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# **Mandarin and Mandarins**

## **Rethinking cultural diplomacy in Britain and China**

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**Abstract**

*State-funded national cultural institutes, like the British Council, Alliance Française and the Confucius Institute, serve an important diplomatic purpose, increasing the sponsoring state's "soft power." Past and present scholarship on soft power tends to assume that it has different qualities in the hands of liberal democratic states compared to non-democratic ones; in turn, this colours much of the debate on cultural diplomacy, and legitimates negative assumptions about Chinese cultural diplomacy in particular. This thesis suggests that this assumption relies on a state-level theory of international relations known as "democratic distinctiveness," which holds that whether a state is democratic is the key variable in determining its foreign policy. Taking the British Council and the Confucius Institute as case studies, it argues that the observed management of cultural institutes is not consistent with democratic distinctiveness theory, and that lower-level analysis provides more explanatory power. Employing both primary and secondary sources and semi-structured interviews, the thesis finds that decisions made within and governing the two organisations from 2007 to 2016 are more consistent with the theory of bureaucratic politics, with decision outcomes resulting from bargaining between individual officials. It concludes that a more nuanced approach to analysing cultural diplomacy is needed, and, acknowledging that the competing theories are but two of many, calls for further research in this developing field.*

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## Abbreviations

<b>BBC</b>	British Broadcasting Corporation
<b>BC</b>	British Council
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CI</b>	Confucius Institute
<b>FPA</b>	Foreign policy analysis
<b>FTE</b>	Full-time equivalent
<b>IR</b>	International relations
<b>NAO</b>	National Audit Office
<b>NCI</b>	National cultural institute
<b>NPM</b>	New public management
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>SCIO</b>	State Council Information Office
<b>USD</b>	U.S. dollars

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction to topic

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, several of the world's major powers have invested in national cultural institutes (NCIs), offering language teaching, exhibitions and cultural events in foreign countries. Famous examples include Alliance Française (1883), the British Council (1934) and the Goethe-Institut (1925). These organisations are widely assumed to be a foreign policy tool, fostering beneficial diplomatic and trade relationships by influencing public attitudes in other countries. In this sense, they are a rare example of state-sponsored institutions charged with increasing a country's "soft power" (see, for example, Smits, Daubeuf & Kern, 2016; Holden, 2013; Hartig, 2016).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, more governments sought to establish NCIs, including several powers outside Europe. The People's Republic of China (PRC) established its own organisation, the Confucius Institute, in 2004. Like its predecessors, scholars quickly assumed that the Confucius Institute was intended as a diplomatic tool (see, for example, Bound, Briggs, Holden & Jones, 2007; d'Hooghe, 2007). The following decade saw the number of branches worldwide rocket to 500, eclipsing all but one of its European equivalents (Hanban, 2016: 2). Yet the rise of the Confucius Institute has proved considerably more controversial than other NCIs, raising widespread concerns about propaganda, censorship and academic freedom (see, for example, Shepherd, 2007; Marcus, 2013; Sahlins, 2013).

The unique controversy around Confucius Institutes raises important questions, with implications for diplomacy and international relations more generally. Does China's closed political system make its diplomatic tools different, in intention or effect, from those of other countries? Past scholarship tends to assume that the soft power capacity of liberal democracies is fundamentally different to – and greater than – that of authoritarian states. This assumption recalls the theory of "democratic distinctiveness," which holds that whether a state is democratic is the key variable in determining foreign policy decisions. In turn, this prejudices the debate around NCIs, exacerbating the controversy surrounding the Confucius Institute. Democratic distinctiveness is subject to considerable debate in other aspects of foreign policy – particularly the so-called "democratic peace" – but has never been empirically assessed with regard to soft power.

This thesis tests the applicability of democratic distinctiveness to the soft power field, by examining the management of NCIs in democratic and non-democratic states. Taking the British Council and the Confucius Institute as case studies, it finds considerable similarities in decision-

making, and scant evidence of democratic distinctiveness theory's propositions. Alongside democratic distinctiveness, the paper tests a competing theory of foreign policy, known as "bureaucratic politics theory," which sees foreign policy decisions as the resultants of bargaining between individual officials, rather than products of state characteristics. Observing more evidence to support this theory, the thesis concludes that the two organisations have more in common than is generally assumed, and suggests that greater theoretical diversity in the soft power field is needed.

## 1.2 Problem statement

NCIs are by no means absent from the scholarly literature. In addition to works identifying NCIs as soft power assets, there have been many historical studies of their development (see, for example, Taylor, 1978; Lee, 1998; Vaughan, 2005) and empirical studies of their effects (see, for example, Hubbert, 2014; Lien, Ghosh & Yamarik, 2014; Kim, Liu, Tuxhorn, Brown & Leblang, 2015). Yet they remain understudied in two important respects. First, few comparative studies have looked at multiple NCIs simultaneously, and those which have (see Paschalidis, 2009; Martens & Marshall, 2003) limit their scope to European organisations, excluding their faster-growing Asian equivalents. Second, much of the existing literature on NCIs lacks a basis in broader international relations (IR) theory, reflecting a deeper disconnect between traditional IR theory and foreign policy analysis (FPA). This is no trivial problem; if public and cultural diplomacy are increasingly important elements of international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Melissen, 2005), they must be able to be analysed through the same theoretical lenses as other, 'harder' forms of diplomacy if those frames are to remain relevant (Kaarbo, 2015). This thesis contends that a similar problem exists in the broader literature on soft power, where a reluctance to go back to theoretical basics has led to a reliance on assumptions about state-level characteristics which are rarely acknowledged or tested. This is not a new observation: as far back as the 1970s, Graham Allison suggested that "professional analysts of foreign affairs... think about problems of foreign and military policy in terms of largely implicit conceptual models that have significant consequences for the content of their thought" (Allison, 1971: 3-4).

These are not the only problems relevant to this thesis. The absence of studies of NCIs which look inside the "black box" of decision-making also necessarily limits our understanding of them. Theories of foreign policy formulation, which offer the possibility of lower-level analysis, have been underutilised with regard to NCIs. And while such theories could prove useful, their inevitably narrow focus limits generalisability, particularly with regard to non-liberal states. Finally, while China's decision-making structures have become increasingly transparent in recent years, its generally closed political system has restricted our ability to apply theories of policy-making to



the Chinese context (Zhang, 2016: 440), and inhibited the willingness of Chinese academics to conduct FPA research (Feng, 2015).

### 1.3 Research aim

Each of these issues widens the gap between the importance credited to NCIs as diplomatic assets and our understanding of them in the context of broader IR theory. This thesis seeks to contribute to bridging this gap. It examines the assumptions present in work on soft power, explains the origins of those assumptions in liberal IR theory, and proposes an alternative theoretical perspective which casts off those assumptions and may provide greater explanatory leverage as a result. Using a congruence analysis approach, it tests the two competing theories by applying them to the management of two very different NCIs, the British Council and the Confucius Institute, over the past decade.

The aim of this analysis is to determine which theory – democratic distinctiveness, which underlies common assumptions regarding soft power, or bureaucratic politics, which disregards them – better explains decisions made regarding the two organisations. Recognising that case studies have limited external validity, and that actor-specific theories such as bureaucratic politics can also be difficult to generalise from, this paper does not claim to solve the problems identified. Instead, it hopes to make a small contribution to our understanding of NCIs and their place in the universe of IR theory.

In accordance with this aim, the central research question of this thesis is:

- *How can we explain the management of national cultural institutes across democratic and authoritarian states, and thereby better understand NCIs and cultural diplomacy in the context of soft power and international relations theory?*

The theoretical approach taken in the paper can then be operationalised via two sub-questions:

- *To what extent is decision-making in the British Council and the Confucius Institute explained by the democratic distinctiveness paradigm dominant in the study of soft power?*
- *What additional insights can be obtained by applying the bureaucratic politics model, in addition to the democratic distinctiveness model?*

## **Academic relevance**

The lack of comparative and theoretical work on NCIs has allowed the field to become dominated by assumptions regarding liberal and non-liberal states. While there have been many admirable empirical studies of individual NCIs, this lack of theoretical diversity has nonetheless skewed the debate. In particular, a growing body of work assumes that the Confucius Institute, the fastest-growing NCI, poses a threat (see Paradise, 2009; Sahlins, 2013). This concern is influenced by the wider “China threat” theory (see Mearsheimer, 2006; Breslin, 2010), which argues that China cannot grow its economic power without destabilising international security, and which has previously been linked to the growth of China’s soft power (Kurlantzick, 2005). This thesis seeks to examine the underlying assumptions of concerns surrounding the Confucius Institute, and by testing two alternative theoretical perspectives on NCIs, to enrich and inform the wider debate.

More generally, the paper hopes to make a small contribution to bridging the persistent gap between mainstream IR theory and work on soft power. It is also designed to answer calls by previous researchers for further empirical work in particular areas of need. These include calls for further work on democratic distinctiveness beyond the realm of war and peace (Owen, 2004); for the expansion of democratic distinctiveness research to include elements outside of the liberal tradition (Geis & Wagner, 2011); for more research on influences on policy-making in one-party states (Risse, 1991); for further observation of how culturally and politically distinct countries conduct public diplomacy (d’Hooghe, 2015: 370); and for examinations of how theories of policy-making apply to China (Zhang, 2016).

### **1.4 Policy relevance**

Foreign policy research is rarely a matter of academic interest alone. Scholars in this field have often aspired not just to explain the policy-making process, but to influence it. In the United States, academics have often occupied positions in the national foreign and security policy architecture, and those who do so are considered particularly influential by their government colleagues. This applies in the soft power field, too; Joseph Nye, the originator of the concept, is by far the most influential IR scholar in the eyes of American policy-makers (Avey & Desch, 2014). And if we accept that NCIs and cultural diplomacy are increasingly important in international affairs, it follows that their analysis will have more policy relevance.

This thesis does not itself claim to have great policy-influencing potential. But the question it asks, and the future research it calls for, could have real relevance if they succeed in changing the way we think about soft power across liberal and non-liberal states. More open-minded research in

this area could foster closer understanding between officials working on cultural diplomacy on behalf of Western and non-Western countries. By looking critically at the assumption that the Confucius Institute is different to and more threatening than its European equivalents, this paper hopes to encourage cultural diplomacy practitioners to pursue more open, trusting and productive international partnerships.

If this sounds idealistic, there is still value simply in minimising the likelihood of miscalculations in cultural diplomacy. These miscalculations often arise from the misguided assumption by policy-makers that another state is a rational, unitary actor – despite the knowledge that their own is anything but (Allison, 1971). If it is not possible to encourage closer cooperation in cultural diplomacy, it might at least be possible to reduce the risk of miscalculation by offering a more nuanced picture of policy-making in this field.

### 1.5 Definitions

“National cultural institute” is not a new label – it is used by the European Union and its EUNIC network (Smits, Daubeuf & Kern, 2016), among others – but since it is not in everyday use, it requires definition for the purposes of this paper. I use it to refer to organisations which meet the following criteria:

- a formal mission to spread understanding of a particular language or culture through teaching, accreditation and cultural events, across multiple countries and including a bricks-and-mortar presence in those countries;
- a formal relationship with a national government, through government involvement in the management structure and/or government funding of the organisation; and
- a recognition in official documents or scholarly analysis of additional diplomatic or strategic aims.

Though this thesis focuses on only two organisations, at least 22 organisations meet these criteria, including 18 NCIs sponsored by EU member states, as well as the Confucius Institute, the Japan Foundation, the Korea Foundation and Turkey’s Yunus Emre Enstitüsü. European NCIs are recognised as having “played an important role in developing and implementing the cultural diplomacy strategies” of their sponsoring states, with “thematic priorities... in line with [the state’s] cultural and foreign policy objectives” (Smits, Daubeuf & Kern, 2016: 13; 27). The four organisations outside the EU are also included in scholarly definitions of NCIs (see Leung & du Cros, 2014: 73).

NICs including the British Council have been identified as contributing to a state's efforts to "manage the international environment," even when they stop short of internalising "advocacy roles and overt diplomatic objectives" (Cull, 2008: 33). The Council is frequently referred to as a contributor to the UK's "soft power" (see, for example, Bound et al, 2007; Holden, 2013; Pamment, 2015). The Confucius Institute is also commonly recognised as part of China's "soft power" apparatus (see, for example, Hartig, 2016: 8; Leung & du Cros, 2014; Zhe, 2012), and an analysis of *New York Times* coverage from 2004 to 2011 has shown that Western media consistently frame the Confucius Institute in this context (Lueck, Pippis & Yang, 2014).

"Cultural diplomacy" is defined here as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas" (Cull, 2008: 33). This thesis considers both the British Council and the Confucius Institute to be engaged in cultural diplomacy. However, it acknowledges an active debate around this term, especially in the UK, where the British Council prefers to define its activities as "cultural relations" (British Council, 2016: 4), and the use of "cultural diplomacy" is controversial among officials (B, personal communication, May 24, 2017).

"Chinese" and "Mandarin" both refer to Standard Chinese, which is the official language of China and the language taught in Confucius Institutes. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of distinct ethnic and linguistic groups in China, and the teaching of only Standard Chinese by the Confucius Institute is itself a matter of some controversy in the literature (see Hartig, 2016: 123; Stambach, 2015: 60), though not within the scope of this paper.

"Democracy," "democratic," "liberal" and "liberal democratic" denote those states which offer their citizens freedom of conscience and expression, property rights, and democratic representation (Doyle, 1983a: 206-7). John Owen summarises the key features of a liberal state as "free speech and regular competitive elections" (Owen, 1994: 89). This definition does leave some room for interpretation, and its application to historical case studies is often disputed. But it is clear enough for the purposes of this thesis, which considers the UK (Freedom House score 95) to be a liberal democratic state, and the PRC (Freedom House score 16) to be its opposite, referred to here as a "non-liberal," "illiberal," "non-democratic" or "authoritarian" state.

## 1.6 Outline

The thesis develops as follows:

- Chapter 2 offers an introduction to past scholarship on cultural institutes and soft power, as well as the emergence of the two theories relevant to this thesis;
- Chapter 3 sets the two theories in opposition to each other, justifies their selection, and derives some expectations from each;
- Chapter 4 explains the selection of cases, qualitative techniques and data sources for this research;
- Chapter 5 presents observations from the case studies, grouped into salient themes based on the characteristics and history of each organisation;
- Chapter 6 parses the observations for evidence which supports, contradicts or is otherwise relevant to each of the theories and expectations; and
- Chapter 7 presents some conclusions, along with brief recommendations for policy and future research.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 National cultural institutes

Few NCIs are the subject of extensive English-language research. Little scholarly material is available on Spain's Instituto Cervantes, Italy's Società Dante Alighieri or Portugal's Instituto Camões, for example. In continental Europe, France's cultural diplomacy is the subject of most analysis; its two NCIs, Alliance Française and Institut Français, operate over 1,000 branches worldwide (Hartig, 2016: 12), and the country is historically associated with influencing others through both its cultural output and its "nation branding" (Olins, 2005: 170-172). The most comprehensive survey of French cultural diplomacy is notable for its approval of coordinating the activities of France's NCIs at the government level (Lane, 2013). Yet the richest literature on NCIs in English concerns two apparently very different organisations: the British Council and the Confucius Institute. There are two reasons for the greater availability of material. One is language; the other is controversy, which has persistently followed the Confucius Institute since its establishment by China's authoritarian regime in 2004.

Some of the more recent literature on the British Council examines it in context of the UK's efforts at national "branding" since 2000, including promotional activities related to the 2012 Olympic Games, and the subsequent "GREAT Britain" campaign, a global marketing exercise with concrete, even brazen economic objectives (Pamment, 2015: 261). At the other end of the spectrum, scholars look back to the formation of the British Council in the 1930s, assessing its impact on Britain's spheres of interest in the mid-20th century (Taylor, 1978; Vaughan, 2005) and the institutional activism which expanded its resources and remit during this period (Lee, 1998).

The Confucius Institute, meanwhile, is too young to have been subject to the same type of historical inquiry. Instead, a clutch of quantitative and qualitative studies have sought to measure specific aspects of its impact, including its effect on American public attitudes toward China (Hubbert, 2014; Gil, 2015), its contribution to domestic regime legitimacy (Callahan, 2015), and its impact on China's economy (Kim et al, 2015; Lien, Oh & Selmier, 2012; Lien, Ghosh & Yamarik, 2014). In addition, two European scholars, Ingrid d'Hooghe and Falk Hartig, have recently published the first comprehensive volumes on China's modern public diplomacy apparatus (d'Hooghe, 2015) and the Confucius Institute itself (Hartig, 2016).

Another significant portion of scholarly writing on the Confucius Institute refers to the idea that its values conflict with academic freedom, and that its presence on university campuses is therefore malign (Paradise, 2009; Sahlins, 2013). While this subset of the literature focuses on North

America, other micro-level case studies have examined specific Confucius Institute branches in Germany (Hartig, 2016), Australia (Yang, 2010; Hartig, 2016), Kenya (Wheeler, 2014) and Peru (Park, 2013).

