Taking the beautiful country (by strategy):
US academics dealing with the Confucius institutes

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ABSTRACT

The government of the People’s Republic of China, through Hanban, has been opening Confucius institutes (CI) all over the world. More than 80 only in the USA. The proliferation of CIs, as a tool of Chinese cultural diplomacy, has brought a lot of criticism from academics of some universities in the USA. Some scholars presume that CIs are an institutional device that undermines what they consider basic and inherent rights of their society, political culture and academic institutions’ traditions. In this paper, our goals are: depict what academics argue about CI, find out if their arguments could help or obstruct the Sino-American relations and explain how subnational actors could put pressure on both their universities and Washington to change the approaches to deal with Beijing’s bureaucracy and its academic establishment. Our paper embraces an anthropological perspective where actors and their ideas are the core concern of the academic research.

Keywords

China; Confucius institutes; subnational actors; academic diplomacy; United States

Subnationalization of international politics and policies: actors, issues, methodology and concepts

In this paper our goal, first, is to depict and assembly some of the criticisms against Confucius Institutes (CI) in the United States (USA). The subjects of our research are universities-colleges scholars, who consider CI’s are a Chinese government institutional device that undermines what they consider basic and inherent rights of their society, political culture and academic institutions.
traditions. We pay more attention to individual postures; however, it is important to present here at least two institutional responses to the Chinese cultural presence in the USA universities. In the medium term, a second goal is to find out now scholars act and how deep is your influence on their country foreign policies regarding China. On the surface the problem they face and manifest their distaste against, i.e. the way CIs work and engage with the host institutions, is a domestic one that should be solved by very one of the American universities involved. It is true that some of the criticisms are related to local policies, but at the end everything is related to the federal powers at least in two senses: politicians in Washington design cooperation policies that have opened the doors to the CIs and have cut universities budgets that make both academic and administrative managers to eagerly look for Chinese money to finance, among other, Chinese language programs and sometimes social sciences research.

We have found that their influence has strong limits, but dissatisfaction is getting stronger, more outspoken and radical in the sense that one of the proposals, as we will see, is to shut down every CI in USA. Traditionally, local actors are inherent part of American politics and in the China issue they have been important in a national scale persuading the decision-makers to implement certain policies. Criticism is not new, but is more evident in 2017 than before.

This is an exploratory investigation. As far as we have found, there is no literature that studies scholars’ criticisms. Our main source has been a substantial number of critics published in journals and newspaper, mainly in electronic form. Also, an important source is that produced by scholars’ associations. Both are political analysis with practical proposals and implications, there is no academic research. Our exploration sets a framework to stablish who the actors, what issues are at stake and what are the causal relations among actors’ actions and their agenda. Above all, we are building the conceptual and empirical tools to show how important scholars are, or not, in creating international policies toward China.

In this exploratory stage, two concepts are to be useful to understand the role of scholars in defining American international policies. The first one is subnational actors, which here denotes to any actor, government or not, that does not have position, power, resources that could let them have a multidimensional agenda. Still they have specific interests, ideas and will to be influential on specific topics, even beyond their own goals. A second one is academic diplomacy, a term closely linked to East Asia studies and apparently coined by John K. Fairbank (Wang, 2007: 50).
Here academic diplomacy denotes political activities performed by non-diplomats whose main
activity is teaching and/or research in a university with the explicit aim of changing an existing status quo achieved by their government with some other government and/or among other subnational actor from different countries.

**Academic diplomacy and subnational actors in the bilateral relation**

President Donald J. Trump has motivated some of local actors to get (more) involved in politics, even in the international one. Since his electoral clients are them, he is constructing a government discourse and political actions to strength his legitimacy with them.

Subnational actors also are those who were and are against him, before and after the 2016 elections. A new challenge to the White House is that the political awakening and greater participation in international issues are of those who do not support him. In a large scale, it is what has happened with the American government retirement from the Paris Agreement. The target of this action were his supporters, those who could help him to be re-elected in 2020, but the most politically rational responses have come from other sides of the socio-political spectrum: the Governor of California, Jerry Brown; the Mayor of Pittsburgh, Bill Peduto; Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City. In a minor scale but in a similar fashion, criticism from local actors, some with a sort of national influence, against CIs has deepened after Trump victory. This issue has a specificity: it does not matter their political geometry, critics are heterogeneous but coherent in their opposition to Beijing.

