange Year 2019 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2019). China has also become increasingly active in Africa (Marsh, 2019). China, Africa's largest foreign trade partner, invests not only in economic but also cultural projects on the African continent. Between 2013 and 2016, Chinese organizations offered training and education programmes for 30,000 Africans and awarded 18,000 scholarships to African students to study at Chinese universities (Smits, 2014, p. 21). As of 2018, there were more African students in China than either the US or UK (Luedi, 2018).

Table 3: Key ECP statistics of China

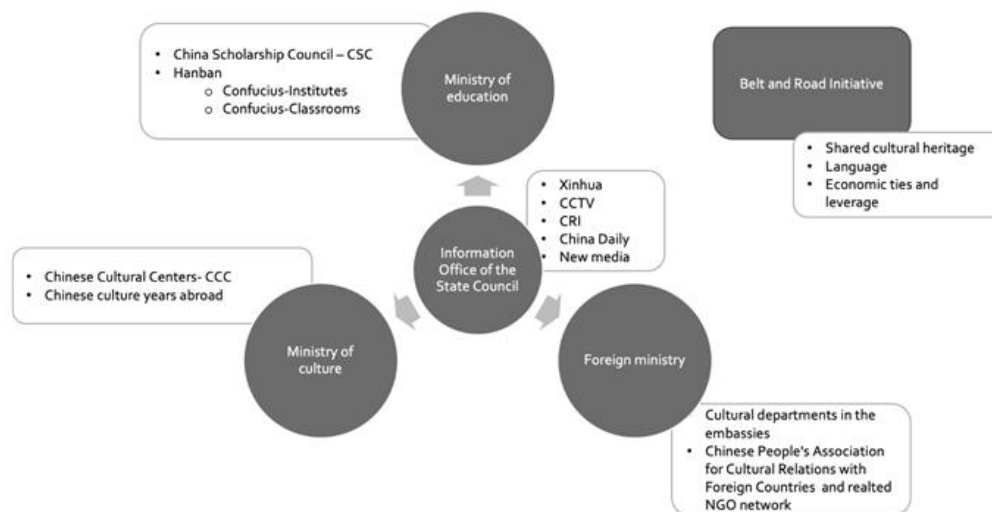
| | 2019 |
|---|-------------|
| Number of countries with ECP activities | 171 |
| Total number of institutions abroad | ~1500 |
| Total number of FTE staff engaged in ECP activities | min. 85,000 |
| Government financial support (€ million) | ~9 billion |
| Comparative ECP ranking | global |

2. External cultural policy: an overview

Chinese cultural policy operates on two distinct levels. Globally, cultural exchange and communication abroad is designed to improve China's international reputation and contribute to a favourable trade climate for its traditionally export-led economy. A positive image abroad should help China to effectively represent its interests and rights in an international context — be it political, economic or cultural goals. At the same time, cultural policy is also directed internally: It is intended to strengthen national identity and promote culture as an economic factor. Additionally, concerns about China's national security and political stability are repeatedly cited as motives. However, broader, ideational goals are also mentioned. China's international cultural programmes also seek to develop a greater international understanding and, ideally, a peaceful future (Hartig, 2014, p. 65).

In China, foreign cultural and educational policy is predominantly conducted and coordinated by the state. There are few private actors. Organizations involved in the field are in most cases subordinate authorities under the responsibility of a ministry. Even if names such as “foundation” or “association” suggest a certain independence from the state, these are also usually financed and controlled directly by the government or by the Chinese Communist Party (Scheng, 2015, p. 29). A total of around a dozen state organizations and ministries are involved in the planning and implementation of Chinese information, culture and education programmes abroad (Hartig, 2015).

Figure 1: Institutional map of China's ECP



The Information Office of the State Council is responsible for coordinating all foreign policy measures in the fields of education, media and culture. It was founded in 1991 and is located at the intersection between the State Council and the Communist Party of China, since in many respects it also functions as the centre for the party's foreign propaganda operations (Creemers, 2015, p. 307). Every December, the Information Office holds a conference at which the guidelines for external communication and cultural foreign policy are presented (Shambaugh, 2015, p.102). These are developed by the Information Office and reviewed before publication by bodies of the Council of State and the Party (d'Hooghe, 2015, p. 134). They serve as the basis for all international initiatives of the various state actors.