While these bodies of literature are significant, there has been little contemporary comparative work on NCIs. The few comparative studies which exist tend to focus on the 20th century histories of different institutes (Paschalidis, 2009), their organisational features (Martens & Marshall, 2003), or the effectiveness of specific functions (Prieto Gutiérrez, 2015). In addition, these studies focus only on the NCIs of European democracies. There appear, therefore, to be two gaps in the literature: one regarding comparative studies of the Confucius Institute against its more established European equivalents, and another regarding the analysis of NCIs from the perspective of decision-making.

## **2.2 Soft power and cultural diplomacy**

Academic research on NCIs is generally tied to three interrelated concepts. First and most famous is Joseph Nye's "soft power", the ability for states to influence one another without recourse to coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). Second is a channel for soft power which Nye calls "public diplomacy": how a country communicates its identity to others, and who exactly it communicates with (Nye, 2004: 107-110). The concept has its own literature, including work on the "new" public diplomacy, which suggests that events such as the advent of cross-border terrorism have made communication with foreign publics a more urgent priority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Melissen, 2005: 8). Third, "cultural diplomacy" has emerged as one element of public diplomacy, linking cultural output such as art and literature with this direct state-to-public communication (Cull, 2008: 33). By understanding NCIs in this context – as an example of cultural diplomacy, which is an element of public diplomacy, which is in turn a channel for soft power – we can conceptualise them as a micro-level example of soft power.

As the literature on soft power grows, a consensus is emerging that it takes different forms in democratic and authoritarian states. Nye describes soft power as "a staple of daily democratic politics" (Nye, 2004: 6), and predicts that authoritarian states will see a "limited return" on soft power strategies because they cannot be complemented by a strong civil society (Nye, 2013). William Callahan suggests that authoritarian states are capable only of "negative soft power," promoting negative perceptions of other states (Callahan, 2015: 217). Callahan, Kingsley Edney (2015), Jeanne Wilson (2015: 287) and others have argued that, consequently, the primary objective of soft power strategies for authoritarian states is internal regime stability, rather than Nye's concept of external "attraction."

To identify a consensus on this point is not to say that all authors share the same view of soft power. Callahan, for example, stands in opposition to Nye by conceptualising soft power as a social construction rather than a measurable asset. In his view, an authoritarian state like China does not simply produce *less* soft power than a democratic society. Rather, the objectives of a state's soft power reflect its individual domestic political priorities, which in China include first and foremost the safeguarding of regime legitimacy: "before it can spread values abroad, soft power policy first needs to produce and police values at home" (Callahan, 2015: 219). Edney takes a different approach, agreeing that China's soft power strategies are geared towards internal regime security, but framing external influence as a means to that security, rather than an alternative objective (Edney, 2015: 262).

Wilson, another constructivist, sees soft power strategies in authoritarian states as a defence against the use of the same strategies by the West, which countries like China perceive as "nothing less than an existential threat" (Wilson, 2015: 287). Realist scholars, meanwhile, have argued that this relationship of threat and response runs in the opposite direction: that Chinese soft power contributes to the "China threat," and must be aggressively countered (Barr, 2011; Kurlantzick, 2007). Finally, a third group of authors argue that Chinese soft power is primarily designed to counter the "China threat" thesis, by promoting understanding of China's distinct socio-economic character and allaying fear of its military power (Li, 2009; Rawnsley, 2012).

### **2.3 The relevance of democracy in international relations**

These different perspectives on soft power are ostensibly rooted in the main traditions of IR theory. But though there are well-established theories of interactions between states, before the 1960s, theories had not emerged regarding the process by which states form their foreign policy preferences. James Rosenau, identifying this gap, developed a framework for FPA theories by specifying five "sets" of variables which influence decisions in foreign affairs (Rosenau, 1966). Among these variables were the qualities and values of individual decision-makers, the structure of government machinery, societal values, and the degree of unity in a society. Taking their lead from Rosenau, scholars began to formulate theories focusing on particular characteristics or relations, and to conduct empirical and deductive research on foreign policy formulation. These theories fall into two broad categories: "actor-general," which propose the state as the unitary actor in world affairs, and study the effects of variable state characteristics; and "actor-specific," which seek to identify change mechanisms within states, and regard individuals as unitary actors (Hudson & Vore, 1995: 210).



One such “actor-general” theory emerged in the 1980s, eventually developing into a major branch of liberal IR theory: the idea that the foreign policy of liberal democracies is distinct from that of other states. Most prominent in this literature is the concept of the “democratic peace,” popularised by Michael Doyle in a 1983 paper, and rooted in the work of Immanuel Kant two centuries earlier (Doyle, 1983a: 206-7). Doyle argued that through liberalism, states had come to recognise “the legitimate rights of all citizens and of all republics,” and that this moral shift led liberal states to prefer peaceful mutual relations (Doyle, 1983b: 230). In response to Doyle’s work, other liberal theorists proposed a different model of the democratic peace, in which the domestic structures present in liberal states create the conditions for peace, rather than the moral character of the states themselves (Owen, 1994: 90-1). These normative and structural perspectives offer different causal explanations, but agree on the central idea that the foreign policy of democracies is fundamentally different to that of other states. At its core, as Doyle makes clear, the theory is a rejection of the realist view of international relations, in which interactions between states are governed by power dynamics and self-interest, and the character of states is relevant only in determining those interests (Doyle, 1983a: 218-224).

In order to test the democratic peace theory, a large number of scholars conducted empirical research on the foreign policy of democracies, giving rise to a new, broader field which Owen calls “democratic distinctiveness”: “a research programme whose hard core comprises, among others, the general propositions that liberal democracies are distinctive in international relations and that international outcomes among such states are qualitatively different” (Owen, 2004: 611). This programme has led to findings which range beyond Doyle’s theory, including that liberal democracies are likely to keep to international agreements for longer than other states, and that they are more likely to win the wars in which they choose to participate (Owen, 2004: 611). The field also includes many detractors of democratic distinctiveness – including both critics of the normative stream, who suggest that the theory legitimises immoral foreign policy practices by liberal states (Geis & Wagner, 2008), and critics of the structural stream, who argue that the institutional constraints present in democracies are in fact equally present in other states (Rosato, 2003).

#### **2.4 Decision-making in international relations**

On the “actor-specific” side, the 1960s and ‘70s saw the development of several more theoretical strands which sought to examine and explain decisions made within states, seeing these as necessarily prior to interactions between them. These FPA scholars wished to “[discard] the state as a metaphysical abstraction” (Snyder, Bruck & Sapin, 1954: 53), and focus instead on the various formations in which individuals make decisions. The most cited work in this field is

Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* (1971), which sets out three alternative "models" of decision-making, each with some explanatory power when applied to a foreign policy case, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The theory which Allison labels "Model III" is commonly known as bureaucratic politics theory, and has become the most influential of the three.

Bureaucratic politics theory originates from the observation that decision-making by groups is more confused than most IR theory allows. "To explain why a particular formal governmental decision was made, or why one pattern of governmental behaviour emerged," Allison wrote, "it is necessary to identify the games and players, to display the coalitions, bargains, and compromises, and to convey some feel for the confusion" (Allison, 1971: 146). He traced his own model to earlier works which observed interactions between American presidents and officials, including *Presidential Power* by Richard Neustadt (1960) and *American People and Foreign Policy* by Gabriel Almond (1950), as well as work by Charles Lindblom and Warner Schilling, the latter of which focused on domestic policy formation (Allison, 1971: 153-5).

*Essence of Decision* noted the tendency of IR theorists and practitioners to assume that states are not only unitary (as Snyder et al had criticised), but also rational, consistently seeking the course of action with the greatest material or strategic benefit. This "value-maximising" assumption, Allison argued, led officials to mistakenly believe that the decisions of other states would be rational, despite knowing from experience that decisions made within their own government were often not. Model III, in contrast, framed decisions as the result of bargaining between individual officials, shaped by the pre-existing "perceptions, motivations, positions [and] power" of those individuals, and their resulting "maneuvers" (Allison, 1971: 6).

Bureaucratic politics theory became highly influential in the study of American foreign policy, from the 1970s onwards, largely due to its leverage in analysing the Vietnam War (Hudson, 2005: 8). Since then, use of the bureaucratic politics model has expanded to other contexts, from the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Valenta, 1979), to the 1987 stock market crash (Headrick, 1992), to German participation in peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Brummer, 2013). While Allison and his colleagues were specialists, they had aspirations of universality for the theory, hoping that it could be applied "to the behavior of most modern governments in industrialized nations" (Allison & Halperin, 1972: 43). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, meeting this aspiration clearly requires the theory to be tested in the context of Chinese policy-making. Zhang Qingmin has argued specifically for new research on the applicability of the theory to modern China: "considering the more active diplomacy that has come with China's rise, any FPA theory that cannot explain Chinese foreign policy, or cannot be used to research Chinese foreign policy, cannot be called an international or universal theory" (Zhang, 2016: 457).

### 3 Theoretical framework

#### 3.1 Selection of theories

As this brief introduction to the literature shows, there is a significant divergence between the perspectives offered by “actor-general” theories like democratic distinctiveness and “actor-specific” ones like bureaucratic politics. Yet there remains precious little work dedicated to assessing these theories comparatively, especially outside the narrow field of conflict and peace studies. Given the steady decline of inter-state wars since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pettersson & Wallensteen, 2015), and the increased importance of public diplomacy over that time (Melissen, 2005), it is more necessary than ever for theories of decision-making in international relations to apply to the soft power policy arena. This chapter justifies the selection of these two theories for this purpose, and derives a set of testable expectations from each.

The selection of theories, methods and cases is to some extent interdependent. The primary qualitative method used in this thesis, congruence analysis, is best applied to comparisons between established or predominant theories and ones which challenge this predominance. Congruence analysis derives expectations from these theories, and applies them to cases which are in turn selected based on their “ex-ante likeliness” to reflect these expectations (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 25). Observations are then measured against expectations, not according to numerical indicators, but to “concept validity” – the degree to which they reflect the meaning of the theories (Blatter and Haverland, 2012: 166).

In order to conduct a meaningful congruence analysis, and to make a positive contribution to the literature, more than one theory must be tested. While this thesis is partly driven by the desire to challenge the assumptions of democratic distinctiveness, testing this theory in isolation is insufficient for a scientific contribution to the debate. Theories should be chosen based on their prominence in the relevant field, as well as the researcher’s aspirations for this contribution (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 169). The democratic distinctiveness paradigm is extremely prominent in IR literature: as well as inspiring the other central works of the democratic distinctiveness programme, Doyle’s *Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs* (1983a; 1983b) has been cited over 2,500 times in works covered by Google Scholar. Owen’s three works dedicated to defining and supporting the programme (1994; 1997; 2004) have been cited a further 1,200 times. And as the previous chapter argued, democratic distinctiveness has become a central assumption of much of the literature on soft power, including the concept’s canonical work, Nye’s *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), itself cited 7,000 times. It can therefore be seen as the predominant paradigm in this field, making it suitable for inclusion in this study.

In the FPA field, bureaucratic politics theory is equally prominent, and *Essence of Decision* is perhaps *the* pre-eminent work (Bendor & Hammond, 1992: 301; Hudson, 2005: 8). Though FPA remains peculiarly separate from mainstream IR theory, the application of bureaucratic politics theory extends far beyond FPA itself, with *Essence of Decision* boasting over 8,000 citations, including equally influential works in management and psychology (see, for example, Janis & Mann, 1977; Mintzberg, 1989; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). As the research question suggests, the theoretical aspiration of this thesis is to discover whether actor-specific theories provide new and greater insights in the understudied field of NCIs. It is therefore logical to select bureaucratic politics, the most prominent actor-specific FPA theory, as the “challenger” theory. My second theoretical aspiration is to establish that the assumption of democratic distinctiveness inherent in soft power theory does not sufficiently explain the management of NCIs, and thereby to challenge the assumption that the Confucius Institute is a threat. In such circumstances, it is appropriate to select an alternative theory which can potentially fill theoretical gaps left by such an assumption (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 171). Bureaucratic politics is exactly such a theory, since it focuses on organisational hierarchies and the influence of individuals within them, which are present in both cases, and which the democratic distinctiveness paradigm does not account for.

Finally, the congruence method implies a trade-off between the likelihood of finding perfect congruence in case studies and the level of detail in which cases can be investigated. There is no perfect number of theories for such an analysis (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 173), though two of the influential works cited here, Allison’s *Essence of Decision* and Owen’s *Liberal Peace, Liberal War*, use three apiece. This thesis uses only two theories, as time and length are strictly limited, and I would like to afford a reasonable level of detail to each case and give due attention to interviewees’ contributions. In addition, this thesis is in a sense exploratory research, in that it introduces not just a new theory (bureaucratic politics) but a new theoretical field (actor-specific FPA) to the topic of NCIs. Consequently, it seeks only to gain some initial insight into the applicability of this theoretical field to this topic – not necessarily to find perfect congruence between a specific theory and the selected cases. In these circumstances, a very small-N case study is recognised as the most appropriate approach (Rohlfing, 2012: 10; Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 144).

### **3.2 Democratic distinctiveness theory**

Setting out the theory of democratic distinctiveness as it applies to this thesis is a complex exercise. For one thing, its influence in debates on soft power and cultural diplomacy is evident in the assumptions made by scholars in that field, not in explicitly stated theoretical frameworks. For another, rather than being neatly set out for our empirical use in one founding work, the theory

has emerged as part of a long process of expanding and refining a prior theory, that of the democratic peace. Most democratic distinctiveness work still focuses on war and peace, rather than the “softer” diplomacy being investigated in this thesis, and so relevant hypotheses must be carefully separated from those which only concern conflict situations.

Owen, who published three major works on democratic distinctiveness between 1994 and 2004, first proclaimed its status as a fully-formed “Lakatosian research programme.” These three works serve here as a basis for identifying the theory’s key assumptions and hypotheses. They also explain how, although democratic distinctiveness is a state-level, “actor-general” theory, its hypotheses can be observed within states and during decision-making processes. Owen’s *How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace* (1994) provides a taxonomy of different approaches to testing democratic peace theory since the publication of Doyle’s landmark thesis. Central to this taxonomy is the distinction between “structural” accounts of democratic peace, which emphasise the “institutional constraints within democracies,” such as cabinets, legislatures and electorates, and “normative” accounts, which hold that liberal states simply “believe it would be unjust or imprudent to fight one another” (Owen, 1994: 90). Helpfully, Owen then offers a causal model which allows these two divergent approaches to coexist. Because liberal ideas are a necessary precursor to democratic elections and accountability, such structures can be thought of as products of those ideas, in the same way that liberal attitudes are also the product of liberal ideas. Owen’s theoretical model, therefore, sees both branches of the theory as intervening, not independent variables (Owen, 1994: 93). Thus, it is not necessary to choose between structural and normative factors to identify a testable theory of democratic distinctiveness for our own purposes.

In *How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace*, Owen suggests a number of hypotheses underlying democratic peace theory. In a clue to his future work to expand the theory into a more generalisable research programme, most of these hypotheses do not relate only to conflict situations. They include that “liberals will trust states they consider liberal and mistrust those they consider illiberal,” that “liberals will claim that fellow liberal democracies share their ends, and that illiberal states do not,” and that “during crises, statesmen will be constrained to follow liberal policy” (Owen, 1994: 103-4). In 1997, Owen published *Liberal Peace, Liberal War*, further expanding his contribution to the theory and providing a new model for empirical tests. Again, hypotheses are divided into two categories, structural and normative, corresponding to the two intervening variables in Owen’s causal model. In the normative category, Owen hypothesised that “liberals will perceive a foreign state as liberal if it matches their criteria for liberalism within their own state,” and that this perception will be a meaningful factor in foreign policy decisions (Owen, 1997: 58). This should be apparent in decision-making through the arguments put forward by

participants – for example, “liberals should argue that a war would be wrong or imprudent because the potential enemy is liberal.” While he does not require participants to explain the significance of another state’s liberalism or authoritarianism, Owen expects that they “should cite the foreign state’s regime type as a reason” for a suggested course of action. In the structural category, Owen’s hypothesis is that “during crises, the stronger liberal institutions are within a state, the more constrained its decision makers will be to follow policies advocated by its liberal elites” (Owen, 1997: 59). He explains that, again, this influence can be determined by examining decision-making processes, and that the advocacy of “liberal elites” for certain decisions may be observed from “statements, diaries, writings, and legislative votes.”

Finally, Owen’s 2004 article *Democratic Peace Research: Whence and Whither?* observed that the proliferation of empirical work on democratic peace theory had led to the emergence of a more generalisable theoretical field, which he christened “democratic distinctiveness.” In part, democratic distinctiveness derived from the theoretical shortcomings of democratic peace, which, however valid its empirical support to date, can never be “impervious to empirical falsification” (Owen, 2004: 610). Owen argued that due to its lack of hard and fast rules, democratic peace was not itself a theory, but instead “a statistically significant finding that remains... in search of a theory.” Instead of concerning conflict decisions specifically, such a theory must focus on more general rules about democratic states themselves. Owen proposed that these rules were “the general propositions that liberal democracies are distinctive in international relations and that international outcomes among such states are qualitatively different from those among non-democracies or between democracies and non-democracies” (Owen, 2004: 611). These propositions, Owen argued, would meet the criteria for a “research programme” set out by Imre Lakatos, which require a theory to compose a “hard core” of non-alterable laws, and more specific “auxiliary hypotheses” which reflect both the hard core and related empirical findings (Ray, 2003).