From the conceptual perspective, we link the concept of subnational actors to international policies and actors. In the economic realm, business persons and governors transcend their spatial subnational constraint and can be international actors with strong influence on the national political system. While the first mentioned actors trend to be actives in the international level is related to the possibility of increasing profits and expand their trade, governors’ international activities are more complex. Causes are related to their official position that requires open foreign markets for the benefit of state business and to attract foreign investment. Not all the governors have the same level of international involvement, research (MacMillan, 2008) tell us “that governors with greater institutional and personal powers are more likely to take part in foreign policy.” They have means, budget and an office; motives, that include future political aspirations; finally, opportunities does not appear by themselves, they create their own occasions to benefit from. Because previous
international activism, it is possible to reach higher echelons in global arena. Thanks to his acquaintance with Xi Jinping, Chinese president, Terry Branstad, governor of Iowa for more than two decades, on May 22, 2017, was confirmed US ambassador to China by the Senate.

Those scholars who study regions/countries or international policies are even more active than politicians and to some extent than businesspersons, even they pioneer bilateral contacts, hand in hand with diplomatic, military and clergy personnel. Sometimes, they have been the same person with multiple identities. Even when they have institutional leverage, their power is almost composed only of ideas and guanxi. Financial resources are meager and their political influence most of the time is almost non-existent.

Historically, the bilateral Sino-American relation has been one of many subnational actors with multiple and specific agendas. The American political system and its society is strongly decentralized, leading to atomization of political actors. Most of them are not focused in international issues unless they have strong impact on their local agenda. Universities and scholars are different. Educational institutions get involved in politics at the three political levels: county, state and federal. They should face regulations and laws coming from the legislative and executive powers. In fact, they lobby to create a legal environment suitable to their activities.

Universities and colleges, at different degrees, transcend those spatial constraints. They perform, among other activities, academic-scientific diplomacy, transmit cultural values and train their future partners; some of them, such as Harvard, University of Texas or Vanderbilt, using hedge funds, invest in Africa; exchange and diffuse knowledge, their main goal; attract money under the form of student exchange programs and financing of specific projects, such as the CIs; finally, they train professional cadres to run key state positions. Scholars manage, teach and research inside this framework, share similar academic aims with their employers. Nonetheless, they have specific interests, both individual and group. The history of the scholars’ engagement with China has not been secluded into academic issues. Not always successful when they try to put in action their ideas, scholars have been defending one or other side in the conflict Taipei-Beijing or promoting political activities in defense of students or workers who demonstrated against the government.
American scholars, mainly those who study foreign policies, but not just them, pursue being heard by the government, even aspire to work in the White House, the State Department or help Congresspersons to create policies toward China.

From a historical point of view there are two primary reasons of American scholars involvement in academic diplomacy and jumping into (inter)national politics from the bottom of subnational levels. Paradoxically, Mao Zedong coming to power meant a fast-growing American interest on China but, because the negative of Washington to recognize the new government in Beijing, scholars saw themselves alienated from their object and subject of study. Some of them attempted to change Washington approach to East Asia. Their grievances and proposals reach the Senate, 1966, (Kou, 1966) where Fairbank spoke, with no success, about the requirement of establish a new attitude through Beijing.

When Sino-American interactions were mainly unidirectional from America to Asia, many American scholar not only study Chinese history, or politics, or literature. Not just translate novels or poetry. The interact in ways that they embrace ideas and aspirations of their subjects of study. Academic exchanges were essentially asymmetrical: American influence on Chinese society was stronger that the other way around. Back in the 80s, the Chinese government tagged American influence as a form of spiritual pollution. Nowadays situation is different in many ways. The main way to attract empathies and friends was to attract hundreds of young students from all over the planet to study Chinese language or many university studies. Chinese tactics and instruments have changed. Chinese government, at every level, still gives scholarships to study in its educational institutions. That approach is not enough, they go to dozens of countries to teach language and culture. Their instrument is the CIs, institution that were conceived to be part of the host institutions and yet working with great autonomy. At the end, CIs respond to Beijing.