In China, the Foreign Ministry plays a decisive role in the implementation of ECP, but is less involved in the actual political decision-making process than the military and other ministries (Creemers, 2015, p. 308-309). While the Ministry of Education is primarily responsible for the internationalization of Chinese higher education and language promotion abroad, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism administers projects and institutions in the fields of cultural promotion and exchange. It was established in April 2018, a reorganization from the former Ministry of Culture (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2018). The ministry is primarily responsible for the administration of projects and institutions and negotiates bilateral agreements with other governments that serve as a basis for cultural cooperation and exchange programmes.

3. Fields of ECP

3.1. Culture and the arts

Table 4: Statistics on culture and the arts in China

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Number of countries present | 154 | 135 |
| Number of institutes | Confucius Institute: 548 Confucius Classroom: 1,193 | ~500 ~1,000 |
| Number of FTE staff | Confucius Institute: 46,200 | - |
| Budget (€ million) | - | Confucius Institute: 452 |
| Government financial support (€ million) | - | 240 |

Confucius Institutes (CI) and Classrooms (CC) are the most rapidly growing institutions and are discussed in the following section on language, but some other smaller cultural programmes warrant discussion in the context of arts and culture. In addition to these institutions, there are also a number of new initiatives with the roughly 70 “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) countries. The BRI is an economic and infrastructure plan stretching from Southeast Asia via the Middle East to Europe, partially paralleling the Silk Road from centuries prior. In addition to economic links, the BRI often emphasizes shared cultural heritage (IIAS, 2016). Additionally, the China National Arts fund has been active in BRI countries supporting 13 projects in 22 countries and regions with 23.46 million RMB (China National Arts Fund, 2017).

Chinese Cultural Centres (CCCs) are a longstanding player in China’s ECP. There are two primary functions of the CCCs. First, they are understood as “windows” that provide a glimpse into China: 60 to 70 per cent of their activities serve to promote Chinese artists and present Chinese culture to the world. At the end of the 1980s, the Chinese government opened the first cultural centres in Mauritius and Benin. With the opening of Chinese cultural policy, the number of new openings increased drastically from the turn of the millennium. In contrast to the Confucius Institutes, the expansion of the cultural centres follows the rule

“one country, one institution” (i.e. they are not distributed nation wide like CIs). The financial costs of setting up and maintaining the centres are borne by the Chinese state. In 2014, roughly 214 million US dollars (approx. 161.4 million euros) were invested in opening new centres. 57.5 million US dollars (51.8 million euros)—181 percent more than in the previous year—were budgeted for operating costs in 2015 (Zhangyu, 2015). New figures are not available, but the budget is assumed to be growing substantially, considering the planned expansions.

The “Chinese People’s Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries” was initially founded in May 1954. Since 1969 it has been responsible for China’s people-to-people diplomacy as the “Chinese People Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries” (CPAFFC). By organizing exchange programmes and delegations, seminars, conferences and workshops, as well as financing exhibitions and other cultural events, the CPAFFC is committed to building long-term, friendly relations with people abroad (CPAFFC, 2017). In addition to the CPAFFC headquarters in Beijing, the organization has nearly 300 local friendship societies in all Chinese provinces, autonomous areas, direct government cities, and other Chinese cities above the district level. The CPAFFC also maintains a dense worldwide network of 46 regional and bilateral friendship societies and cooperates with some 500 NGOs and institutions in 157 countries (CPAFFC, 2019). Despite its status as an NGO, within the framework of which the CPAFFC also has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, the organization is closely linked to and co-financed by the Chinese government.

3.2. Language

Table 5: Key language promotion statistics on China

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Number of countries present | 154 | 135 |
| Number of institutes | Confucius Institute: 548 Confucius Classroom: 1,193 | ~500 ~1,000 |
| Number of FTE staff | Confucius Institute: 46,200 | - |
| Budget (€ million) | - | Confucius Institute: 452 |
| Government financial support (€ million) | Data issue ¹ | 240 |
| Number of students enrolled | - | 1.4 million |
| Number of candidates for language qualifications | - | - |

¹ Hanban states it spent more than 2 billion US dollars on Confucius Institutes worldwide from 2008 to 2016; starting in 2017, it no longer reports spending on the programme.