As the democratic distinctiveness programme has matured, it has been applied to increasingly diverse fields of foreign policy, including trade (Bliss & Russett, 1998), decolonisation (Goldsmith & He, 2008), arms control (Müller & Becker, 2008) and counterterrorism (Abrahms, 2007). In the soft power field, the connection is less explicit, but equally prevalent. Nye has consistently argued that states which are not liberal democracies have limited capacity for soft power as a result (Nye, 2004; 2013). Nye’s detractors, while often subscribing to different IR theories, tend to support this distinction (Callahan, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Edney, 2015). Even among constructivists, the argument that soft power capacity should not theoretically be connected to the democratic or authoritarian character of a state is extremely rare (though not unheard of – see Keating &

Kaczmarek, 2017). It is therefore necessary to empirically test the key assertions of democratic distinctiveness in the soft power field.

### 3.2.1 Hypotheses and expectations

From the theoretical framework developed by Owen, we can derive the following core and auxiliary hypotheses:

Core hypothesis:

- Liberal democracies are distinctive in international relations. Decisions in cultural diplomacy will therefore be qualitatively different between democratic states and authoritarian states.

Auxiliary hypotheses:

- Liberal democracies will trust states they consider liberal, and mistrust those they consider illiberal, while authoritarian states will not make this distinction;
- Decision-makers in liberal democracies will be constrained to follow the preferred policies of the domestic liberal elite, while decision-makers in authoritarian states will not be thus constrained.

Applying these hypotheses to our cases, we can further derive a set of expected observations. The UK, as a liberal democracy, should distinguish between liberal and illiberal states in its cultural diplomacy, and should follow the preferences of its liberal elite, which may change as a result of its democratic process, in its cultural diplomacy decisions. China, on the other hand, should exhibit no distinction between liberal and illiberal states in its cultural diplomacy, and its decision-makers should be less constrained due to the lack of democratic institutions and processes.

Expected observations:

- 1a. The British Council will distinguish between liberal and illiberal states in its decisions, and decision-makers will refer to this variable during the decision-making process (Owen, 1997);
- 1b. The Confucius Institute will not make this distinction, and decision-makers will not refer to this variable during the decision-making process.

- 2a. Decision-makers in the British Council will refer to liberal democratic goals and values in their decision-making process, such as the promotion of human rights and free trade (Doyle, 1983b);
- 2b. Decision-makers in the Confucius Institute will not share these goals and values, and will not refer to them in their decision-making process.
- 3a. Decision-makers in the British Council will be constrained by the preferences of liberal domestic elites, and will refer to these preferences in their decision-making process (Owen, 1994; Risse, 1991);
- 3b. Decision-makers in the Confucius Institute will not be constrained by these preferences, and will not refer to them in their decision-making process.
- 4a. Domestic political change in the UK will materially alter the constraints on the British Council, and decision-makers will change their behaviour in response to this change (Risse, 1991; Owen, 1997);
- 4b. Domestic political change in China will have little impact on the Confucius Institute, and decision-makers will not change their behaviour in response to this change.

### 3.3 Bureaucratic politics theory

Explaining the theory of bureaucratic politics is a somewhat simpler task, since it explicitly applies to the study of decision-making within states, and since Allison's *Essence of Decision* still stands as its single founding work. However, the model was developed in a very specific context, and further investigation of the literature that sprung from *Essence* is necessary to be able to apply it to our cases. In addition, the theory has weathered much criticism over the last four decades, some of which must be explained and responded to before hypotheses can be derived.

Allison's Model III concept is one of simultaneous, overlapping "games" in which "players" take "stands," "regular channels structure the game," and "deadlines force issues to the attention of incredibly busy players" (Allison, 1971: 162-3). Each player has a "position" in a hierarchy, possibly with several simultaneous (and often contradicting) roles and loyalties. The "stand" they take on an issue is composed of their understanding of the issue itself, and their view on the appropriate course of action. Players determine their "stand" based on two types of considerations: "parochial priorities and perceptions," derived from their position and filtered through the "baggage" they bring to that position; and "goals and interests," which include the actor's international, domestic, organisational and personal interests and their conception of their role in the game. Each player identifies their "stakes" from these priorities and interests, and



formulates their “stand” accordingly. Players take their stands, and their impact on results is determined by their “power,” which comprises will, skill, “bargaining advantages,” and other players’ perceptions of them. Though it emphasises the importance of power, Allison makes clear this model applies to “Indians” as well as “Chiefs,” and that senior leaders will feature only if an actor or issue attracts their attention (Allison, 1971: 177).

As Model III’s influence on foreign policy scholarship grew, critical voices began to emerge, suggesting that *Essence of Decision* had traded away external theoretical usefulness for the sake of internal explanatory power. Bendor and Hammond (1992: 318) called Model III an “analytical kitchen sink,” arguing that between “priorities and perceptions,” “goals and interests” and “baggage,” Allison had included too many intangible variables to reliably discern the causal effect of any one. “A model that includes everything explains nothing,” they concluded. “If it does not simplify, it cannot explain.” Similarly, David Welch (1992: 120-1) has observed that Allison’s inclusion of personal “baggage” undermines his emphasis on bureaucratic interests – that it cannot be possible on these terms that, as *Essence* is often summarised, “where you stand depends on where you sit.” Welch also pointed out that Allison occasionally credited a foreign policy outcome to an actor’s pre-existing beliefs or skills which ran counter to their institutional interest as a bureaucrat. These arguments added further substance to an early criticism of Model III by the neo-realist Stephen Krasner (1972), who suggested that the name “bureaucratic politics theory” was not compatible with Allison’s emphasis on personal attributes.

In addition to these arguments, the theory has been criticised for overlooking the impact of hierarchy through its focus on “Indians,” and for assuming that foreign policy decisions can uniformly be characterised as problems of conflict rather than coordination (Bendor & Hammond, 1992: 314). Model III is also often said to be insufficiently distinguished from Model II, the “organisational process theory;” Allison originally included some of the same concepts in each model, and later appeared to merge the two by incorporating organisational processes into the bureaucratic politics paradigm (Welch, 1992: 118; Allison & Halperin, 1972). Finally, Model III was developed with a specific case in mind – the Cuban Missile Crisis – and Allison left few clues in his original work as to how it should be applied to cases outside the national security field.

In light of these criticisms, it is necessary to be highly selective in deriving applicable hypotheses and expectations from Model III. Welch (1992: 128) summarises four key “propositions” of bureaucratic politics theory, which we might reasonably expect to be universal, and therefore applicable to fresh cases. These are that an actor’s position in a bureaucratic structure will influence their preferences, perceptions, and level of influence on decisions, and that the decision-making process will result in compromise outcomes which rarely reflect the exact

position of any individual actor. But what of the differences between the foreign policy of liberal democracies and authoritarian states? Fortunately, Allison's later work with Morton Halperin illuminates his position on this issue, though it was never his primary focus. First, before specifying the additional propositions behind the theory, Allison and Halperin asserted that their aspiration was for the framework to be applicable "to the behavior of most modern governments in industrialized nations" (Allison & Halperin, 1972: 43). That they chose the word "industrialized" over more normative alternatives like "democratic" or "liberal" is no coincidence. Second, in setting out their propositions, they also outlined the difference, as they saw it, between Model III decision-making in democratic and non-democratic systems. In "governmental systems that are relatively open as a result of elections," they wrote, actors would have a "larger conception of their interests," due to the need to seek approval from a wider group of stakeholders (Allison & Halperin, 1972: 49). In "relatively closed" systems, actors typically have to consider a smaller number of stakeholders, and thus can form a narrower conception of their interests. This makes clear that, while the democracy variable is not completely insignificant in bureaucratic politics theory, its propositions apply to both democratic and authoritarian systems, and can thus be used to make comparisons between them.

### 3.3.1 Hypotheses and expectations

Taking the relevant propositions from Allison's original theory and later work, we can derive the following core and auxiliary hypotheses:

Core hypothesis:

- Decision outcomes in international relations are the resultants of bargaining between individual officials. This bargaining process takes place in both democratic and authoritarian states.

Auxiliary hypotheses:

- Across both regime types, the role of actors in the bargaining process will correlate strongly with their position within the bureaucracy.
- As a result of the bargaining process, decision outcomes across both regime types will rarely reflect the exact preferences of any given actor.

Applying these hypotheses to our cases, we can derive a series of expected observations which would suggest congruence with this theory. Both the British Council and the Confucius Institute

operate as part of larger governing bureaucracies, including through formal relationships with government ministries and the informal influence of politicians, and decisions made within and regarding both organisations can thus be understood to be political. If both bureaucracies behave as the theory suggests, they will exhibit similar levels of parochialism, bargaining and politicisation.

Expected observations:

1. The preferences of officials in the decision-making process will correlate with their position(s) in the structure of each organisation (Allison, 1971; Welch, 1992);
2. Each individual's level of influence on decisions will also reflect their position(s) in the structure of each organisation (Allison, 1971; Welch, 1992);
3. Decisions made regarding each organisation will appear to result from bargaining between individual officials, in that they will tend not to reflect the original intentions of any single actor (Allison, 1971; Welch, 1992);
4. While both organisations will exhibit these behaviours, officials within the British Council will take account of a larger number of stakeholder interests in their positions than actors within the Confucius Institute (Allison & Halperin, 1972).

### **3.4 Theories not employed**

The theories of democratic distinctiveness and bureaucratic politics are certainly not the only ones which could be applied to these cases. Since the cases concern decision processes governing "arm's length" public organisations, further theories from the policy formulation and public management fields could also reasonably be applied. However, there is a clear rationale for selecting the above theories over these alternatives. In designing this research, I am seeking to maintain a direct connection between the theoretical framework and the study variable (the fact that the UK is a democratic state and China is not). Theories from the field of public policy analysis tend not to give their attention to non-democratic states. Conceptualisations like the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier, 1998) or the multiple streams framework (Kingdon, 1984) have rarely been applied beyond Western liberal democracies. Certainly the theories themselves make no claims about the effect of democracy as a variable on policy outcomes. Similarly, new public management theory could be applied to the cases, but at the cost of maintaining this connection. In any case, an existing body of empirical work has already concluded that NPM is not directly applicable to the Chinese bureaucratic system (Yang, 2007; Chan & Chow, 2007).

## 4 Research design

### 4.1 Selection of methods and previous approaches

This thesis is a case study, which is the most common form of qualitative research in the social sciences. It applies two competing theories to two cases, using congruence analysis and process tracing techniques, to assess the explanatory power of those theories comparatively. Taking a small-N approach allows detailed investigation of empirical relationships (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 20) and provides space for a specific investigation of necessary and sufficient conditions for causation (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006: 229). This is highly necessary in this field, because the number of NCIs is too small to conduct any reliable correlation-based analysis.

Previous studies of NCIs have tended to fall into two categories: large-N “difference-in-difference” studies, measuring the impact of cultural institutes on, for example, foreign direct investment (see Kim et al, 2015; Lien, Oh & Selmier, 2012); and small-N case studies, which use either process tracing (for historical studies – see Paschalidis, 2009) or co-variance analysis (to compare organisational features – see Martens & Marshall, 2003).

Likewise, past research on democratic distinctiveness has ranged across quantitative and qualitative methods. Both have merits: quantitative studies of the liberal peace effect (see Maoz, 1997; Thompson & Tucker, 1997) tend to draw more generalisable conclusions, while qualitative case studies of particular flashpoints (see Oren, 1995; Owen, 1997) offer the opportunity to illuminate the intervening stages in the causal model. However, while wars are relatively easily recorded for quantitative purposes (including in widely-cited impartial datasets such as Correlates of War or PRIO), decisions and interactions in the soft power sphere are less quantifiable. In addition, by leaving little room for case-level detail and relying heavily on arbitrary categorisation, quantitative research on democratic distinctiveness leaves itself particularly vulnerable to accusations of unreliability (see Oren, 1995; Barkawi & Laffey, 2001). Owen has noted the widespread suspicion that quantitative scholars of the democratic peace effect “cook the books” (Owen, 2004: 607). This criticism has also proved resistant to alterations to the theoretical framework. Wolfgang Wagner has suggested that research on the “commercial peace” and the “institutional peace,” two later variations on Owen’s causal model, are subject to the same vulnerabilities as democratic peace research itself, due to a heavy dependence on arbitrary definitions, measurements and time periods (Wagner, 2007; Mansfield & Pollins, 2003). Given these recurrent criticisms, and the difficulty of quantifying interactions in cultural diplomacy, a qualitative approach to democratic distinctiveness would clearly be more appropriate in the context of this thesis.

Bureaucratic politics theory, while used across a wide variety of disciplines and fields, is only used in qualitative research. This is because it operates at a low level of analysis – interactions between individuals – which can only be studied using qualitative techniques. In addition, the theory's use is restricted to qualitative studies by its requirement for the researcher to identify where each actor “sits” in a decision-making structure, which is not possible in large-N studies. While these caveats do limit the theory's generalisability, and prevent the theory from being usable in all types of research where democratic distinctiveness appears, key works relating to both theories do suggest a common methodological path forward. Allison's *Essence of Decision*, which gave rise to bureaucratic politics theory, is a classic example of a single case study using congruence analysis (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 3), and later works inspired by Allison's theory follow the case study method (see, for example, Kozak & Keagle, 1988). While the specific methodological tools used in this thesis are similar, my approach differs from Allison's, in that it compares two cases, and uses two already popular theories, where Allison offers three “cuts” at a single case, including two developed within the work itself.

While there are obvious benefits to increasing the number of theories or cases – improving the probability of congruence and the external validity of the study, respectively – this paper selects only two of each, in order to ensure a reasonable level of detail. In addition, this research does not aim to identify perfect congruence with a single theory, but rather to suggest a new broad theoretical approach which may have some value in the chosen field.

#### **4.2 Case selection**

I have chosen to study two cases: the British Council and the Confucius Institute. These organisations are both the most prominent in the literature, providing the most evidence for empirical research, and the ideal “most-likely” and “least-likely” cases. If democratic states distinguish between liberal and illiberal contemporaries in their foreign policy and cultural diplomacy, the British Council, as the most prominent such organisation in a democratic state, is most likely to demonstrate this effect. Conversely, the Confucius Institute, as the most prominent such organisation in an authoritarian state, is least likely to show the same results (Rohlfing, 2012: 84). Most- and least-likely cases are often used when taking an “effects-of-causes” perspective (Rohlfing, 2012: 88), and are particularly well-suited to the congruence method, which begins by making a judgment on the “ex-ante likeliness” of cases “in respect to the selected theories” (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 27). In the language of congruence analysis, the British Council may also be referred to as a “crucial” case, in that it is most-likely with respect to the dominant theoretical paradigm, and least-likely with respect to the challenger theory used in this paper (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 176).

While they necessarily differ in regime type, the crucial study variable for the democratic distinctiveness theory, the British Council and Confucius Institute do share a number of similarities which make them eminently comparable. Both are sprawling bureaucracies, spanning over 100 countries each. Both offer language teaching as a core service. And both countries abide by similar mission statements: the British Council pledges to offer “cultural relations and educational opportunities,” and thereby “engender trust,” while Confucius offers “educational and cultural exchange and cooperation,” contributing to “a harmonious world” (British Council, 2017; Hanban, 2017). While potential intervening variables can never be truly “controlled” in international relations, these similarities are a good start in any effort to isolate the effect of state character.

Practical and political concerns also motivated the choice of cases for this paper. The British Council seemed a logical choice for this researcher, both as a native English speaker, and having some familiarity with the organisation from time spent working in the UK cultural sector. Confucius, meanwhile, is a necessary choice, because the controversy that follows it, and the widespread suspicion with which it is regarded in academic circles, demand further investigation.

Finally, in order to be stable and reliable, case studies must have “temporal”, “substantive”, and either “institutional” or “spatial” bounds (Rohlfing, 2012: 24-26). Accordingly, I propose to apply some conditions to the cases:

- **Temporal:** The paper covers the decade from 2007 to 2016, beginning with the appointment of Martin Davidson as chief executive of the British Council, and concluding with the retirement of Xu Lin as director of Hanban (the semi-independent government organisation which runs the Confucius network). The period saw important strategic realignments in both organisations, as well as changes of political leadership in both the UK and China.
- **Substantive:** Only evidence which relates to decision-making is relevant for the purposes of the competing theories. This includes the strategic, financial and political management of each organisation over the time period, and key events in the development of each organisation, insofar as they had an effect on decision-making.
- **Institutional:** The dependent variables include only decisions made within the British Council and the Confucius Institute/Hanban.

### 4.3 Case study techniques

#### 4.3.1 Congruence analysis

Congruence analysis refers to an approach to small-N research which assesses the explanatory power of two or more theories comparatively via case studies (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 144). A set of hypotheses and expected observations are deduced from the selected theories, and the observed reality of each case is compared to these expectations to establish their explanatory leverage. The congruence method differs from co-variance analysis, in which expectations are itemised in the form of dependent variables, are identified or not identified in the observed reality, and conclusions drawn from the tally of these hits and misses (Annamalai, 2010). Congruence analysis allows the researcher to approach the cases with an open mind as to how expected phenomena may manifest themselves (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 166).