This situation has been attracted criticism from academics who witness how their presence is covering a wider space and are gaining more intellectual influence.

The strengthening of the subnational is a byproduct of domestic historical processes, but above all is an outcome of the way China and United States interact. Agenda spillovers and actors grow. From most of the time, since 1972, the bilateral relation was asymmetrical with Americans dominating almost every aspect of the agenda. There has been a qualitative change: USA actors do not face with an aspirational power anymore, now they deal with an ideational power, one that has “might, money and minds” (Lampton, 2008) and has a toll, Cis, to conquer non-Chinese minds.
Goals and spatial distribution of CI in USA

The story of the CIs in the USA began at the same time of the establishment of the first institute in the world, Seoul, South Korea, in 2004. The earliest American that signed an agreement of cooperation with the Hanban was the University of Maryland. Since then, most of the states have, at least, one CI. Only three states lack CI: Mississippi, Vermont, and Wyoming.

Location

Even though the location of the institutes is wide-ranging, the main interest of China in the USA is closely related to the features of the state where the CI is established. Four states have shown more enthusiasm with Hanban: California, Georgia, New York and Texas. There are registered more than five institutes per state.

If we take location as a variable of a successful agreement with Hanban, we could inferred that the states with a considerable number of institutes have closer ties with China. For instance, California, with seven CIs running to this date, the variable is demographics. It is the state with more Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. The number of CIs by state can be observed in Map 1, where soft colored ones have only 1 institute, and the darker-colored ones have more institutes.
Regarding location, there is a pattern. Authorities made strategic decision: try to include all the neighboring cities. In the case of the state of California (map 2), the Chinese institutions tried to embrace the most important cities because of certain features like immigration, language courses demand, Chinese students enrolled in American universities and economic importance. The city of San Francisco and the cities around the bay area have prestigious universities like Stanford, the State University of San Francisco and one campus of the UC in Davis. The Silicon Valley area is internationally known for its economic power and contribution to technological innovation. The city of Los Angeles—where UCLA host a CI—and the surrounding cities of Long Beach, Anaheim and even San Diego features one of the largest Chinese immigration where approximately 207 thousand people live there.
Programs and focuses

Officially Hanban has 110 institutes established in the United States, but after exhaustive investigation of each institution individually, we discovered that some agreements like the one of State University of Dickinson was suspended in 2012. Two more agreements, the one in the State University of California at Long Beach and the University of Southern Utah, were not functioning.

Six out of the 110 were under a special K-12 agreement program, in which a traditional academic agreement hosting a Confucius Institute in a campus university is not held and instead a consortium is formed by secondary schools. In this case, the language courses and the cultural activities are focused to students since pre-school to secondary school and in some cases even to
high school. The CIs in the United States that are under this sort of cooperation agreement are the ones in the Public Schools of Chicago (Illinois), the Public Schools of Broward County (Florida), the District School of Clark County (Nevada), the Educational Service Centre of East Middle Ohio (Ohio), the Independent School of Houston District (Texas) and the School of Davis District (Utah).

The K-12 program counts as a Confucius Institute and not as a Confucius Classrooms because, even if the institute is not hosted in a university campus, the activities that it pursues are the same as the ones at the universities except for the college-credited courses and the conferences of advanced topics. In this case, the CIs at the secondary school acts as a headquarters for the Confucius Classrooms that are held at the secondary schools of the county.

Furthermore, 105 of the 110 CI have cultural activities that range from the Chinese New Year celebrations, Taijiquan classes or taking the afternoon tea to spelling and pronunciation contests; 97 of the 110 have Chinese language courses in different levels and of that 97, only 21 have specialized courses in business, tourism and/or engineering. Of all the CIs in the USA, only 65 of them are official examination centers; 45 of the total offer training courses for Chinese teachers. 49 out of the 110 held conferences of diverse topics that range from commerce and economy to ethnology and culture of China. Only 49 of the 110 function as headquarters for the Confucius Classrooms of the neighboring secondary schools and 9 for high schools. Of the 110 CIs in the USA, only 4 are focused in reconnecting with the Chinese diaspora, offering opportunities to children and teenagers of Chinese origin (graphic 1).
The American case of the CIs is one of the greatest importance because of the rapid proliferation in comparison with other nations. The different cooperation modalities in the USA, the K-12 and the specialized institutes, show the large and wide demand in the country and the willingness of China to cooperate in this exercise that considers the socio-economic importance of the region.