China has made significant strides in promoting the Mandarin language internationally. The Confucius Institutes and Classrooms are the best-known instruments of Chinese foreign cultural and educational policy and fall under the Ministry of Education. They were founded in 2004 as part of the “Cultural Bridge” initiative, which also invested in training Chinese teachers and supplying a better range of teaching materials (Scheng, 2015, p. 64). Although the rapid economic rise in China has raised concerns about “Chinese threats”, it has also boosted global demand for Chinese language teaching (Ding, 2008, p. 117). The main focus of the institutes and classrooms is therefore on offering Chinese courses and standardized HSK tests (known as the “Chinese TOEFL”). In most institutes, language promotion is supplemented by smaller, mostly traditional cultural programmes, which account for about 10 percent of the activities (Smits, 2014, p. 15).

Unlike comparable institutions like the British Council or the Goethe Institut, the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms are set up as joint ventures. Confucius Institutes are in most cases connected to local universities, while Confucius Classrooms are attached to schools. As a rule, the CI Chinese partner institutions are foreign universities certified by Hanban, the headquarters of the Confucius Institutes (Scheng, 2015, p. 94). However, there are also exceptions, such as the Confucius Institute for Business in London, which is supported by a British and a Chinese university as well as various business enterprises (Ibid., p. 96).

The institutes are jointly financed by both partners. The Hanban provides the initial costs of around 100,000 to 150,000 US dollars (approx. 85,000-125,000 euros), bears the costs for books and teaching materials and the secondment of Chinese teachers (travel expenses, salary, accommodation). The local partners provide rooms and personnel and cover half of the running costs. In developing countries, China often bears the entire cost (Ibid., p. 99). In 2015, China spent a total of about 240.5 million euros on the institutes, while the international partners invested about 358.9 million euros (Hanban, 2015, p. 15). Hanban states that it has spent more than 2 billion US dollars on Confucius Institutes worldwide from 2008 to 2016; starting in 2017, it no longer reports spending on the programme.

This cooperation model enabled the Confucius network to expand extremely quickly, even though it has repeatedly met with criticism, especially in the West. At the end of 2019, there were already about 550 Confucius Institutes and 1,100 Confucius Classrooms in 154 countries. This represents a remarkable growth less than two decades after the opening of the first institutes in Uzbekistan and South Korea (Hanban, 2015, p. 3). In the first five years, a new institute was opened every five days on average (Hefele et al., 2015, p. 64). Still, even this rapid growth has not met its aspiration. China had aimed to establish 1,000 Confucius Institutes worldwide by 2020 (Smits, 2014, p. 7), but it has not come close to meeting this goal. Currently most institutes and classrooms can be found in the USA and Europe, but the number in Africa and Asia is also rising steadily.

There has been some pushback against the Confucius Institutes, however. As a 2019 article finds that “*eight decisions to terminate their renewable CI agreements were all made by the host institutions—Macmaster University in Ontario in 2013, Chicago and Penn State universities in 2014, Stockholm University in 2015, and most recently the University of West Florida, Texas A&M University, the University of North Florida and the University of Michigan in 2018*” (Liu, 2019). In a sign of the perceived geopolitical stakes, a US official has asked Taiwan to step in and take over some of the responsibilities for teaching Mandarin that the CIs had previously assumed (Aspinwall, 2021).

China has also been under pressure to close Confucius Classrooms. For example, in 2018 US Senator Marco Rubio called for CCs in Florida to be closed (Rubio, 2018). As scepticism of China's global ambitions grows in Western capitals, it could further put pressure on universities to cut ties with CI. In turn, China could be expected to refocus on Africa and Asia.

3.3. Primary and secondary education

Table 6: Key statistics on foreign primary and secondary education of China

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|--|---|------|
| Number of countries | 1 | N/A |
| Number of schools | 1 official (2,000 unofficial) | N/A |
| Number of students | 201 | N/A |
| Number of staff / teachers | 38 | N/A |
| Government financial support (€ million) | Unknown. Set to rise substantially in the future. | N/A |

China is a very new player to foreign primary and secondary education. Although the Chinese language is taught worldwide (including through Confucius Classrooms, discussed above), the first official Chinese school was only opened in Dubai in 2019. More are set to follow in Brazil and Malaysia (Jie, 2020). There are 2,000 unofficial Chinese schools worldwide, but these are frequently designed more for local students than children of Chinese expats, such as longstanding schools in New York and London.