This approach is particularly well-suited to exploratory research which applies existing theories to new empirical fields. In such cases, expected observations may not be easily expressed as dependent variables due to a lack of precedents. However, to ensure validity as far as possible, congruence analysis does require the researcher to justify each decision to connect an observation from the cases to an expectation derived from the theories. This emphasis on interpretation, though problematic for positivists, allows more qualitative reflection on the cases than a co-variance method (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 167).

In exploratory research, the identification of expectations also requires a degree of interpretation and justification. Though expectations may be quite specific, they are unlikely to take the form of “concrete” predictions, and further interpretation is thus required later, after observations have been made (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 186-7). Data collection, which follows the setting of expectations, may use any source type, depending on the availability of information relating to the cases. *Essence of Decision* and *Liberal Peace, Liberal War*, both cited by Blatter and Haverland as archetypes of the congruence method, take entirely different approaches to data collection, for example. While Owen relied on previous scholarly literature, along with newspaper reports, Allison was able to take advantage of primary sources, including tape recordings of discussions within the White House, and was able to generate original data by interviewing participants (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 188).

The “congruence analysis proper,” to use Blatter and Haverland’s term, takes place after the collection and presentation of data. At this stage, the collected observations are compared with the expectations deduced from each theory. Because of the open-mindedness maintained in the

prior stages of research, this analysis requires “inferential leaps between different levels of abstraction,” making “explicit reflection and justification” indispensable (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 189). Comparing their observations against the expectations of each theory in turn, the researcher is able to classify observations as either supporting one theory and contradicting the other, supporting or contradicting one theory and offering no insight on the other, or supporting or contradicting both theories. The first type of observation carries the greatest explanatory weight, but is rare. In this paper, few such observations can be expected, as the two theories being tested, while competing, express their expectations using different units of analysis. Most evidence collected will fall into the second category, supporting or contradicting only one theory, while some will fall into the third. In addition, since the two theories selected are not exhaustive of the possible explanations for decision-making in cultural diplomacy, some evidence which is pertinent to explaining the cases may not connect conveniently with either theory. Such evidence is still important, and must be included to maintain internal validity in the case studies. In addition, such evidence could suggest that the selected theories should be expanded, adjusted or replaced in the search for a more powerful explanation (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 191). Following the congruence analysis, conclusions can be drawn, which will be stronger or weaker depending on the categorisation of observations, and results can be generalised – not in terms of other cases, since the external validity of the case study method is limited, but in terms of their significance for the wider theoretical debate.

#### **4.3.2 Process tracing**

Within the congruence analysis method, it remains necessary to facilitate the classification of observations by making sense of the impact of those observations on each case. This requires some understanding of causality within the case – and the ideal technique for identifying this causality is process tracing. Though process tracing is a well-known standalone qualitative technique, Blatter and Haverland also recognise its value in “drawing causal inferences to answer research questions for which the [co-variance] and [congruence] approaches represent the optimal choices as overall research designs” (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 206).

Process tracing seeks to establish causal links between independent and dependent variables, such as “smoking guns” or “confessions,” thus increasing internal validity. Process tracing is necessary in studies of decision-making, because observations of decision outcomes are not in themselves sufficient to identify the effect of a given variable (such as, in this case, state character) or process (such as, in this case, individual bargaining) on those outcomes. It is also necessary when the observations made do not support the theories being tested, because the absence of such a connection still requires explanation (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 213). In addition, the level



of detail allowed by process tracing is necessary to mitigate the possibility of omitted variable bias (Rohlfing, 2012: 115). This is especially relevant here, because as well as the character of their sponsoring states, the British Council and Confucius Institute differ in other important characteristics, including governance and funding models.

Since this study considers two cases over a ten-year period, process tracing will seek to establish an explanatory “storyline” to set the emergence of causal factors and critical junctures in context. These long-term narratives tend to focus on structural factors. Subsequently, critical junctures themselves can be investigated using process tracing, with closer investigation of the roles and motivations of individual actors, and the possibility of illuminating “smoking guns” and “confessions” (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 111).

Like congruence analysis, process tracing is also well-suited to the theories selected for study in this paper. As Owen has explained, gathering meaningful evidence on democratic distinctiveness requires a detailed examination of causal relationships within specific cases, which quantitative studies cannot provide. Both Owen and Nye have recommended further research on democratic distinctiveness using process tracing, while bureaucratic politics theory is even more strongly associated with the technique, as its primary aim is to identify causal processes within the “black box” of a state (Owen, 1994: 91; Nye, 1993: 40; Hudson, 2005: 2-3).

#### **4.4 Data collection**

##### **4.4.1 Desk research**

The primary data collection method for this thesis is desk research. Primary source data used include annual reports, policy and strategy documents, and research reports from the British Council and Hanban. Of course, though generally reliable on matters of fact, these official documents present only a version of events sanctioned by each organisation, and consequently carry a risk of reporting bias (Yin, 2009: 86). Secondary source material includes previous scholarly works on the two cases, while newspapers and magazines are used both as running records of events and secondary analysis of the two cases.

##### **4.4.2 Interviews**

In addition to the desk research, data collected include a series of semi-structured interviews with six current and former officials with direct experience working with the two organisations. These interviews collected officials’ reflections both on the culture of each organisation and on specific

decisions in which they were involved. Evidence collected in these interviews gives greater richness to the evidence base, but must be triangulated with other sources to account for possible bias (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 68).

Interviewees were approached with the aim of achieving a spread of perspectives across both organisations, and to ensure representation of a range of different functions and levels of seniority. The interviews were semi-structured, with each interviewee asked a standard set of open questions about their experience, to mitigate the possibility of leading questions and researcher bias. To mitigate further risks, including of “socially desirable answers,” incomplete answers and non-participation, interviewees were offered the option of anonymity, a common safeguard in public policy research (Blatter & Haverland, 2012: 68; Coontz, 1999: 11-12). All interviewees took up this option, and are consequently each referred to by a letter, along with a brief description here of their role and background. The full interview questions are included as an appendix.

- **Interviewee A** works in the policy team at the head office of the British Council in London.
- **Interviewee B** is a former senior manager for the British Council, who joined the organisation in the 1980s.
- **Interviewee C** is a former country director for the British Council, who joined the organisation in the 1980s and retired in the mid 2010s.
- **Interviewee D** is a curator and sinologist, who worked as the programme manager of a Confucius Institute in Italy from the early to mid 2010s, and has worked for academic, diplomatic and cultural institutions in China and Europe.
- **Interviewee E** is a former vice-chancellor of two universities which host Confucius Institutes, establishing the Institute at one of those universities in the early 2010s.
- **Interviewee F** is a senior director of an Australian university which hosts a Confucius Institute, and previously worked as a senior diplomat in Beijing.

#### 4.4.3 Limitations

As ever, some limitations exist which hinder data collection, and the effect of these limitations should be borne in mind. First, the availability of primary sources from Hanban is limited by

comparison to the British Council. Although it publishes a comprehensive and bilingual annual review and a bi-monthly official journal, Hanban does not typically publish policy and strategy documents or internal research. This difficulty is exacerbated by the English-Mandarin language barrier, which prevents this study from making use of Chinese-only publications.

The generally closed nature of Chinese political culture further restricts the availability and richness of information for this study. Observing positions and negotiations within the Chinese civil service is notoriously difficult, and due to the language barrier and a lack of personal contacts, no officials who are themselves Chinese were interviewed. While the interviews include contributions from people with direct experience working with both organisations, their different organisational structures and the difficulty of securing Chinese interviewees mean that the positions of interviewees on either side are not directly equivalent.

While the variety of sources used attempts to mitigate the possibility of bias overall, there will inevitably be biases within individual data sources, such as “spin” in official documents, personal biases and revisions in interviews, and researcher bias in some scholarly work. Finally, the very recent establishment of the Confucius Institute means that scholarly research on it is limited, and much of it is coloured by the preconceptions which this paper seeks to challenge.

## 5 Case observations

### 5.1 British Council

#### 5.1.1 Context

The case study period follows a series of interventions affecting the British Council by other political actors. The ‘Wilton review,’ conducted by the Foreign Office in 2002, took an initial step toward redefining the Council’s activities and its relationship with central government (Rivera, 2015: 14). The review made two conclusions with far-reaching implications for the Council: first, that its activities constituted “public diplomacy,” and that it was therefore intended to engage and influence foreign publics “in support of” the UK government (Rivera, 2015: 14); and second, that British public diplomacy was “uncoordinated,” and therefore required formal strategic coordination and measurement (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2006: 13).

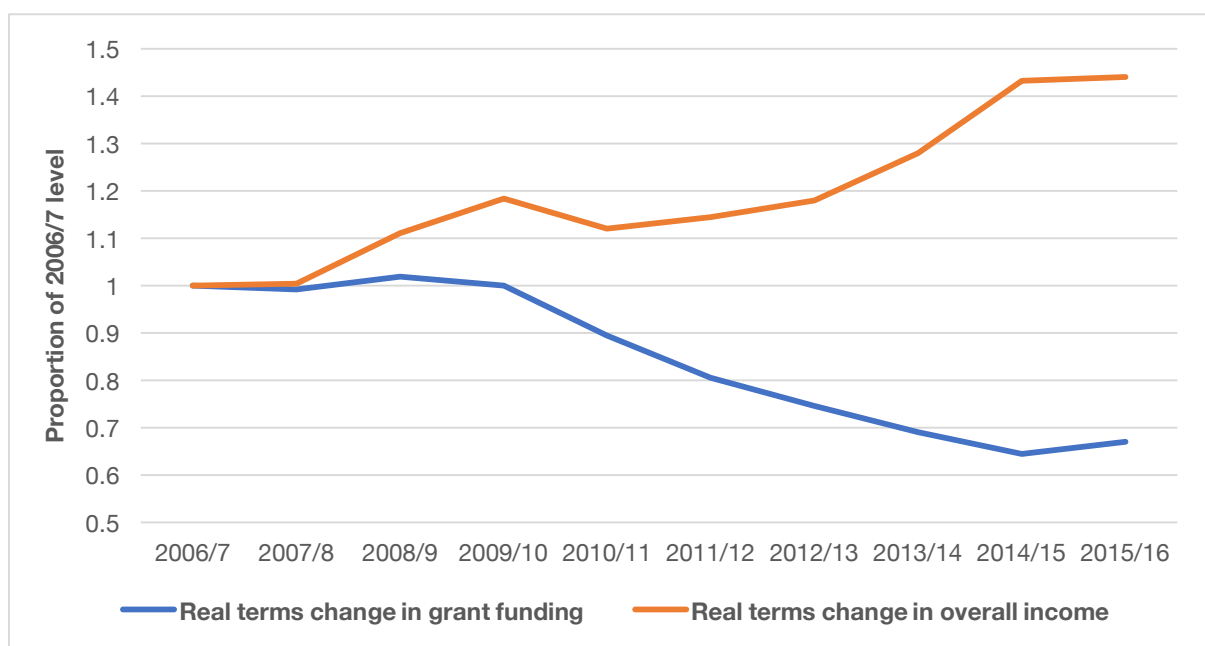
A second review of Britain’s public diplomacy apparatus was published in 2005, led by Lord Patrick Carter, the “oldest and closest friend” of the then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (Straw, 2012: 3). This document was bolder in its assertion that the British Council’s activities should support governmental priorities, by virtue of the Council representing British “interests” overseas (Pamment, 2013: 73). It also recommended multiplying the Council’s political accountabilities (along with those of the BBC) via the creation of a “Public Diplomacy Strategy and Performance Management Board,” to be chaired by a Foreign Office minister and accountable to the British parliament (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2006: 7). The Board was intended to concentrate strategic responsibility in the hands of the Foreign Office by removing those organisations which it did not fund (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2006: 17). The Carter review also marked the beginning of a period of intense scrutiny of the British Council’s finances. At the time, the Council received almost 40% of its funding from a central government grant, and the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that it therefore represented poorer “value for money” than its French and German equivalents (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2006: 35-6).

These debates over independence and funding provide the context for the British Council’s key decisions from 2007 onwards. In April 2007, the Council appointed Martin Davidson, who had joined the organisation in 1984, as its chief executive. Under Davidson’s leadership, the Council made several major strategic realignments, reducing its reliance on public funding, consolidating its branches, and becoming, outwardly at least, increasingly comfortable with being identified as part of the UK’s cultural diplomacy apparatus.

### 5.1.2 Financial realignment

Figure 1 shows the scale of the financial transformation which took place over the case study period. The British Council funds its activities through a mix of sources, including paid-for English teaching and accreditation, contract work with governments and private companies, and direct funding from the UK government, mostly via the Foreign Office (known as “grant-in-aid”) (British Council, 2016: 54). Over the ten-year period, the Council increased its income by 44% in real terms, from £551 million to £980 million. Government funding, meanwhile, fell by a third, from £195 million to £162 million, and declined to just 17% of the Council’s total income. At the same time, more than 10% of British Council offices worldwide were closed, with the number of separate premises falling from 213 to 187 (British Council, 2007-2016).

This transformation reflected a deeper choice by the Council, in the wake of criticism from Lord Carter and the Foreign Affairs Committee, to improve its sustainability by focusing on its most profitable activities. Senior officials recall a decision “under Martin Davidson, that we either had to shrink, perhaps to insignificance, or we had to expand commercially” (C, personal communication, May 30, 2017). This focus on self-generated revenue provoked mixed feelings both within the Council and outside it. One interviewee reported an unwelcome cultural shift had resulted from the change, commenting that “a peculiarly dense managerialism” had come about, under which “impact and outcomes... often seem subsidiary to the fulfilment of revenue targets” (C, 2017). Others, however, felt less strongly, endorsing English teaching as a core purpose of



**Figure 1. British Council grant funding vs. overall income, 2006/7-2015/16**

(British Council annual reports, 2007-16)

the Council, and welcoming its achievement in growing its budget far beyond that of its European counterparts. External reactions were also mixed, with Britain's National Audit Office concluding in 2008 that the Council's expansion of paid services ran the risk of representing "unfair competition" with private providers, due to its "operating in the benign shadow of Britain's diplomatic presence" (NAO, 2008: 6; de Lotbinière, 2008). The NAO review was followed by further reputational problems related to the Council's finances in the 2010s. Two scandals in 2012, mainly focused on high spending on corporate credit cards, damaged the organisation's public and political standing (Pamment, 2016: 215-16), and in 2015, the NAO stepped in again, this time fining the Council for breaking UK rules on executive pay (Sullivan, 2015).

While the Council grew its independent income substantially, grant-in-aid declined sharply following the election of a new Conservative-led government in 2010. The Council was told to expect its grant to be cut by 25%, with the rest of the UK's public diplomacy apparatus subject to similar austerity (Pamment, 2015: 264). During this period the Council became increasingly used to its public funding coming with strings attached – via project-specific grants, or the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget, which can only be spent in developing countries, and which now constitutes over half of the Council's government grant (Rivera, 2015: 30). One interviewee from the Council's head office felt that this change had promoted a more collegial decision-making culture in the organisation, because project funding bids relied heavily on in-country officials' expertise: "other parts of the organisation are intimately involved with decision-making, because they're helping to put together bids" (A, personal communication, May 22, 2017). However, there was consensus among interviewees that the transition toward project-specific funding had forced the Council into making a strategic realignment, not just a financial one.

### **5.1.3 Strategic realignment**

At the same time as increasing its focus on revenue-generating services, the British Council took a series of decisions from 2007 onwards which narrowed its geo-strategic focus. In the 2006/7 financial year, the Council operated 213 offices worldwide, including 46 in the European Economic Area. Over the following two years, the Council reduced its grant-funded spending in Europe by 30%, reallocating its resources toward "high-priority regions for the UK" (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2007: 88), and by 2015 it had completely withdrawn from several European countries, including Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland (British Council, 2015). Davidson explicitly linked the shift away from Europe to reduced public funding, saying that it was necessary to "create an operation in western Europe that fully covers its cost through earned income," and to ask "whether the physical presence in those countries adds value" (Rivera, 2015:

30). The Council's chair, the former politician Lord Neil Kinnock, was more blasé, justifying the change in an interview by arguing that "in these days of cheap air travel, most Europeans can pop on a plane to see some cultural event in another European country" (Brooks, 2007).

Interviewees agreed that the realignment away from Europe had not served the Council well. The 'Brexit' referendum on European Union membership in 2016 threw this decision into sharp relief, with the Council now charged with "spearheading attempts to maintain our friendly connections" with Europe, despite having withdrawn from several bilateral relationships with European states (A, 2017). One former director believed the Council had shown "abysmal foresight regarding Europe," having "gradually assumed that that job was done... that we didn't have to bother" (B, 2017). The reallocation of resources toward priority countries also drew criticism from outside the organisation, with accusations that the Council was "neglecting our friends in Europe" while practising "cultural imperialism" in the Middle East (Smith, 2007).