The criticism formulated by US scholars regarding the CI arouse from this fast growth. Beyond numbers, scholars are most worried about the institutional framework were CIs are implanted and the political outcomes of the way they function.

Criticism could be a source of power to influence the political agenda of politicians in Washington.

**American academic criticism to the CIs**

The CIs were created as a tool to conquer the mind and the heart of the people of the world. But, or maybe because of this, in some parts they are not welcomed or are observed with suspicion.
From an optimist view, they are seen as an opportunity to the academic community to find new paths of knowledge and learning. In the USA the CIs are a hot topic of discussion that had reached Capitol Hill.

The topics revolve around four main arguments: 1) academic freedom, threatened by the contradiction of the rules in which the CIs should interact with the host university due to their insertion inside campuses, thus controlling the curriculum and avoiding some topics that the Chinese government consider sensitive and the US academics as a platform for Chinese propaganda; 2) lack of transparency due to their financial dependency on the Chinese government and the economic interest some universities have, hence affecting the fair and equal treatment of smaller universities with no negotiation capacity; 3) intertwined, prestigious universities get some concessions from the Chinese government, but in exchange give in some issues to benefit Beijing; and 4) soft power is what made Beijing promote and finance the CIs as a mean to secure its interests in the USA and in the international scenario.

By supporting institutions of cultural promotion, the world’s perception of China could change its negative perception for a will of cooperation and acceptance of China’s policies, increasing the attractiveness of Chinese.

The critics

Few of the critics against CIs have an origin in personal experiences of the professors while most of them are formulated through the analysis and observation of other academics. We have found eight critics about CIs.

The convenience of using Confucius as a cultural magnet

When the Institutes were created in 2004, the Chinese government decided to adopt the name of the most prominent Chinese philosopher, Confucius. Its idea was to suggest a benign perception that other characters may not have, like, for instance, the paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party and of the People’s Republic, Mao Zedong. Chen Jinyu, vice-president of the Confucius Institute, explained that the name was planned to be used as a brand that would project the quality and longevity of the program, making it more popular, influential and that would bring
the support and acceptance that China was looking for (Mosher, 2012). Other academics suggest that the use of the name of Confucius would bring a different response, reviving philosophy and religious practices that could provoke a new kind of nationalism and, in an extreme scenario, could led to a Confucian fundamentalism (Bell, 2010).

It seems that none of the academics read to write this paper realize that the theoretical concept that is usually linked to the CIs, soft power, is misunderstood by the Chinese government and its critics alike. A successful soft power must arise from any actor but not from state/government actors. Because of the financial dependence and control from the CCP, the CI would never be considered as soft power tool, they are a device of Chinese government cultural diplomacy. Nowadays, at a discursive level the interest of the Chinese government in using the name Confucius is related to the principles that the philosopher predicated, especially are the sense of obedience and of vertical hierarchy, as well the idea of loyalty to the leader. These principles applied by government could justify the authority of Beijing, the rejection to western values like democracy and human rights (Worrall & Schuman, 2015).

**Proliferation of CI**

The Confucianism, like any other ideology, can be understood and interpreted from different perspectives. The way in which the CCP is using its philosophical doctrine has popularized and benefited the perception of China and its government in more positive ways. This is especially relevant when it comes to the relations with the United States, whose bilateral interactions are considered as a fundamental element of its foreign policy (Sutter, 2013).

There are 110 CIs in the USA, more than in any other country, even more than in the whole Asian continent. One of the reasons of it, besides of the diplomatic interest, is related to the desire of American universities to fulfill the absence of federal funds to language programs. At the beginning, these programs were supported when Washington started its war on terror (2001), creating a fund for programs of “language priority”, languages spoken in the countries considered as terrorist for the American government in order to form experts in the languages (Rice, 2006). With this support, several universities invested in language programs as part of the curricula. One of those languages was the putonghua. The funds were reduced in more than 47% in 2011, leading to the universities with no financial capacity and a strong demand in language programs. The offer
of Hanban seem attractive: a five-year contract that secured funding, scholarships, research grant, language instructors, textbooks and cultural supplies.