3.4. Tertiary education and science

Table 7: Key statistics on tertiary education and science in China

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|--|----------------------|-----------|
| Number of countries | Worldwide | Worldwide |
| Number of universities/colleges abroad | 2,332 joint ventures | - |
| Number of domestic universities/colleges | 2,668 | 2,560 |
| Number of students | | |
| Number of foreign students ² | ~500,000 | 396,531 |

² Data based on Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students | UNESCO UIS. (2020). Retrieved 2 September 2020, from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|---|---------------------|---------|
| Number of outbound students | 900,000 | 819,524 |
| Number of government scholarships awarded | 63,000 ³ | - |
| Budget (€ million) | 424 (2018) | - |
| Government financial support (€ million) | ~400 | - |

In 2019, China hosted over 500,000 international students from about 200 countries and regions, up from under 400,000 in 2015. Additionally, “*Recognizing that today’s top students may be tomorrow’s political leaders, intellectuals, and experts,*” China has launched a prestigious scholarship programme called the Yenching Academy based at Peking University. The scholarship is similar to the Fulbright and Rhodes Scholarship programmes. Furthermore, since 2017 China has been the most popular destination in Asia for foreign students.

One reason for the rise in inbound student figures is the growing prestige of Chinese universities. The grants on offer in China are also an important factor in the rise in foreign students. Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC) students, for example, receive a monthly stipend of 2,500 to 3,500 yuan (320-450 euros, as of March 2021). Grants can provide for free living accommodation in university dormitories and tuition fees for academic study. Promotional materials stress that, unlike most other countries, where students often look for part-time jobs, in China, students can focus on their studies (China Daily, n.d.).

This is run through the CSC, a non-profit organization that enables Chinese students to study abroad and international students to come to China (Hartig, 2014, p.67). The funding of scientific exchange programmes is intended to bring cultural, economic and technological knowledge to China and therefore to enable sustained economic growth, but also to strengthen mutual understanding between China and the world (China Scholarship Council, 2016). The Chinese government finances the Scholarship Council by providing scholarships for the various exchange programmes and by offering financial support for cooperation programmes. Many of these scholarships are awarded as part of bilateral agreements to students from specific countries who in turn provide financial support to Chinese students. The overall funding of foreign students was 3.32 billion yuan in 2018, or about 450 million euros (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

The China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE), founded in 1981, is also committed to the internationalization of the Chinese education sector. On behalf of the Ministry of Education, CEAIE organizes the exchange of Chinese and international pupils and students, lecturers and teachers as well as experts from the field of education. CEAIE cooperates with partner organizations worldwide, including the AFS Intercultural Programs, the British Council, CampusFrance and the DAAD (CEAIE, 2016, p. 13). In China, CEAIE has over 550 member organizations, particularly schools, colleges and universities, which make up about 70 per cent of its members, and over 45 regional and local offices. It is also responsible for organizing the China Annual Conference for International Education (CACIE), which

³ 10,000 are reserved for BRI countries; 30,000 for Africa.

attracted nearly 50,000 visitors and 600 international educational institutions in 2015 (*ibid.*, p. 15). CEAIE stopped publishing annual reports in 2016, so more recent data is unavailable.

The Chinese government also has a number of foreign scientific recruitment programmes. Like other programmes, this has created a pushback in the West, for example with the US government viewing these talent attraction plans as a threat to US dominance in technical fields (US Senate, 2019). The government has therefore demanded that talent recruitment exclude the phrase “Thousand Talents Plan”—which seemed to strike some other countries as particularly aggressive—from written documents. Typically, government programmes focused on outward mobility so that scientists could develop expertise abroad. However, more recent programmes emphasize inbound movement. From 2008-2020, over 10,000 scientists have participated in Chinese government funding programmes (Barry and Kolata, 2020).

China also participates in joint scientific initiatives, notable with “Panda diplomacy.” According to government sources, China cooperates with 22 zoos in 18 countries (including several large nations like Japan, the US, Russia, and Indonesia). Its stated aim is to build “academic exchanges between China and foreign countries in the field of endangered species conservation, [and improve] the level of conservation scientific research, and strengthened species conservation” (Foreign Ministry of China, 2021).