While Western Europe became a low priority for the Council after 2007, its activities in Russia became increasingly controversial. Diplomatic relations between the two countries had soured during the investigation into the murder of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko, and as a retaliatory measure, the Russian foreign ministry ordered the Council to close all of its offices in the country outside Moscow in December 2007 (Buckley, 2007). After initially defying the request, the Council complied in 2008, citing "direct intimidating pressure by the federal authorities" toward its in-country staff (British Council, 2008). At the same time, a previously announced decision that the Council would withdraw from the Baltic states was reversed, with branches in all three countries remaining open (Malvern, 2007; British Council, 2016).

The organisation became further embroiled in politics in 2009, when it withdrew from Iran following an order from the Iranian president's office. Davidson described the incident as "the culmination of two years of pressure from the authorities on our operations," including the refusal of travel visas to British officials, intimidation of the Council's Iranian partner organisations, and indiscriminate confiscation of employees' passports (Borger, 2009). The Iranian authorities, like the Russian government in 2007, gave the pretext that the Council had not signed sufficient contracts for its operation in the country. Finally, in 2011, another Council office came under attack, this time violently, as Taliban militants killed nine people in an assault on its compound in Kabul, Afghanistan. The attack was timed to coincide with the anniversary of Afghan independence from British imperial interests in 1919 (Boone, 2011).

The incidents in Russia and Iran especially prompted strong reassertions from the British Council that it operates separately from the UK government, and that its operations should not be

dependent on diplomatic relations with countries in which it operates. On the contrary, Kinnock argued, “strong educational and cultural connections are increasingly vital at times of political tension” (British Council, 2008: 3). Interviewees agreed with this sentiment: one said that, in the case of Russia, it was vital for the Council to “find ways to keep lines of engagement open, at times when maybe politically they’re closed” (A, 2017). Yet at the same time, officials believed that the Council’s activities in countries like Russia and Iran could at times be “subversive,” and that this explained why the Iranian government “were more afraid of the Council than they were of [British] diplomats” (B, 2017). These diplomatic incidents are evidence that, despite the Council’s official stance emphasising its separation from the British state, it is prone to being perceived as a proxy for it. The true nature of the relationship between the organisation and the UK government is therefore deserving of closer examination.

#### **5.1.4 Political realignment**

The British Council operates at “arm’s length” from the UK government, making it one of over 300 semi-independent agencies and organisations in the British public sector. But the reviews by Wilton and Carter hastened a process of realigning the Council with governmental priorities through operational, structural and discursive change. The two reviews were followed by a formal “triennial review” by the Foreign Office in 2014 – a process introduced in 2011 to “provide a strong challenge of the continuing need” for public bodies, as part of the new government’s effort to cut spending and streamline the public sector (Cabinet Office, 2013). This review went further than ever in casting the British Council as an explicitly political and diplomatic organisation: “the potential return to the UK globally is enormous,” it stated, “in terms of ‘soft power’, reputation and prosperity” (Foreign Office, 2014: 20). Given this political purpose, the review proposed that the Foreign Office should “strengthen capacity to provide effective oversight of” the Council, “including through secondments into relevant positions” within it (Foreign Office, 2014: 54). In addition, it noted that the Council self-defines as “the UK’s organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations,” but chose instead to categorise its activities as “cultural diplomacy,” which it defined as the “promotion of a country’s culture and values to build positive relationships and influence, thereby furthering national interests. In other words, use of national culture in support of foreign policy and diplomacy” (Foreign Office, 2014: 9-10). Finally, the triennial review referred to a lack of “clarity of purpose” within the Council, arising from the tension between its revenue-generating services and this foreign policy mission. As a solution, the Foreign Office floated the prospect of a legal separation between the Council’s commercial and publicly-funded operations (Foreign Office, 2014: 4-5).



All of these proposals were highly controversial within the Council. The triennial review has been described as “threatening the [Council’s] operational and editorial independence from Government” (Rivera, 2015: 7). Interviewees recognised the review, as well as its antecedents in 2002 and 2005, as part of a historical process in which the “arm’s length” between the British Council and central government “has got shorter or longer, depending on to what extent the Foreign Office has sought to control what’s going on” (B, 2017). One interviewee saw the triennial review’s governance recommendations as an explicit existential threat: “You do what we tell you do to, otherwise we close you down... or break you up” (B, 2017).

The progressive shortening of the “arm’s length” over the case study period is deeply problematic for the Council, because of the broad consensus that cultural diplomacy organisations are more effective if they are not tied to governmental priorities. Nicholas Cull notes that such organisations are in fact “helped by perceived distance from government,” and observed in 2010, before the triennial review, that the “clear division of labour by function” between the Council and the Foreign Office, “with its agreed firewalls and a sensible system of strategic cooperation at the executive level, seems like an excellent model” (Cull, 2008: 36; 2010: 14). This distance was recognised by interviewees as a crucial asset for the Council, which had “done enough work over enough years... that people distinguish between us and the British government.” In addition, it was felt that this independence had distinguished the Council from other cultural diplomacy organisations, including European bodies like Institut Français, which it had historically felt to be “culturally imperialistic,” and newer organisations like the Confucius Institute, which had “not had the impact the Chinese government would have liked” as a result of its perceived closeness to the regime (A, 2017).

Despite the potential threats to its independence during the period, the Council appeared to become increasingly comfortable identifying with the political purposes set out for it by government. While it continued to formally describe its mission as “cultural relations and educational opportunities” (British Council, 2016: 4), the Council’s historic “discomfort with advocacy roles and overt diplomatic objectives” appeared to decrease as governmental pressure grew (Cull, 2008: 33). In 2007, several senior Council officials contributed to a report by the British think tank Demos on ways to improve the UK’s “cultural diplomacy.” While maintaining reference to the independence of organisations like the Council, the report explicitly sought to close the gap between politics and culture by increasing public investment in cultural exchange, and encouraged ministers to recognise the “value of culture in international relations” (Bound et al, 2007: 12-13; 83-4). By 2013, the Council was working with Demos to co-author a report on the growing importance of “soft power” in international relations, and the potential contribution of cultural relations towards it (Holden, 2013). The report even took its title, *Influence and Attraction*,

directly from Nye (Nye, 2004: 6). The Council's growing willingness to tie itself to political concepts may have been less an ideological conversion, and more an attempt at self-preservation in an austere climate: while seeking the explicit buy-in of the Foreign Office hierarchy (the Foreign Secretary William Hague agreed to write the foreword), *Influence and Attraction* chastised government for "short-sighted" budget cuts, and warned that by comparison, "China does not agonise over the minutiae of cost-effectiveness, as it understands the importance of cultural influence" (Holden, 2013: 23).

Not all interviewees agreed on the net result of these political realignments. One official based in the Council's head office felt that, despite the discursive changes since 2007, "governments of all types have understood that... we do a better job for them if they mostly leave us alone to get on with it" (A, 2017). Former in-country officials, meanwhile, received a drastically different impression. One concluded that the same changes amounted to a fundamental shift of focus toward political management above all else: "some people would say the [Council's] primary audience has moved from the world to SW1" (C, 2017). The "great irony" of the Council, they observed, was that "at a time when we have less money coming from the government than we have ever had before, we are in some ways much more closely tied to it than ever before." Another interviewee judged that the changes reflected a tendency in the Council towards "knee-jerk reactions to external and internal government decisions." The origin of the political realignment, they argued, was a change in the strategic thinking of governments: "as people have understood how important and influential that horrible concept 'soft power' can be, they've taken a greater interest." The Council's willingness to capitalise on this change of thinking reflected its institutional self-interest, seeing an opportunity to preserve its threatened public funding and stave off the possibility of forced governance changes. "Either you can say that's pragmatism, and realism," they concluded, "or you could say it's cowardice" (B, 2017).

One additional factor in the tightening of the political relationship between the Council and the UK government is the enthusiasm with which the latter embraced ideas of "nation branding" in the early 2010s. The concept of "nation branding," developed by the British marketing consultants Wally Olins and Simon Anholt in the 1980s and '90s, refers to "the strategic self-presentation of a country with the aim of creating reputational capital through economic, political and social interest promotion at home and abroad" (Szondi, 2008: 5). Although its practice long predates its conceptualisation, the best-known instance of nation branding in the UK is the initiative known as "Cool Britannia," led by Tony Blair's government in the late 1990s. By the mid-2000s, Cool Britannia had become widely derided, and British policy-makers were reluctant to embrace the idea of branding as part of public diplomacy (Olins, 2005: 170; Pamment, 2015: 264). But following the election of the Conservative-led government in 2010, this reluctance dissipated, and

the UK developed the GREAT campaign, “one of the most ambitious national promotion efforts ever undertaken” (Pamment, 2015: 260).

GREAT, driven by incoming prime minister David Cameron on the advice of his strategist Steve Hilton, was primarily an attempt to maximise the economic benefits of planned national events in and around 2012, most notably the London Olympics. The British Council was invited to join the programme board of the initiative, which “superseded concurrent public diplomacy, strategic communication and soft power initiatives and commandeered a vast array of national resources” (Pamment, 2015: 261-2). The Council proceeded to integrate its own work significantly with GREAT, applying the new brand to its language teaching centres, and seeking additional funding from the campaign for specific GREAT-branded initiatives. It also appeared to support the campaign’s economic rationale, commissioning a report entitled *Culture Means Business* in 2013 which measured the effect of cultural engagement on how foreign publics see the UK “as a place to do business” (British Council, 2013b: 3). James Pamment has suggested that following the cuts to the Council’s grant after 2010, “the opportunity to bid for funds for running campaigns which would otherwise have been de-prioritised” was a significant attraction for the Council, as well as a “key disciplining method” for central government (Pamment, 2015: 270). The Council’s engagement in the GREAT campaign was contentious among officials. Tim Rivera noted reservations from staff about the campaign “diluting the British Council’s brand,” and the 2014 triennial review recognised a perception in government that the Council was not fully “bought in” to the campaign, recommending it adopt “a more consistent practice of positive engagement and contribution” (Rivera, 2015: 19; Foreign Office, 2014: 109; 51). Interviewees shared similar reservations: one former director saw a fundamental clash between the Council’s cultural relations mission, which emphasises “mutuality [and] reciprocity,” and GREAT, which “project[s] an image of the UK [as] the best thing since sliced bread, and [expects that] everyone’s going to fall over and want more of it” (B, 2017).

### **5.1.5 Consequences for decision-making**

All three of these realignments had significant consequences for the way decisions are made within the British Council, as well as for its relations with non-democratic states. Interviewees reported that, while some long-standing aspects of the Council’s organisational behaviour remained unchanged during the period, others changed tangibly as a result of the altered financial and political context.

All three officials interviewed agreed that decision-making in the Council had historically been slow, and that it remained so throughout the case study period. Several reasons were cited for

this. First, the Council's relatively large size – 9,624 FTE staff by the end of the period (British Council, 2016) – limited its adaptability: “It takes a long time for a big bureaucratic organisation like this to reallocate its resources and focus” (A, 2017). Second, the Council's “values of mutuality and reciprocity” (B, 2017) tend to necessitate involving many internal stakeholders in decisions, as “so many different people want to be involved” (A, 2017). These internal stakeholders tend to have different views, with differences dependent largely on their geographical location and their place in the Council hierarchy. “A lot of people act not for the Council, or to the purpose of the Council,” one interviewee said, “but their loyalties are owed to a particular *part* of the Council – either a country, or a region, or a function, or a business unit” (B, 2017). All interviewees also agreed on this point; a head office-based official explained that “inevitably, there are tensions between the people on the coalface [in-country officials], who are very sceptical of anything that smacks of soft power or British national interest, and the headquarters who sometimes think that maybe we need a little bit more focus on that” (A, 2017). Interviewees believed that country directors, in particular, were likely to have disagreements with head office colleagues, due to differences in their priorities, professional backgrounds and expertise.

While the slow, conflictual nature of decision-making remained the same, interviewees believed that decision-making in the Council was subject to “a major growth of centralisation” during the period. In particular, the “autonomy” enjoyed by country directors was eroded, and replaced by “what now sometimes seems like a lack of trust” in in-country officials (C, 2017). Again, several explanations were offered by interviewees. First, technological change had enabled the micro-management of in-country officials by head office, resulting in country directors being “inundated with constant demands for frivolous information, and equally frivolous instructions, on email” (C, 2017). Second, the Council's refocusing on revenue generation had necessitated changes to its recruitment policy and management structure, with a greater emphasis on business acumen in each. As a result, the “most important decision-makers in the Council [were now] the regional directors and the heads of business units,” not in-country staff (B, 2017), with regional directors becoming “a sort of micro chief executive, with his or her own revenue targets, and a strategic plan... to enforce on the tier below” (C, 2017). A head office official agreed that in decision-making, “it's certainly an advantage to be in the head office, because you're closer to the action, and you hear more what is going on” (A, 2017). One interviewee felt that this centralisation was exacerbated by a culture of risk aversion among Council staff, resulting in a tendency to “push decision-making up the chain” (B, 2017).

Interviewees did not agree on whether the Council's strategic and financial realignment had restricted its options in dealing with non-democratic countries. One believed that the growing emphasis on financial sustainability inclined the Council toward “producing off-the-shelf, draw-

down projects on a regional or global scale,” which in turn made it “less and less easy to do something that’s focused on a particular country.” At the same time, the official had “major concerns” about the Council’s tendency, in this new climate, to be “diffident about offending the governments of countries where there’s a lot of money which contributes to our revenue streams” (C, 2017). Another argued that the Council continued to promote its values within the same limits of practicality that had always existed. While Council officials in non-democratic countries took care “to ensure that none of our activities crossed lines that endangered our presence there, or pissed off the authorities too much,” one official said, there would still be “subtle cultural or political messages” in the content of the Council’s courses and activities. “Even just by learning English, people are exposed to different ideas, and are able to then go on the internet, and read different things that they might not otherwise have been able to read” (A, 2017). A third official, however, believed that the adaptations required in non-democratic countries were of greater consequence: “if you’re working with an authoritarian regime, you don’t have the freedom to work with civil society – and that’s your main job... so you end up doing, you know, bloody film festivals” (B, 2017).

## **5.2 Confucius Institute**

### **5.2.1 Governance model**

The Confucius Institute’s core activities are language teaching and exams, educational exchanges, and cultural events (Hanban, 2017). Its language programmes, which cater to both children and adults, typically provide an introduction to Mandarin, rather than training towards fluency. Cultural activities, which are usually free, most commonly take the forms of “exhibitions, film screenings or concerts, the celebration of traditional Chinese festivals or courses about Tai Chi, Qigong, paper cutting, calligraphy, Chinese tea ceremonies or Chinese cuisine” (Hartig, 2016: 175; 179). These activities are broadly similar to those of by the British Council – indeed, the organisation was inspired by the Council and the Goethe-Institut (Hartig, 2016: 99) – though individual Confucius Institutes may offer different combinations of services based on local demand and existing provision.

Confucius differs substantially from the Council, however, in its business model. Rather than a network of free-standing branches around the world, Confucius Institutes are joint ventures between Hanban, a Chinese government agency, and a host institution. The host institution, usually a university, provides the premises for the Confucius Institute and is responsible for its day-to-day operation. In addition, a Chinese university is usually involved as a third partner. Each local Institute is both jointly managed and jointly funded, with Hanban providing just under 40%

of the Confucius Institute's global budget (see Table 1). Falk Hartig has observed that "this cooperation is not only essential to maintain these Institutes, but it is very much the approach deliberately chosen by China to manage and run its cultural outposts" (Hartig, 2016: 3).

Leadership of each Confucius Institute is provided by a director, appointed (and usually salaried) by the host institution, while Hanban may appoint a Chinese co-director or deputy. The exact arrangement is not consistent across all Institutes (Hartig, 2016: 126-7); interviewees had experience working with Chinese co-directors and without. Teaching staff are also dispatched to most Institutes from China, typically selected and employed by the Chinese partner university. Exactly how these directors and teachers are selected is opaque to their non-Chinese colleagues. Interviewees believed that appointments are likely to involve some form of political vetting or patronage, and that whether or not staff were required to have a formal connection to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), either Hanban or the Chinese university would have to consider them "politically safe" (F, personal communication, 8 June 2017). However, following the rapid growth of the Confucius network, Hartig found that many branches had severe difficulty finding enough staff, let alone individuals who speak the local language or even English. In addition, they considered Confucius postings to be far from a political reward, carrying little prestige in China, and being given typically to "young people, recently graduates, or old people with not too much expectations anymore" (Hartig, 2016: 152-3).