The critics from the academics range from the pointing to Chinese money dependency (Sahlins, 2013), to a response to the global profile that China is building (McCord, 2013) and even to the priority of the federal budget, un-targeting language programs (China File, 2014a). For the universities with larger budgets, strong demand and prestigious acknowledge like Stanford, Columbia or the University of California, hosting a CI s more controversial because of the internal pressure of some members of the academic community and interest of the students.

The most popular case, in this sense, is the CI at Stanford. The US university not only agree to concede some demands from the Chinese, but they also overcome the annual budget for 4 million dollars— when a normal university’s annual budget is between 100,000 and 150,000 dollars— offered by Hanban, including all expenses for language instructors and textbooks (Redden, 2012). The budget of Stanford has even surpassed the one million-dollar fund of Columbia and the one of the University of Chicago as well (Sahlins, 2013).

Some professors are reluctant to believe in the Chinese money, they think the program could change the way in which China is studied (Redden, 2012), transforming the class into a boring, biased, not open to discussion or diversity way, elements that are the fundamental base of academic credibility (Schallhorn, 2015).

In the academic cycle of 2015-2016, there were 1,043,839 international students in the USA which 328,547 (31.5%) were Chinese, 132,888 (15.9%) Indians and 59,946 (5.9%) from Saudi Arabia (Institute of International Education, 2016), making China the main country of origin of most of the exchange students in the United States and whose fully funded tuition is reflected in most of the incomes of the American universities (Sahlins, 2013).

**University geopolitics**

The root of the problem the Confucius Institutes issue is their location inside a university campus. Academics usually tend to associate the Chinese institutions to similar ones like the Cervantes Institute, the Alliance Françoise and even the British Council but these institutions and the Chinese ones are not the same because of its location, its dependency on their respective government. The CIs, according to the agreement that regulates their work, can only exist inside a university.
With the CI inside campus, it must subordinate to the rules of the university and the country where it establishes, as articulated in the Art. 6 of the “Laws and Bylaws of the Confucius Institutes”. The consequent problem is the confrontation of the American and Chinese laws, clashing in some aspects like freedom of speech, academy, human rights and discussion (Golub, 2014; China File, 2014b). Some academics consider that because of the location, the CI are the foreign branch of a political structure that extends to China and to the highest levels of its government (Grossman & Perez Jr, 2014; Redden, 2012; Sahlins, 2013).

When compared to other institutions of language promotion, the location of the CI inside campus reflects a deeper commitment. The reason behind it is that it is less complicated to convince students and academics, through the CI program, to change the negative perception of China and at the same time increase its attractiveness. The positive outcome is that more and more people would be interested in cooperating in areas like economy, commerce and education. The perception of what the US get from this exchange is the opposite. They consider that instead of being convinced or enlightened about Chinese culture, they forced to surrender to Chinese cultural power.

The simplest solution could be to have the CIs outside universities campuses, so they would not be subordinated to educational institutions laws and could operate the way they want, without violating USA laws.

_Looking for the focus_

Most of the CIs in the United States does not focus in any specific activity. In fact, the focus itself is not determined by Hanban or the CCP; it is decided when the agreement is negotiated and taking in account the interest of both parts. For instance, the CI at UC Davis is focused in food science with the collaboration of its partner the University of Jiangnan at Wuxi. According to the vice provost of International Affairs, Bill Lacy, this is because Chinese interest in developing its wine industry, an area in which UC Davis is an expert (Hu, 2012).

The features of the city where the CI is going to be established are also taken in consideration before its establishment. When the University of Southern Maine and Hanban decided to establish a CI, they agreed on that the Chinese partner university would be Dongbei
University in Dalian because this city “is very similar to Portland, with an active industrial port, strong tourism and an economy focused to international business” (Gallagher, 2013).

The focused pursued by the CI are not the main complaints of the debate, but the discrimination in which Hanban decides the partner universities because of its strengths and features, closing the opportunity to smaller universities, as critics points out.