3.5. Foreign media

Table 8: Statistics on Chinese foreign media

| | 2019 | 2015 |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| TV: CGTN | | |
| Number of countries broadcasted to | 171 | N/A (Previously CCTV, which had 140) |
| Number of languages | 6 | N/A |
| Number of channels | 6 | N/A |
| Audience / weekly (million) | ~ 50 million | ~45 million (2017) |
| Digital & social media audience (million) | Twitter: 14 million YouTube: 2.2 million Facebook: 115 million | N/A |
| Budget (€ million) | ~2,000 | 1,800 |
| Radio: CRI | | |
| Number of countries broadcasted to | 161 | 160 |
| Number of languages | 65 | 65 |
| Number of channels | 50 | - |
| Audience / weekly (million) | - | - |

As part of the “going global” strategy, the foreign media are among the most important instruments of Chinese foreign cultural policy. As was the case with other cultural and educational initiatives, China’s media presence was substantially increased at the beginning of the millennium. On the one hand, this reflected the opening of the Chinese market to foreign media in 2001 (Zhao, 2013, p. 19). However, the expansion of foreign media was also aimed at establishing direct communication channels to the outside world in order to strengthen confidence in China’s peaceful growth (Hefele et al., 2015, p. 69).

The fact that this strategy did not achieve the desired success became clear in 2008 when negative reporting before and during the Olympic Games in Beijing dominated Western media (Sun, 2015a, p. 126). Li Changchun, head of propaganda of the Communist Party, concluded: “*We must become global, strengthen our foreign-language channels abroad, expand our partnerships with foreign television stations so that our images and voices reach thousands of living rooms in all parts of the world*” (Sun, 2015b, p. 404). The aim was to “talk back” by countering Western media with their own reporting. In order to expand Chinese media globally accordingly, their financial support was drastically increased once again. The global financial crisis made this step easier. While Western media companies massively reduced their investments in the wake of the crisis, Chinese media were largely able to fill the vacuum. Since 2009, the Chinese government has invested around 8.7 billion US dollars (approx. 7.8 billion euros) in the expansion of state-owned foreign media (Hefele et al., 2015, p. 68). It now spends roughly 2 billion euros per year. In addition, the Chinese state media are increasingly concluding partnership agreements with foreign media. Such cooperation can be particularly attractive for many newspapers under financial pressure (Ohlberg, 2016, p. 6).

China Central Television was one of the main players in China’s early media strategy. In the early 1990s, CCTV opened an Overseas Broadcasting Center and began broadcasting Chinese television programming for Chinese people abroad, especially in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, on its first international channel. In September 2000, the first English-language channel, Channel 9, was founded. Since 2010 it has been broadcasting news and reports on current events under the name CCTV News. CCTV has also been offering channels in French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian since the end of the 2000s (Zhang, 2011, p. 59). In 2012, CCTV America was founded to produce programmes specifically for North and South America. In addition to the production studio in Washington D.C., a regional headquarters was opened in Nairobi, Kenya, in the same year (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 103).

In December 2016, the new global media platform China Global Television Network (CGTN) went live, bringing together six foreign broadcasters, including an English-language documentary channel, and other multimedia offerings from CCTV (Public Media Alliance, 2017). In 2018, it was funded with nearly 2 billion euros per year, and is active in 171 countries (CCTV, 2019). It includes 6 TV channels, 3 overseas sub-stations, 1 video news agency and “new media clusters” (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). Its Twitter account is popular, with over 14 million followers, but its website is currently not available in the EU. Its efforts at presenting credibility abroad seem to be successful, as it has been rated “highly accurate” and unbiased. However, China’s overall low reputation of press freedom may negatively affect it nonetheless (Media Bias/Fact Check, n.d.). The Chinese government intends to create a media behemoth by merging CCTV, CGTN, and CRI (Feng, 2018). Like other institutions, CGTN has received pushback in Western countries. For example, the US has deliberately delayed the visas for many reporters, forcing them to leave (Chen, 2020). In the EU however, CGTN may

soon be able to return to the airwaves after being banned by Britain. It is due to set up new operations out of France (Bermingham, 2021).