Whatever the nature of staff appointments, the day-to-day management of Confucius Institutes is remarkably free from Hanban control. Interviewees unanimously agreed that their branches had "never had any experience of [Hanban] interfering" in their activities, and one programme manager described feeling "free to do pretty much what we wanted" (F, 2017; D, personal communication, 26 May 2017). Wider surveys support this finding; the directors of every Australian Confucius Institute confirmed to Hartig that they had experienced "no interference from the Chinese side and no attempts to push topics in a certain direction" (Hartig, 2016: 132). This is not to say that political concerns have no bearing on the network, however. It is widely understood that a partnership with Hanban implies some restrictions on the subject matter dealt with by classes and events. Most sensitive are what Hartig calls the "T-words:" the political status of Taiwan, Chinese actions in Tibet, and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 (Hartig, 2016: 159). One might add the Falun Gong sect to this list, which many Confucius directors also understood to be off-limits (Hartig, 2016: 133). The extent of this restriction, however, is unclear. Interviewees indicated that explicit censorship did not occur – rather, non-Chinese Confucius staff are simply "used to working with the PRC," and therefore "don't find these [limits] strange" (D, 2017). Hartig's survey found only one case in which Hanban had intervened, after the director of a European branch gave a lecture discussing the Tiananmen demonstrations. The director

received a call from Hanban, suggesting that “we should maybe better not talk about this,” but felt that Hanban had taken this action out of obligation rather than anger: “by calling me and explaining their point of view they reacted on it, and this was it” (Hartig, 2016: 182). Though all interviewees recognised these implicit limits, they generally felt that the legal and financial separation between Confucius and the host university enabled them to approach these subjects under the banner of the university, provided they did not apply to Hanban to fund such events. One interviewee cited the example of hosting a campus visit by the Dalai Lama, saying “that’s fine, whether you’ve got a CI or not. But you would never get the CI to run that event” (F, 2017). And European Confucius Institutes have been able to hold events which went beyond the “correct” versions of Chinese politics and culture associated with Hanban: German branches have held lectures on “Political Participation in China,” “China’s role in the world economy crisis,” and “the Problems of Chinese Minorities,” for example, while many Institutes have hosted concerts by Chinese punk bands (Hartig, 2016: 158; D, 2017).

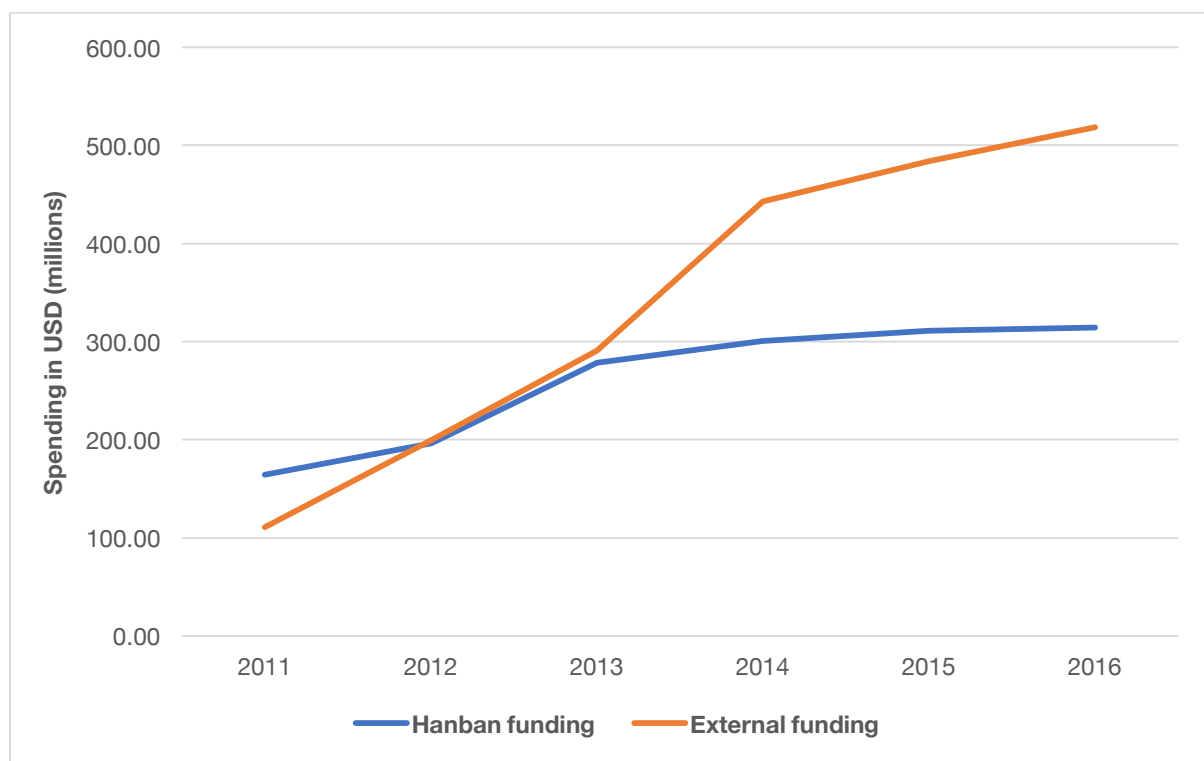
The degree of political independence enjoyed by each branch may relate to its financial reliance on Hanban. Since the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in 2004, the proportion of funding provided by Hanban has gradually declined to become a minority of the network’s budget, while contributions from host institutions and third parties have steadily risen (see Figure 2). Having initially adhered to a 1:1 funding model, Hanban now reports that the ratio of grant funding to self-generated income is 1:1.65, with over \$10 million of the network’s expenditure covered by corporations (Hanban, 2016: 15). This decreasing dependence on Hanban funding, along with the sheer size of the network, have further reduced the risk of political interference at the branch level. In the words of one director, “Hanban is much more an administrative body which is not that much interested in questions of content. Besides, there are too many Institutes around the world and they cannot have a close look at everyone” (Hartig, 2016: 159). For Confucius Institutes in the developing world, however, the opposite may be the case. These institutes are more likely to receive a larger proportion of funding from Hanban (Hachenberg and Li 2007: 534), and one interviewee speculated that this may materially affect their independence: “a million dollars to a university in Africa is a far more significant loss of funding, or gain in funding, than a million dollars would be for us... so when [Hanban is] dealing with less affluent partners I think they’re much more assertive” (F, 2017).

### **5.2.2 Expansion and regional realignments**

The first Confucius Institute was established in Seoul in 2004. In the early years of the network, a core of branches was established in Asian countries, followed by initial waves of a few dozen Institutes in both Europe and North America (see Figure 3). The original intention was to establish

a relatively small number of Confucius Institutes within prestigious universities. Interviewees believed that in this early phase of development, Hanban “made decisions about where they needed CIs to be credible. So it was quite clear that the US, the UK and Australia were heavily targeted in those initial years... because they’re seen as thought leaders” (F, 2017). This prestigious approach led to a widespread misunderstanding, however, whereby many host universities received the impression that only one Institute would be established per country (or, in larger countries, per state), and that host institutions would be able to roll out courses and programmes beyond their local area, with major financial and reputational benefits (Hartig, 2016: 125; 145). Later, this impression was revealed to be mistaken, as Hanban shifted to a strategy based on achieving wider impact through hundreds of branches. From 2009 to 2016, Hanban almost doubled the number of Confucius Institutes in European and American universities (see Table 1). At the same time, the establishment of “Confucius Classrooms” – separate branches based in primary and secondary schools – added over 500 premises to the network in the Americas alone.

Although the process of establishing a new Institute can be instigated by any of the three parties – Hanban, the host or the Chinese university – there is a consensus that Europe and North America were identified by Hanban as priority regions (Ding & Saunders, 2006; Niquet, 2012;



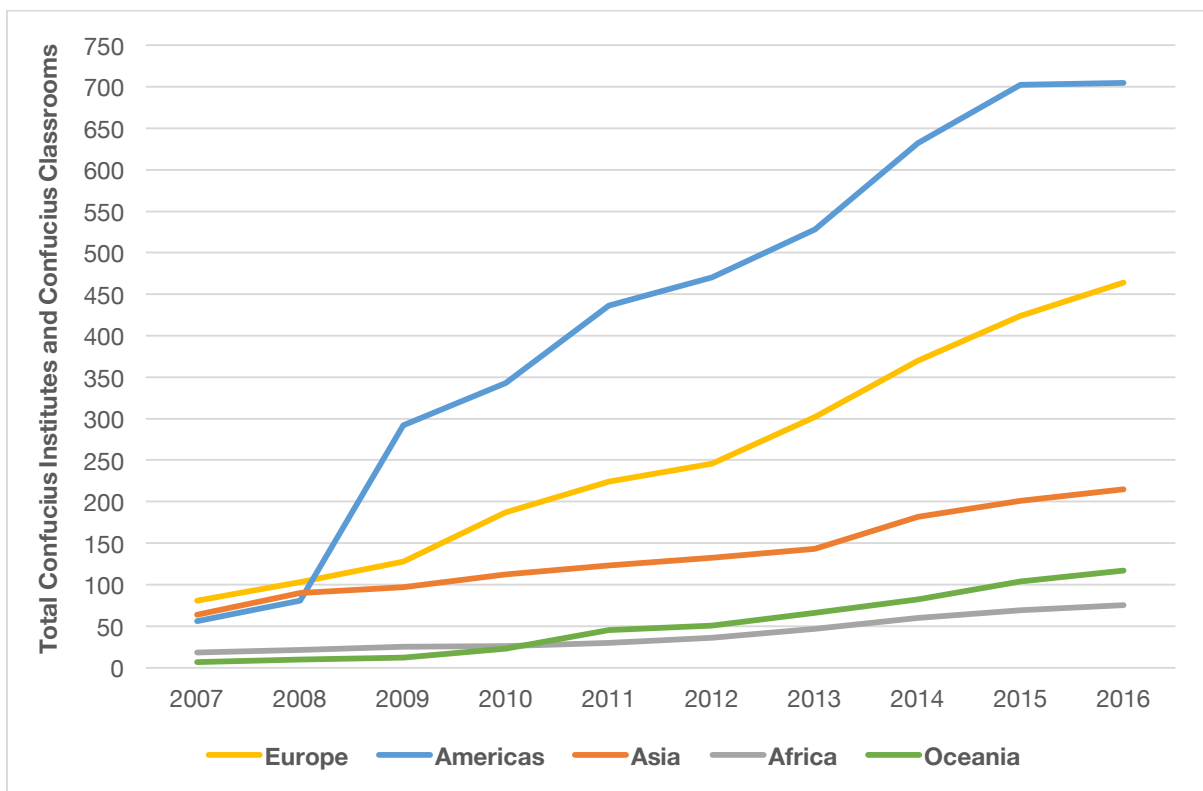
**Figure 2. Hanban spending on Confucius network vs. self-generated income, 2011-16\***

(Hanban annual development reports, 2011-16)

\* Prior to 2011, Hanban published details only of its own contribution, not of total network income, and did not publish any accounts in US dollars.



Hartig, 2016), and there continue to be many more Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in these regions than the rest of the world (see Figure 3). A key factor in this strategic choice was the desire to improve China’s image within liberal democracies (Ding & Saunders, 2006). Later, however, Hanban became more interested in establishing further premises in Asia and Africa, scaling up its operations on both continents by over 50% from 2013 to 2016. This realignment also reflected a strategic priority, following the political decision to increase Chinese investment in the developing world, encapsulated in the “One Belt, One Road” development strategy unveiled in 2013. Tian Xuejun, China’s vice-minister of education, has highlighted the connection between the Confucius network and the strategy (Wong, 2017), and interviewees agreed a connection seems likely: “the [Confucius Institute’s] secondary foray out into developing countries,” one said, “did coincide to some extent with the first stirrings of the One Belt, One Road, [and] the idea of building economic influence in developing countries” (F, 2017). Another interviewee suggested that this connection between the Confucius network and broader policy goals also extended to domestic policy priorities. During an application to open a new Confucius Institute, the interviewee received “a very, very strong suggestion” from Hanban that a university in western China would be a good choice as a partner, as “there was a big economic policy in China to develop the west” (E, personal communication, 29 May 2017). The interviewee recalled being “impressed” that “a pretty low-level decision... was [still] influenced by these higher-level goals.”



**Figure 3. Total Confucius Institute premises by continent, 2007-16**

(Hanban annual development reports, 2007-16)

**Table 1. Number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms by continent, 2007-16**

(Hanban annual development reports, 2007-16)

	Europe		Americas		Asia	
Year	Institutes	Classrooms	Institutes	Classrooms	Institutes	Classrooms
2007	81		56		64	
2008	103		81		90	
2009*	94	34	87	205	70	27
2010	105	82	103	240	81	31
2011	122	102	112	324	83	40
2012	134	112	131	339	87	45
2013	149	153	144	384	93	50
2014	159	211	154	478	103	79
2015	167	257	158	544	111	90
2016	171	293	161	544	115	100
	Africa		Oceania		Total	
Year	Institutes	Classrooms	Institutes	Classrooms	Institutes	Classrooms
2007	18	-	7	-	226	-
2008	21	-	10	-	305	-
2009*	21	4	10	2	282	272
2010	21	5	12	11	322	369
2011	25	5	16	29	358	500
2012	31	5	17	34	400	535
2013	37	10	17	49	440	646
2014	42	18	17	65	475	851
2015	46	23	18	86	500	1000
2016	48	27	18	99	513	1063

\* In 2009, some existing branches were reclassified as Confucius Classrooms

### 5.2.3 Political realignments

Given the apparent connection between political initiatives and strategic decisions regarding the Confucius network, it is worth considering in more detail the relationships between Hanban and the Chinese political establishment. China is not a typical bureaucracy in the Western sense; its political system is dominated by the CCP, which predated, designed and established the Chinese state itself, and is thus completely intertwined with the machinery of government (Zheng, 2010). Many government officials simultaneously hold senior posts in the party, and this system, combined with the opacity of Chinese political culture, makes distinguishing a hierarchy within

the civil service extremely difficult compared to a country like the UK. As one interviewee explained, “you can never be quite sure where [a] person fits into the shadow hierarchy” (F, 2017).

The institutions which make up China’s public diplomacy apparatus are a “complex tangle” of ministries, departments, agencies and party committees (d’Hooghe, 2007: 7). Without wishing to dwell on this complexity, organisations charged with some form of public diplomacy mission include the State Council Information Office (SCIO), the Communist Party Office of External Publicity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Information Department and its Public Diplomacy Division, the Ministry of Culture’s Bureau for External Cultural Relations, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, and, of course, Hanban, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Education (d’Hooghe, 2015). The most powerful of these bodies are the SCIO and the Office of External Publicity, which share most members and are, according to one government website, “one institution [with] two signboards” (Hartig, 2016: 85). Yet the absence of an overarching body for all public diplomacy initiatives has been widely criticised by Chinese analysts, who perceive a lack of coordination and supervision, resulting in important organisations frequently being “excluded from the strategy-planning and decision-making processes” (Hartig, 2016: 73-4).

Although Hanban’s supervising department is the Ministry of Education, the SCIO is also involved in its oversight (d’Hooghe, 2015: 175). Interviewees recalled ministers from both organisations having been involved with their branches. One believed that “the vice-minister for international education is important” (E, 2017), while another observed that over time Hanban had gained influence relative to the Ministry: “initially [Hanban] was seen as a very junior partner... But my perception was that as time went on, when the two didn’t agree... Hanban gradually prevailed more often than not” (F, 2017). At the same time, the SCIO’s involvement became more visible: “it would be the head of the [SCIO] that was wheeled out, rather than the state councillor responsible for education, at conferences” (F, 2017). This is reflective of a wider trend of the Confucius Institute building “an impressively high standing within the Chinese top leadership,” with the vast majority of Politburo Standing Committee members – the party and therefore the government’s most senior leaders – making official visits to Confucius Institutes (Hartig, 2016: 173). Ingrid d’Hooghe has noted that this change coincided with the endorsement of the terms “soft power” and “public diplomacy” by former premier Wen Jiabao at the 2007 CCP congresses. This interest has continued to grow, with the current president and premier, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, devoting “as much if not more attention to public diplomacy than their predecessors” (d’Hooghe, 2015: 149).

The influence of this upper tier of party leaders on the Confucius Institute is reflected not only in the translation of key policies to the Confucius network, but also in discursive changes in the way

Hanban describes its work. Two slogans developed by CCP leaders in recent years illustrate this point: the “harmonious world” and the “Chinese dream.” The “harmonious world” concept, introduced by former president Hu Jintao and adopted by the CCP in 2007, was designed to counter the “China threat” theory by pledging that China’s development will be based on peace and multilateralism (d’Hooghe, 2015: 81). It was quickly adopted by Hanban, which added a reference to it to the Constitution of the Confucius Institute (Hanban, 2017). On assuming the presidency in 2013, Xi introduced a new slogan, the “Chinese dream,” an open-ended rallying cry to unite China behind a vision of “national prosperity and a revitalization of the nation and people’s happiness” (d’Hooghe, 2015: 81-2). The following year, Confucius Institutes began to hold “Chinese dream”-themed workshops and events, and the director of Hanban, Xu Lin, described the Institute in interviews as “a bridge that links the China Dream and the world dream” (Hartig, 2016: 185).