Another feature is that most negotiations and agreements are linked to a single person’s interest to establish relations with China. The CI at the University of Chicago, which to the date doesn’t longer exist, stands out to the fact that at the beginning of the negotiations the focus of the CI was more orientated to research grants and economic development studies than to language and cultural activities. The agreement was made by Dali Yang, a researcher in political and economic science and director of the Centre of Asian Studies, who was seeking financial support for the creation of an annual symposium with Renmin University (Sahlins, 2013).

Even though the CIs are established by the interest of a person, there should not be any focus or activities regarding symposiums, conferences and researches financed by the CIs because the latter activities are not the core of the existence of them. Since the beginning of the program, Hanban made it clear that the aim would be cultural exchange and language promotion, so the activities regarding scientific investigation should not be considered for financial support. Otherwise it would mean losing academic credibility.

**Academic freedom in danger**

The highest complaint against the CIs is related to self-censorship and the consequent privation of academic freedom. Talking about certain topics like democracy, Falun Gong, Taiwan or Tibet are somewhat sensitive for Chinese government. It is sensitive for China because it projects a negative image, affecting its façade as a “pacific” and “harmonious” country. Some scholars said that they have felt threatened by the presence of the CIs inside the campus because in some cases they were not allowed to talk of certain topics that made China look less positive. In some other cases, this demand has been expressed in a literal direct way by members of the CI and in few cases, it was expressed in an indirect way by having the feeling of not talking about it because it may not like it for CI members.
Politics in China are orientated to be “what cannot be said” instead of what is allowed. And even if the academics argue that “there has not been any case in which Hanban tries to censor or control what the university says” (Hu, 2012) or that “they would defend academic freedom at the very first moment Hanban tries to control curricula or researches in topics like Tibet or Taiwan” (Redden, 2012), self-censorship is silent and hard to detect, especially if the academics justify it because of the financial support they can get from Beijing (Redden, 2012; China File, 2014a). It is a real problem that becomes purely subjective.

Perhaps the most known case of self-censorship is the one that happened in the University of Miami at Ohio. A professor told the New York Times that “there’s a list of proscribed topics like Dalai Lama, Tibet, Taiwan, the military buildup of the Chinese army, the factional clash inside Chinese politics– all those are off-limits” (Guttenplan, 2012). Inviting the Dalai Lama to campus or making conferences in topics like Tibet (Mcintire, 2013; Sahlins, 2013; Redden, 2012) makes the CI reluctant to held such an event.

The strategy that Hanban and sometimes American universities have is to avoid confrontation by appointing directors that are either too loyal to China or know nothing related to the country, its ideology and political practices. For instance, when the CI at the University of Chicago was in negotiation, the members of the board of Asian Studies were never invited to the discussion and didn’t knew about the existence of it until the day it was inaugurated (Guttenplan, 2012; Sahlins, 2013). In the case of other prestigious university, Columbia University, the only thing that could be founded was a university newspaper article arguing that the presence of the CI would challenge the academic integrity of the university (Guttenplan, 2012).

There’s a mislead when some academics tried to define self-censorship and control over certain topics. As professor Edward McCord explains, by demanding to the CI in the USA to talk about the topics that China disagrees with, just to show they don’t censor, they would explain the official statement of those topics and would eventually be accused of promoting communist propaganda inside university campus, which will strengthen the argument of most detractors (McCord, 2013; 2014). Some academics, like Ted Foss from the Centre for East Asian Studies of the University of Chicago, argue that the right place for discuss topics like Tibet or Taiwan are inside the centres that focuses and specializes in these topics, not inside language classes (Golub, 2014).
Self-censorship is a questionable and delicate topic that if the Chinese want to be justified, the most favorable argument would be related to the campaign of improving the negative perceptions of China through the CI as a fundamental role player in the Chinese cultural diplomacy. If the aim is talking about the sensitive topics of China just to demonstrate that there’s no censorship and violation to academic freedom, the effects not only be counterproductive for Americans but for the Chinese as well because, if the critics continue to worsen, it is more likely that the whole CI program could be suspended, affecting de language programs of those universities with no financial capacity.

Beijing calling

Linked to the previous critic, there is the argument that argue that the CIs are financed by the Chinese government and hence controlled by them, attending their interest, exporting its cultural and political values that sets up a platform for spying the United States.