China's first international radio station, Radio Beijing, was founded in 1941 and was mainly used for war propaganda against Japan (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 103). Today, the station hopes to “*inform the world about China, China about the world and the world about the world*” (China Radio International, 2016). While other broadcasters such as Voice of America and the BBC World Service have significantly reduced their programming and offerings in recent years, China Radio International has continuously expanded (d’Hooghe, 2015, p. 164). This has been made possible primarily through local partnerships and cooperation with broadcasters abroad (Zhao, 2013, p. 19). China Radio International is available online in 65 different languages (the most of any broadcaster) and can be received in more than 160 countries. As of 2018, it had six large international offices and 52 correspondent offices abroad. In 2011, the China International Broadcasting Network (CIBN) was founded to exploit the technological possibilities of the Internet (China Radio International, 2016).

Since 2011, all local authorities have been required to use social media. However, international platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are mainly used by the Chinese foreign media such as China Daily and CCTV. The Twitter presence of China Daily (4.3 million) and Xinhua (12.5 million) show China’s efforts to reach an international audience. Since Western social media are consistently blocked in China, the Foreign Ministry has no official Twitter or Facebook account, although specific missions and individuals do (Ohlberg, 2014, p. 435-436). Additionally, many Chinese organizations abroad, such as Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural Centres, are present on the platforms.

4. Challenges and future outlook

Despite centralization in China’s ECP approach, the diversity of actors and programmes means that responsibilities are often unclear or fragmented. There are overlaps and a lack of coherence between the various institutions at the horizontal level (government and party organizations), the vertical level (municipalities, provinces) and the growing number of non-state actors (civil society groups, individuals and enterprises). Coordinating the various instruments and developing an overarching strategy are therefore among the most urgent tasks of the Chinese government as it seeks to develop a more cohesive ECP approach (d’Hooghe, 2015, p. 132).

The internationalization of the higher education system is also facing major challenges at home. In particular, it is difficult to attract students from top international universities for the scholarships, as these often include a Chinese university degree as a goal. In most cases, however, these students are only interested in a semester or year abroad and not in a Chinese degree because it is often not recognized in their home countries. In addition, the limited range of English courses and study programmes available in China makes the internationalization efforts of the Council more difficult.

Despite these challenges, China has quickly become one of the most important global players in foreign cultural policy. In particular, the impressive increase in the number of foreign cultural policy institutions—above all the Confucius Institutes—has contributed to this increase

in importance (Hefele et al., 2015, p. 71). This is also reflected in the growing interest in Chinese as a foreign language.

Despite its rise, and strenuous efforts to boost its image abroad, China has struggled to improve its reputation in Western countries. Indeed, opinions of the country have declined across developed countries in the past year, despite China handling the COVID-19 pandemic far more successfully than most Western nations (Pew, 2020). The story is different in developing countries, notably Latin America and Africa (Pew, 2019). In many of these countries, China is valued as an important partner, particularly for its educational programmes. Additionally, the Chinese media presence is also viewed less critically and, especially in African countries, is welcomed as a counterweight to the influence of Western media (Hefele et al., 2015, p. 73). In view of crises in the West, such as a disastrous COVID-19 response and racist violence in the United States, China's narrative as an alternative to the Western system has the potential to gain purchase.

Additionally, the Chinese state's influence on cultural and educational programmes and the foreign media are criticized, particularly in Western countries. The Confucius Institutes are repeatedly accused of proffering “communist propaganda” and spreading an overly optimistic image of China. For example, in April 2017, the conservative think tank National Association of Scholars (NAS) published a study recommending that American universities close the Confucius Institutes to protect their academic freedom and institutional autonomy (NAS, 2017, p. 17). Politicians from the centre and right of the political spectrum have echoed such sentiments in recent years. Still, business ties between the West and China remain close, with some European countries Germany and France reluctant to disrupt relations due to profitable economic links and others like Hungary and Spain fully committed to building 5G networks with Chinese vendors (Baker and Chalmers, 2020).

Whether China's concerted attempts to increase its soft power will be successful on a global scale remains to be seen. In the West, this prospect is looking more and more unlikely, as both political and media organizations have hardened their stance towards China, likely contributing to its declining approval ratings. Elsewhere, China may have more success. Its economic model offers a seemingly promising pathway for developing countries worldwide and investments in the BRI countries, Africa, and Latin America may yet reap dividends in the cultural sphere as well. Still, acquiring a world spanning cultural profile like the United States—or even large European nations—remains a distant dream for China. However, a growing economy and substantial cultural investments will make it an ever-more formidable ECP player in the years to come.

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