Hanban remains careful, however, to play down its political connections. Though its official language echoes the catchphrases of national political discourse, Confucius stops short of describing itself as a cultural diplomacy or soft power organisation, and its leaders are “adamant about separating Confucius Institutes from the soft power debate” (Hartig, 2016: 123). At its 2015 annual conference, Xu Lin asserted that “the Confucius Institute is independent from politics. We are not the political product of the Chinese government; rather we are an institution supported by the Chinese government and the Chinese people for the promotion of Chinese language and culture. Some say that culture is inseparable from politics, but I disagree” (Xu, 2015). There are several possible reasons for this insistence. First, it provides a justification for the uneven relationship between Confucius Institutes abroad and the offices of other NCIs within China. The Chinese government takes a protectionist stance on foreign NCIs, officially adhering to a policy of one per country. This forces the larger NCIs to develop creative solutions if they wish to be present in more than one Chinese city – the Goethe-Institut in Shanghai, for example, is formally a department of the German consulate to circumvent this rule (Hartig, 2016: 169). Second, it distances Confucius from China’s human rights abuses and its intolerance of domestic dissent, which are major barriers to credibility in public diplomacy (Rawnsley, 2013). Third, it provides an opportunity to maintain cooperation with other countries when political or diplomatic relations may be strained; one interviewee said that cultural and educational links like Confucius meant that “in many cases you can talk to exactly the same people, but you’re wearing a different hat” (E, 2017). Finally, Hanban’s insistence on separation from politics may reflect an institutional self-interest in maximising its importance and independence.

#### 5.2.4 Leadership of Xu Lin

Despite this web of political influences and accountabilities, the Confucius Institute is most closely associated with one individual: Xu Lin. Madam Xu served as director general of Hanban from the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in 2004 until her retirement in October 2016, and continues to be a member of both the State Council and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Xu, 2016). Previously, she had served within the Ministry of Education, and had worked abroad as China's education consul in Vancouver, Canada (Liu, 2015: 780). Xu's leadership of Confucius was sometimes controversial, and the available evidence poses difficult questions about her motivations and influence.

Despite the lack of interference in Confucius branches by Hanban, interviewees who had met Xu understood that she exercised a high degree of control at the organisational level. One interviewee recalled that Xu could be "very forceful and forthright," while another believed that "a lot of the decision-making was ad hoc, by Xu Lin herself... almost as if the whole CI network belonged to her personally" (E, 2017; F, 2017). The most notable controversy of her leadership is evidence of these traits. At the 2014 conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies, in Braga, Portugal, Xu ordered the deletion of several pages from all copies of the conference programme, apparently to remove references to sponsors, libraries and publishers from Taiwan (Greatrex, 2014). This incident, which followed a period of intense debate about the effects of Confucius branches on academic freedom (see Sahlins, 2013) and the closure of a Canadian Confucius Institute due to concerns over discriminatory hiring practices (Bradshaw & Freeze, 2013), severely damaged Hanban's reputation, with branch-level staff feeling that "if there was a line somewhere, that line was crossed" (D, 2017). Interviewees felt, however, that Xu did not always exhibit this ideological rigidity. One recalled that, in most of their meetings, Xu had seemed "in a sense non-diplomatic... not at all someone who you felt was constrained by a party line in conversation" (E, 2017). Another felt that "a lot depended on what mood she was in when you were talking to her, [and] whether she liked you," and speculated that the Braga incident may have occurred because "she may have felt it was insulting in some way to her particular patron at the senior level" (F, 2017).

The sources of Madam Xu's authority within Hanban are difficult to identify, due to the complexity and opacity of the CCP and the civil service. It seems likely, however, that she was able to accrue influence by building an advantageous position in the "shadow hierarchy" of the CCP. One interviewee was "almost certain" that Xu's authority derived from "party patronage at high levels" (F, 2017). At times, however, Xu appeared to be in conflict with the higher levels of the party, fighting to protect Hanban's status and funding. She has expressed frustration, for example, at

an apparent lack of political consensus in favour of funding Confucius: “I really get into a bad mood when people [in charge] don’t want to spent money for cultural exchange and it is really hard to convince those critics that cultural exchange is important” (Xu, in Hartig, 2016: 107-8). She has even asked Chinese journalists not to explicitly state that external partners now provide the majority of the network’s budget, “for fear that the Chinese government would think there was no longer a need to fund Confucius Institutes” (Hartig, 2016: 167). Given these frustrations, the extent of the political and administrative power that Xu actually enjoyed is not entirely beyond question.

Finally, Xu frequently justified the existence of the Confucius Institute on the basis that it would help to expand China both economically and culturally. Her economic argument, that “if foreigners don’t understand us they will fear our development and this will prevent business and trade overseas” (Xu in Hartig, 2016: 107-8), chimes with both the “harmonious world” concept and the fact that many Chinese learners, especially in the developing world, are motivated by economic and job opportunities (d’Hooghe, 2015: 217-18). She has also suggested that Confucius can be a conduit for cultural change and learning inside China, expressing something similar to the notions of mutuality and reciprocity: “the culture of these... countries can come back to China through our teachers and the information they bring back home. In this regard, Chinese culture can also be reformed and renewed” (Xu, in Hartig, 2016: 107-8).

### **5.2.5 Consequences for decision-making**

The most notable quality of decision-making in Hanban is its opacity; like the CCP and government structures in general, observers find it extremely difficult to determine who has made a decision or why. Interviewees unanimously described decision-making within Hanban as “opaque” or “a mystery.” One recalled applying to open a new Confucius Institute:

“There was a somewhat stilted conversation over a couple of years... and the message came back: “oh, the ministry has decided there won’t be any more CIs for a while.” ...I was back in Beijing the next year, and had a meeting, and suddenly I was told, after apparently nothing happening: “we’re going to approve this [new branch]... and the minister, or the vice-minister, has personally said you can go ahead” ...You spend a long time talking and apparently getting nowhere, and then suddenly everything happens all at once.” (E, 2017)

While senior-level decision-making was extremely slow, decisions at the operational level could be surprisingly quick, though no less mysterious to branch-level staff. One branch manager said

that Hanban were generally quick to agree or refuse to fund individual events, often defying expectations as to what would be considered acceptable. “For example, a punk [concert], that you might think: “oh, this will never pass the approval stage,” and it was approved in, like, two minutes. And something more traditional and easy... might not be approved” (D, 2017). This apparent randomness appeared to reflect a lack of expertise at the central level, as “decisions are made in Beijing by people who have probably never been to that place,” and perhaps a lack of complexity in the decision hierarchy, with “somebody sitting on the other side of the world going through a list” (D, 2017).

Despite its general non-intervention in branches, the requirement for Hanban to approve annual and ad hoc funding means many decisions remain highly centralised. And as the number of Confucius Institutes grew, stretching Hanban’s budget, this centralisation seemed to tighten further. Interviewees recalled that as the period progressed, Hanban sought closer involvement in budget management, “asking for more paperwork, and... more strict in asking for reports on how the money was spent” (D, 2017). Chinese co-directors also became “more pushy in trying to enter in conversations with the [university hierarchy],” and there was “always a kind of negotiation going on with the Western director” (D, 2017). One interviewee connected this assertiveness at the operational level to a broader change within the CCP, arguing that “the party feels more and more emboldened that it can say and do what it likes, and if the international counterparts don’t like it, well, that’s just their bad luck” (F, 2017). Referring to Deng Xiaoping’s maxim of Chinese foreign policy, “hide your strength, bide your time,” the interviewee suggested that, under Xi’s leadership, “it seems pretty clear that they’ve got to the end of that phase.”

## 6 Congruence analysis

### 6.1 Democratic distinctiveness: British Council

#### Expected observation 1a

There is mixed evidence as to whether the British Council meaningfully distinguishes between liberal and illiberal states in its decision-making. At the strategic level, the Council's decisions during the period did not appear to refer to any such distinction, as it focused on maximising self-generated income and carefully managing political accountabilities. The shift of strategic focus away from Europe, and towards the Middle East and Asia, does not appear to have included any consideration based on degrees of democratic freedom. Countries in which the Council expanded operations were not consistently democratic or authoritarian – including both China and the United States, for example – while it withdrew from both democracies, such as Norway and Finland, and authoritarian states, such as Eritrea and Cameroon (British Council, 2007; 2016). At the operational level, Council staff clearly recognise the effect of illiberal regimes on their options (A, 2017; B, 2017), but this does not appear to have been reflected centrally. Interviewees' concerns about this very issue serve to underline this point (C, 2017). **In sum, while the evidence is not decisive, there is more evidence to contradict this expectation than to support it.**

#### Expected observation 2a

Similarly, evidence conflicts on the question of the Council's consideration for "liberal values." Clearly, the organisation is still concerned with human rights, gender equality and other liberal norms in its work, and continues to run initiatives to strengthen these in several regions (British Council, 2015: 60). In addition, the Council did expressly invoke liberal values in defending itself from regime interference in Russia, calling on local authorities to respect international law (Buckley, 2007). However, these values did not appear to be a material factor in strategic decisions. The Council's increased focus on economics and trade (Pamment, 2015; British Council, 2013b), while significant, was not connected to normative concerns around free trade. And while the Foreign Office argued that the Council existed to promote the UK's "culture and values to build positive relationships and influence" (Foreign Office, 2014), the Council resisted this view throughout the period as part of the long-running dispute over its purpose. Again, at the operational level, interviewees believed that the Council's work could have "subversive" effects in illiberal countries, and could convey "subtle cultural or political messages" (A, 2017; B, 2017). However, they also noted its reluctance to actively promote liberal values, and one concluded that the Council was "not a systematically progressive organisation" in this way (C, 2017). **While**



**the Council clearly retains its concern for liberal values such as human rights, it does not appear that this played a significant role in its strategic, financial or political choices, contradicting this expectation.**

### **Expected observation 3a**

Undoubtedly, the British Council's decisions from 2007 to 2016 reflect the influence of what Owen would call "liberal elites." Owen, working from Rosenau's definition of "opinion formers," included in this category "government officials, prominent businessmen, civil servants, journalists, scholars, heads of professional associations, and interest groups" (Rosenau, 1961, cited in Owen, 1994: 100). It is clear that the work of politicians and civil servants was a, if not the, determining factor in the Council's key strategic decisions. Most notably, the "decision taken under Martin Davidson... to expand commercially" (C, 2017) was driven by pressure from MPs, who had labelled the Council poor value for money, and hastened by successive funding cuts after 2010. This change prompted other key decisions, like the reallocation of spending away from Europe, as Davidson acknowledged, and made a material difference to the organisational culture of the Council, as interview evidence shows. The Council's participation in the GREAT campaign was determined by politicians and civil servants, and its capacity to influence such programmes was restricted by its funding needs and sensitivity to political pressure. Later, the Council's willingness to change its language to be more accepting of its role in soft power reflected the political community's move toward the same ideas. This culminated in the 2014 triennial review, which advised the Council to be more responsive to political priorities, threatening major governance changes if it did not comply. One issue which clouds the evidence slightly is the fact that different elites sometimes had contradictory impacts; the 2008 NAO review, for example, criticised the Council's income-generating activities, while the wider political community was applying pressure to expand them. This is a common problem in studies of elite influence (Risse, 1991: 482). **Overall, however, there is sufficient evidence of the influence of politicians and civil servants on the Council's decisions to support this expectation.**

### **Expected observation 4a**

The outcome of the 2010 general election in the UK had a substantial impact on the Council. The new Conservative-led government was elected on an austerity platform, and immediately committed to reducing both the number and cost of public bodies. Specifically, the Council was told to expect a 25% funding cut, and more of its public funding became conditional. This influenced the Council in several significant ways: it necessitated a further expansion of income-generating operations; it made the Council more willing to adapt its priorities and dilute its brand

by supporting the GREAT campaign (which was developed by party political advisers); and it led to the establishment of triennial reviews, which exerted further pressure on the Council to adapt its priorities or face enforced governance changes. At the discursive level, the election also prompted a distinct change in the way the Council described its work, as it sought to fit with the new government's way of talking about foreign policy. **In sum, the effects of the 2010 election are sufficient to support the expectation that political change materially alters constraints on the British Council, and that decision-makers change their behaviour in response.**

## 6.2 Democratic distinctiveness: Confucius Institute

### Expected observation 1b

Despite China's own non-liberal status, it does seem that Hanban recognised a distinction between liberal democracies and other states, and that this distinction had some influence on its decisions regarding the location and governance of Confucius Institutes. Hanban's early focus on establishing Institutes in Europe and North America is clear, and these regions still account for over 70% of total Confucius premises worldwide. Though there are multiple factors – including that universities in wealthy countries are more likely to have the capacity to apply to Hanban and to afford the startup costs – Hanban targeted these countries specifically because they are democracies (Ding and Saunders, 2006). Interviewee F suggested Hanban was drawn to countries which are “thought leaders,” a status which surely derives at least in part from their democratic systems and free civil societies. This prioritisation was driven not by ideological attraction, but rather by Hanban's desire to establish credibility as a non-political organisation, a recurrent theme in its language and decisions. In less developed countries, it is highly likely that the distinction between liberal and illiberal states is less consequential, allowing Hanban to be more “assertive” in these places (F, 2017). **Nevertheless, the distinction clearly was made and acted upon in developing the Confucius network, so this expectation is contradicted.**

### Expected observation 2b

Clearly, Hanban does not itself share or promote liberal values such as human rights and free trade. It exists, to a degree, to present a “correct” China to the world – one based on conflicting values. However, the expectation that Hanban “will not refer” to these values in its decision-making is difficult to corroborate. In some ways, the Confucius network does indeed appear to disregard liberal values. For example, it selects and appoints directors and (through Chinese universities) teachers who it deems “politically safe” (F, 2017), and these staff carry out their duties without reference to topics with which Hanban is uncomfortable. In addition, Hanban encourages

the (mostly) tacit understanding that these topics are off-limits, and in this way encourages a culture of self-censorship which branch staff feel acutely (D, 2017; F, 2017; Hartig, 2016). However, it is too simplistic to conclude that Hanban makes no reference to liberal values at all. In fact, Hanban's strategic choices in establishing the Confucius Institute reveal a willingness to give consideration and even concessions to liberal values. Not only was the selection of locations based on liberal democratic states, but the joint venture model, which delegates most decisions to a foreign university, and the hands-off management of branches, both reflect a desire to sustain the network, even at the expense of recognising liberal notions of freedom. The surprising fact that no interviewee had ever experienced any intervention by Hanban is evidence of this. As one interviewee explained: "they made a decision, very early on, that the only way they were going to get a network, given the scepticism... about being a sort of fifth column to influence academics... was that if they pushed that line at all, they risked the collapse of the entire network" (F, 2017). **While decision-makers in Hanban do not share liberal values, they showed significant willingness to consider those values in the network's design, and it is not therefore possible to conclude either that this expectation is confirmed or contradicted.**

### **Expected observation 3b**

The Confucius network and its leaders show clear signs of influence by the political elite within the CCP. The difference with the British Council is simply that this elite cannot be considered "liberal," due to the character of the Chinese state. While this expectation is clearly confirmed, it should not be ignored that there are significant similarities in the relationships that the two organisations have with their respective political elites. Despite the significant decision power enjoyed by Xu Lin, the influence of the CCP leadership on Confucius is clear. Major decisions regarding the network corresponded to policy initiatives from the leadership, such as One Belt, One Road (Wong, 2017) and the drive to develop western China (E, 2017). The adoption by Hanban of CCP slogans like the "harmonious world" and the "Chinese dream" also reflect the elite's influence on the organisation, while Xu Lin's concern for Hanban's budget demonstrates her dependence on the support of CCP leaders (Hartig, 2016: 107-8; 167). The values of the elite also have a strong influence across the Confucius network, as the ultimate source of the self-censorship taking place at lower levels. The interconnection between elite preferences, political initiatives and discourse and organisational decision-making is a common thread between both case studies. **Nonetheless, as the values of the CCP elite are clearly not liberal ones, this expectation is confirmed.**

**Expected observation 4b**

While it is not influenced by anything that could be understood to be a liberal elite, the Confucius Institute is influenced by domestic political change. The case study period includes a string of strategic and discursive changes by Hanban, each made as a direct result of changes at the top level of the CCP. In particular, both the One Belt, One Road initiative and the “Chinese dream” slogan were adopted by the CCP immediately after the transition of power to Xi Jinping. Both had an immediate effect on the Confucius network, with a realignment towards Asia and Africa in the establishment of new branches (Wong, 2017; F, 2017), and the adoption of the “Chinese dream” as a theme in its literature and events (Hartig, 2016: 185). In addition to these obvious effects, the importance of patronage in the “shadow hierarchy” of the CCP means that political change also affects the relative influence of individuals and organisations within government. Although the opacity of the system prevents specific conclusions from being drawn, it is highly likely that this contributed to the accrual of personal influence by Xu Lin, as well as the growth of Hanban’s influence relative to the Ministry of Education. **Given these various effects, it is possible to conclude that domestic political change does in fact impact the behaviour of decision-makers in Hanban, and that this expectation is contradicted.**

**6.3 Bureaucratic politics: British Council****Expected observation 1**

In all the major decisions observed, the preferences of officials within the British Council and the UK government clearly aligned with their position in the hierarchy. Valerie Hudson (2005: 8) has argued that these preferences derive in part from officials’ desire for “turf,” which she defines as “relative influence vis a vis other organizations,” and from their desire to “preserve undiluted” the organisation’s mission as they see it. Both factors are clearly visible in the stands taken by different officials during the period. Within the Council, interviewees unanimously stated that officials often take different stands based on their position, and that central and in-country staff would often disagree because their positions came with different priorities. One interviewee went straight to the heart of Allison’s theory by suggesting that officials’ loyalties are owed not “to the purpose of the Council, but... to a particular *part* of the Council” (B, 2017). Interviewees also demonstrated this phenomenon by offering different opinions on key decisions based on their own places in the organisation. While a London-based official felt that the Council’s focus on its relationship with government was necessary and positive, for example, former in-country officials felt that it was excessive and degraded the organisation’s decision-making capabilities.