Most of the criticism comes from detractors that defend human rights in China. Marshall Sahlins (2013), one of the most known critics, argues that “by hosting a CI, the university gets involved in the political and propagandist efforts of China, contradicting the values of free thought and human wellbeing”. More stronger is the argument of Steven Mosher, whose personal life events determined his thoughts to the Chinese politburo: “should we allow that a cruel, tyrannical and repressive regime teach our young students?” (Mosher, 2012).

In the United States, there has been no cases in which the CI acted as a platform for espionage or propaganda platform.

One flaw of these critics is that they target the CIs in unfavorable ways not used with similar institutions such as the Cervantes Institute or the Alliance Française.

Behind the criticism, on the one hand, we find unfavorable bargains and poorly negotiated agreements between Hanban and universities that lack strong financial capacity (China File, 2014b) on the other, there is the assumption that CI’s should be autonomous. The Chinese State Council is indeed in charge of selecting the members of the Council and Headquarters of the CI, in a similar fashion the USA Department of Education is under control of the Executive power. (McCord, 2013).
The situation happening in the USA is basically a paternalist feeling to the simple fact of not accepting an institution coming from a country that doesn’t share the same values and practices respected by Americans. By doing this, students can be persuaded by the opinions of the professors that perceive any Chinese institution as evil. At the same time, the debate about free thought and speech could not have a counterpart because it would be misled and controlled by an ideology. In order to preserve their academic integrity and credibility, American universities would have to take the risk and open to the Chinese institutes— even if it doesn’t get along with the American ideology—.

A confidential matter

Some critics argue that there is a confidential clause that forces American universities to accept CIs control over curricula and topics taught inside the classrooms. The Chinese are, indeed, demanding a confidential clause so both parts can agree in certain aspects like budget and focus, not a demand to spy or control (McCord, 2014).

Alan R. Klutter explains that the agreement between Hanban and the University of Texas A&M, when the CI was negotiated for the first time in 2007, do not represent any sort of threat but the contract renewal in 2012 has a “confidential clause” that was aimed to protect both parts personal information (China File, 2014b).

If criticism remains, universities that depend of the Chinese money for the survival of their language programs and those who cooperate with Hanban could be affected if the program of the CIs gets canceled because of critics. The so-called confidential clause that most academics fear has nothing to do with espionage, it is a protection for personal information.

Decision power

The last main argument that scholars uphold is related to the power of decision inside the CIs. Most of the decisions of the Institutes are already established and decided in the annual agenda of Hanban, not considering the host university’s authority.

Arthur Waldron, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explains that “once you have a CI in campus, there’s a second source of opinion and another authority, that responds to the CCP,
and that doesn’t put into discussion the aspects of the academic life of the Institute” (Guttenplan, 2012). There’s the case of the CI of the State University of Pennsylvania, where the confrontation of power was so evident that the university decided to suspend its agreement with Hanban due to “not similarity in academic ambitions” (Redden, 2014), that asked more grants for academic research and Hanban denied the petition.

The argument of “they recommend and we accept” explained at the process of deciding the language teachers is controversial in the sense that “the host university is the one that decides if the recommended teacher from Hanban fulfills the requirements for the position” (Sahlins, 2013; 2014). In this case, the host university doesn’t really have the power of decision when it comes to language instructors or budget usage.

In Art. 6 of the “Constitution and Bylaws of the Confucius Institutes”, Hanban states that it is its responsibility to provide professors, text books and study plans for the courses it offers (Hanban, n.d.-c). The universities whose financial capacity is non-existent, the decision remains in the Chinese side, but in the case of universities with larger budget, like the State University of Pennsylvania, the recommendations made by Hanban can be excluded because the university can afford its own professors, text books and study plans (Sahlins, 2013; 2014; Redden, 2014). Host universities can decide if they accept or not the guidelines of Hanban only if it can afford their own academic supplies (Golub, 2014).

C riticism is one of the most important elements for the well-development of the Sino American relations and the CI itself. The sense of the critic must be aimed to improve the differences of both parts and especially the academic institutions. In the case of the CI, universities with smaller budget and less prestige are the ones where the criticism affects more because they are subject to the desires of the Chinese government.