The conflict over the definition of the Council's work is a clear example of the same phenomenon in the wider government hierarchy. The argument made in the triennial review, that the Council exists to "support... foreign policy and diplomacy," is clearly in the institutional interest of the Foreign Office as the ministry responsible for this policy area (Foreign Office, 2014: 10). The position of senior Council officials, that the triennial review posed unacceptable threats to the organisation's independence, is in turn consistent with their own desire to preserve their "turf." In addition, officials' reluctance to support and integrate with the GREAT campaign – recognised both by interviewees and by the triennial review authors – reflects a desire to preserve their own version of the Council's mission. **In sum, all of the available evidence from desk research and interviews supports this expectation.**

### **Expected observation 2**

The position of actors in the Council and government hierarchy also affected the level of influence they were able to wield. One interviewee made explicit reference to this phenomenon, while others alluded to it in their recollections of key decisions. Uppermost in this hierarchy are senior government officials, including the prime minister, foreign secretary and foreign minister, who were able to leverage influence on the Council even when its most senior executives disagreed. Examples include the funding reductions after 2010, the imposition of new governance controls like the Public Diplomacy Strategy and Performance Management Board, and the integration of Council activities with the GREAT campaign. Within the Council itself, the chief executive wielded the greatest influence, followed by a tier of senior management which included "regional directors and the heads of business units" (B, 2017). Interviewees believed that this hierarchy had hardened in recent years, with "a major growth of centralisation" and an erosion of the "autonomy" afforded to in-country staff (C, 2017). In addition to the formal hierarchy, influence also appeared to vary between London-based and in-country staff; one interviewee explained that "it's easier for people [in head office] to get our faces seen by senior staff" (A, 2017). Interviewees did report, however, that decisions are not always acquiesced to at lower levels. One suggested that "there has been a long tradition of ignoring decisions that are being made centrally," while another said that the chief executive can only "nudge [the] organisation in particular directions" (C, 2017; A, 2017). These observations may be interpreted as contradicting this expectation, but may equally be seen as an inevitable consequence of the organisation's size and geographical spread. **In any case, since they do not directly contradict the notion that more senior officials have greater influence, we may still conclude that the evidence generally supports this expectation.**

### Expected observation 3

Despite the strong influence of those higher in the political and management hierarchy, bargaining does clearly occur, both within the Council and between the organisation and its political supervisors. Interviewees agreed that decision-making in the Council is slow partly for this reason; one said that decisions were made “extremely consensually,” while another noted that the Council “has never been a very compliant organisation,” making it difficult to impose decisions unilaterally (A, 2017; C, 2017). In addition, specific outcomes during the period show disagreement between different stakeholders, and do not reflect the original preferences of any actor. The shift away from Europe is one example; it was not the preference either of Martin Davidson, as he stated to the Foreign Affairs Committee, nor of the senior staff interviewed, nor of the stakeholders who feared that the Council was “neglecting [its] friends” (Smith, 2007). Another example is the disagreement over how to define the Council’s work. The Foreign Office stated in the triennial review that it believes the Council’s mission to be “cultural diplomacy,” and put pressure on the Council to act in line with this definition. In response, the Council accepted the review’s recommendations, adapted its external language to align more closely with soft power objectives, and yet continued to define its mission as “cultural relations and educational affairs.” The *Influence and Attraction* report, which contains explicit support for the Foreign Office’s interpretation, a foreword from the Foreign Secretary, and strong criticism of the same government’s decision to reduce funding, is a microcosm of these uneasy compromises (Holden, 2013). Interviewees agreed that the motivation for these changes was a willingness on the part of the Council to make compromises with government, rather than any profound philosophical conviction. **In sum, observations support the expectation that decisions in the British Council are the resultants of bargaining.**

### Expected observation 4

Again, interviewees confirmed that many individuals are involved in decision-making in the Council, and that this contributes to its slowness. The decision-making culture of the organisation emphasises consensus, giving internal stakeholders greater influence. Externally, the Council places a strong emphasis on “mutuality,” a central concept in its philosophy which all interviewees cited as influential. The Council has defined mutuality as “a way of looking at cultural relations, and those who ‘do’ them, which places the building of long-term, trust-based relationships at the centre” (Rose & Wadham-Smith, 2004: 10). Embedding this concept in the Council’s work meant that external partners had to be given consideration, and be able to contribute to its decisions. The Council worked with a bewildering range of partners during the period, including multinational companies, governments, the World Bank and regional

development banks, the European Union, charitable foundations, universities, and civil society organisations (British Council, 2009; 2016). The Council's range of political stakeholders also multiplied during the period, with the Foreign Affairs Committee becoming increasingly involved, the Public Diplomacy Strategy and Performance Management Board being created, and the Foreign Office asserting itself through the various reviews. In this sense, the Council's decision to prioritise its political accountabilities broadened its range of stakeholders, rather than narrowing it.

Interviewees recalled that in practice, however, some decisions do not involve the wide range of stakeholder interests which the Council's values suggest. Although interviewees agreed that the Council's belief in mutuality was sincere, some reported that it was "good on the rhetoric and less good on the practice," and proved a "difficult partner" due to its focus on internal objectives (C, 2017). One interviewee suggested that the Council "found it very difficult to make partnerships work," as its positions were "usually driven by self-interest, either personal or corporate" (B, 2017). **These observations suggest that although the Council clearly has many stakeholders, to what extent it takes their interests into account is somewhat open to question, and these results must be compared to the Confucius Institute to determine whether they support this expectation.**

#### 6.4 Bureaucratic politics: Confucius Institute

##### Expected observation 1

Conflicting evidence in this area, combined with the extreme opacity of the Chinese government hierarchy, makes identifying preferences and positions extremely difficult. It does seem clear that an official's position in the Confucius hierarchy correlates to the importance they place on supporting government policy through the network. While Xu Lin clearly felt obliged to integrate political slogans into her language and political initiatives into her decisions, officials at lower levels did not seem to consider this important (notwithstanding the events on the "Chinese dream"). In addition, Xu Lin herself appeared to be motivated in part by institutional interests, including the desire for independence of mission (Xu, 2015) and the desire to maximise funding (Hartig, 2016: 167). On the other hand, while bureaucratic politics theory might expect central and senior officials in Hanban to seek maximum control over the branches, in reality branches are subject to almost no intervention from Beijing. In addition, the preferences of Chinese co-directors vary significantly, apparently depending on their knowledge of the local environment, as well as their "open-mindedness" and "personal taste," rather than correlating uniformly with their position (D, 2017). Finally, the culture of self-censorship among Confucius staff suggests that the most

meaningful restriction of political expression occurs at lower levels, despite the greater distance from the CCP leadership. **This inconsistent evidence, exacerbated by the mystery of the “shadow hierarchy,” makes it impossible to conclude either that this expectation is supported or contradicted.**

### **Expected observation 2**

The lack of clarity in the Chinese government hierarchy is also an impediment to identifying each actor’s influence relative to their position. However, from the evidence gathered, it does appear that the rigid approvals system within the Confucius network ensures a relatively consistent chain of command. At the operational level, programme managers design events and activities, seek the approval of the director(s), and submit proposals to Hanban, either ad hoc or via the annual budget. This centralised system gives Hanban the power to approve or deny funding – though Hanban exercises considerable restraint in using this influence, due to its strategic sensitivity to academic freedom. Higher up the command structure, the director of Hanban has highly concentrated authority over the rest of the organisation. And in turn, the director is dependent on the continued support – both financial and political – of CCP leaders. At senior levels, this structure is somewhat clouded by the shifting relative influence of Hanban, the ministry, the SCIO and other divisions of government. **Nonetheless, the relatively rigid and centralised nature of decision-making in most of the organisation is sufficient evidence to support this expectation.**

### **Expected observation 3**

Despite the rigid system of approvals and controls within the Confucius network, there is considerable evidence that bargaining nonetheless occurs at various levels. One could argue that compromise outcomes are the inevitable result of the unique governance model used by Confucius Institutes, under which Hanban trades control for credibility (Liu, 2015: 781). Each branch negotiates its annual programme and budget with Hanban, often resulting in activities taking place which Hanban would not itself have envisaged, such as political lectures and punk concerts. Hanban also accepts that partner universities will continue to undertake activities which it does not support, like campus visits by the Dalai Lama. Both eventualities are compromise outcomes resulting from a bargain, implicit or explicit, between Beijing officials and host institutions. In addition, interviewees described a constant “negotiation” between Chinese and non-Chinese directors at the branch level as part of the programme development process (D, 2017). It is not just Hanban, of course, which makes compromises: host universities accept as a cost of operating a Confucius Institute the obligation to consider the Chinese government’s



political sensitivities. **Despite the difficulty of identifying individual influence in the Hanban hierarchy, this evidence of negotiation and compromise is sufficient to conclude that outcomes do reflect bargaining, supporting this expectation.**

#### **Expected observation 4**

Whatever the merits and weaknesses of Confucius Institutes, and however much control is exerted by Hanban, it is too simplistic to conclude that the organisation does not have to take stakeholders' views into account. In fact, the unique governance model of the branches ensures that at least two, and usually three partners are involved in decisions: Hanban, the host, and the Chinese partner university. In practice, this model brings even more stakeholders into contact with the Institute, because hosts work with schools, community organisations, local authorities and corporate partners to deliver Confucius programmes. And the inability of branches to rely solely on funding from Hanban – especially after the expansion boom between 2009 and 2011 – further incentivises hosts to diversify their stakeholders.

At the heart of each Institute, however, is a direct, bilateral link between the host institution and Hanban. Since other partners generally become involved only through the host, Hanban's own range of stakeholders is relatively narrow, consisting of partner institutions, Chinese universities and domestic political leaders. Though there is an element of reciprocity – Hanban routinely asks branches for suggestions to improve the network, for example (Hartig, 2016: 154) – in practice its dealings with each branch rarely go beyond “negotiating funding for the coming year, and the necessary financial reporting” (F, 2017). With over 1,500 premises worldwide, more detailed involvement would be unrealistically burdensome. Interviewees suggest that over time, Hanban has come to take less account of its stakeholders, and the speed with which it makes low-level decisions is further evidence of a process uncomplicated by these considerations (F, 2017; D, 2017). Compare this to British Council, which holds innumerable partner relationships, and simply struggles to balance them against its self-interests, and the difference is clear. **Because its joint venture model delegates stakeholder management to its partners, Hanban reduces its own stakeholder network to the bare minimum, and we may therefore conclude that this expectation is supported.**

## 6.5 Summary of results

Table 2. Summary of results per theory and case

Expectations	British Council		Confucius Institute	
	Supported	Contradicted	Supported	Contradicted
<b>Democratic distinctiveness</b>				
1 Liberal/illiberal distinction		X		X
2 Reference to liberal values		X	?	?
3 Constraint by liberal elites	X		X	
4 Effect of political change	X			X
<b>Bureaucratic politics</b>				
1 Preferences correlate with positions	X		?	?
2 Influence correlates with positions	X		X	
3 Outcomes reflect bargaining	X		X	
4 Number of stakeholders	X		X	

## 7 Conclusions and recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusions

Considering the structures, stakeholders, funding and political stances of the British Council and the Confucius Institute, one interviewee concluded that “there’s nothing in common between the two organisations, that I could see.” But the evidence examined in this paper shows that many of the political, financial and practical pressures on decision-making across the two organisations are similar. Between 2007 and 2016, both undertook significant shifts of regional focus, in line with broader government policy in their two countries. Both overhauled their financial model, in response to pressure on their public funding. And both adapted their corporate language to reflect dominant political discourses. In addition, both the British Council and the Confucius Institute are complex, sprawling bureaucracies, which aim, for different reasons, to encourage a culture of mutuality and shared responsibility across their networks. Finally, both organisations recognise that, in states which do not share their political philosophy, they must compromise to make these networks viable, and to maintain the important links that cultural relations can provide in the absence of strong diplomatic ties.

Where they differ most fundamentally, of course, is ideology. This is no small difference – it shapes each organisation’s values, the types of work they feel comfortable doing, their choice of partners, and the attitudes and aspirations of their staff. But what this analysis suggests is that ideology is not the critical variable in explaining the strategic decisions of either organisation. The British Council is committed to liberal democratic values, working to promote those values where it can, and hoping to spread them by osmosis where it cannot. Yet these values are not pivotal to its decisions at the strategic level. The Confucius Institute, for its part, is highly sceptical of these values, and promotes a culture of self-censorship to avoid fostering exchanges and debates with which it is not comfortable. Yet it is highly sensitive to the liberal values of other states, to the extent that key features of its organisational design are intended as a concession to them in pursuit of international credibility. In both cases, the democratic distinctiveness paradigm does not seem to apply, yet it continues to underlie many of the assumptions made by scholars in this field.

The theory of bureaucratic politics is not a perfect alternative. In particular, it cannot be the right framework to reliably analyse the Chinese bureaucracy, whose “shadow hierarchy” remains strongly resistant to insight at the individual actor level. And neither theory accounts for the apparent importance of perceptions of an organisation’s independence. Both the British Council and the Confucius Institute are determined to be seen as politically independent, and both are

existentially threatened when external stakeholders perceive them as proxies for government – amid diplomatic crises and academic criticism alike. Whatever their constraints, the common desire to maximise and project independence should not be discounted, and a theory which seeks to explain decisions in cultural diplomacy should ideally account for it. But by considering organisational interests within states, the theory of bureaucratic politics gets closer to identifying influential factors in the management of NCIs. It does, as least, “convey some feel for the confusion” within these bureaucracies. And it does seem, based on this analysis, that “where you stand depends on where you sit.” Despite the shortcomings of bureaucratic politics as an explanatory theory, looking at the practice of cultural diplomacy through a new theoretical lens does reveal something worthwhile: that the hard and fast categories of democratic distinctiveness must become more flexible to suit the polychrome world in which cultural diplomats operate.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

At its outset, this thesis hoped to contribute to bridging the gap between mainstream international relations theory and the study of soft power and cultural diplomacy. It has shown that in this increasingly important field of international affairs, established theories may not be capable of explaining why actors and organisations make the decisions they do. Explaining policy-making in cultural diplomacy, in a nuanced and satisfying way, will take further theoretical innovation, and likely the development of entirely new frameworks. At the very least, a theory is needed which can explain China’s cultural diplomacy in the same terms as cultural diplomacy in the West, without resorting to flawed assumptions about its motivations, and based on factors that the outsider can observe. This research tentatively suggests that such a theory should also reimagine the role of democratic and ideological characteristics, not as the key determinant of soft power policies themselves, but as part of a suite of considerations in managing the perceptions of foreign governments and publics. Yet this study has been limited to only two organisations within a plethora of public diplomacy tools used by most countries on Earth. More research will be needed on the key variables of cultural diplomacy, in other countries, political systems and environments, in order to develop an independent literature for the field, and to work towards some consensus.

While this innovation takes place, practitioners of cultural diplomacy should recognise the bureaucratic processes shaping decisions in their field – both in their own organisations and in the institutions of other countries. Governments, organisations and individuals should recognise the willingness of NCIs to adapt to their environment, and to make compromises, however deeply held their values, in order to establish trusting relationships. In their attitudes toward the Confucius Institute, practitioners should recognise that these compromises are made on both

sides, and that the political doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party is rarely shared or enforced by staff on the ground. China, meanwhile, can reciprocate this understanding by lifting restrictions on other countries' NCIs at home, and recognising that they too are able to compromise for the benefit of building successful partnerships.

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## Appendix: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Please describe briefly your professional background.
2. What role(s) have you had working in/with (British Council/Confucius Institute), and over what time period have you been involved?
3. What are the most significant external and internal changes that happened during your time working with (British Council/Confucius Institute)?
4. Can you describe how decisions are made within (British Council/Confucius Institute)?
5. During your time working with (British Council/Confucius Institute), what types of partners, stakeholders and interlocutors were important to you and/or the organisation in decision-making?
6. During your time working with (British Council/Confucius Institute), how did you decide when to get involved in decision-making and what position to take?
7. [If necessary] What factors do you think have the strongest influence on decisions in (British Council/Confucius Institute)?
8. [If necessary] Which people do you think have the strongest influence on decisions in (British Council/Confucius Institute)?
9. During your time working with (British Council/Confucius Institute), what differences did you observe in the organisation's approach to partnerships and collaborations with different countries? Did the organisation tailor its way of working to each country, and if so, what factors influenced this?
10. [If necessary] During your time working with (British Council/Confucius Institute), how did you and/or the organisation approach working with partners in democratic countries, and how did you/it approach working with partners in non-democratic countries?