C riticism scope

As we have seen, some agreements are not favourable for smaller universities, but situation is getting grayer. Since 2004 it is configuring a clash of powers, in which American subnational actors– scholars– face China– Hanban and CI–. The conflict has three aspects: one academic, explained in the critics, one political and one more institutional. These two last aspects had the most powerful appeal as scholars want to bring in the CI’s issue into the political agenda. A first
success has been that members of the US Congress have shown concern about the performance of the Chinese institutions inside universities’ campuses, even some academic institutions, like the National Association of Scholars (NAS) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), have shown concern about the Confucius Institute work.

**Political scope**

It was a matter of time that subnational actors’ concerns could reach the national the political national level of the system. In 2010, during a hearing in the Foreign Affairs Committee, Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of it, asked to the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about the proliferation of the CIs in the USA and if the country was doing the same with American cultural promotion centers in China. The Secretary responded “the Chinese government provides to the institutions about one million dollars as initial fund, they also cover the operatively expenses that can rise to 200,000 dollars per year. We don’t have that kind of money in our budget” (Dale, 2014; González, 2015).

In 2014, after the University of Chicago and the State University of Pennsylvania cancelled their respective agreements with Hanban, the doubts returned. The Congressman Christopher Smith, representative for New Jersey, tried to propose to the Subcommittee of Human Rights and International Organizations to urge the Government Accounting Office (GAO) to audit the agreements of the CI in the American universities to decide if the Department of Education should oppose to them because of the threat that they represent to academic freedom: “I don’t think the American universities should relegate the academic control to foreign governments which, in this case, is a dictatorship”(Gaudiano, 2014).

The investigations of the GAO comprise the following aspects: agreements considered as classified, prove if any kind of freedom was threatened, observe Chinese professors, research if these could have expressed their opinion freely and teach other topics even if China considered them as sensitive.

Another repercussion of the criticism, and perhaps the most known, is that related to the migration issue. The controversy originated in the translations of the official documents of Hanban, where the word “provide” and “hire” were misled by most American universities. They thought that they oversaw the hiring of the language instructors that would go to their campuses
for “work”. With this word confusion, institutions considered that they had the decision to “hire” whoever they thought that was competent in the task (McCord, 2013). The issue worsened when the criticism touched the espionage suspicion, so the migration status of those instructors was changed from “hired professor” to “visiting professor”.

**Institutional scope**

In this aspect, two institutions have stated their concern about the CI. One of them is the AAUP, founded in 1915, which purpose is to protect academic freedom form those entities that tried to control what professors teach and write about (American Association of University Professors, n.d.). The other one is the NAS, founded in 1987, that aims to defend universities against any threat of converting them to political platforms (National Association of Scholars, n.d.).

In 2014, the AAUP published a statement where they accused the CI of doing political activities ordered by the Chinese government, threatening the academic freedom of the US universities. The statement recommended to all universities in the country that had an agreement with the CI to suspend it or at least renegotiate it to clarify that the university had total control of the decisions related to professors recruitment, curricula determination and election of the study material. The university would have to acknowledge to the Chinese professors the same rights as the American ones and that the agreement renegotiated should be available to everyone of the university community (American Association of University Professors, 2014).

A recent study conducted by Rachelle Peterson on behalf of the NAS describes some activities occurred at the Confucius Institutes of the State University of New York at Albany and Buffalo, Alfred University, Pace University and Stony Brook University. The research took a posture against the CI and it recommends to all universities to end its relation with the CI (Peterson, 2017 p.10). She also recommends to those universities to: apply a transparent policy in which all the agreements, contracts and other sort of documents agreed with Hanban and the host university are public to anyone, to publish the disaggregated budget in which it specifies the spends, salaries and any other activity that implies a monetary transaction; separate the funds from the CI to those of the university, make the Chinese classes of the CI noncredit courses, renegotiate the agreement to clarify that the laws that compete are the ones of the USA so the academic freedom is respected, request to Hanban to be part of the hiring process and to offer a class open to the public in topics
relevant to China even if those are sensitive, inform the language instructors their rights and freedoms, procuring they had the same privileges as the American professors and to convert the position of CI director into voluntary, without salary.

The report also makes a series of recommendations to the US Congress to open a research on CIs and investigate if they threaten academic freedom in American universities and the national security as well (Peterson, 2017 p.11). This report brings an important aspect that the one of the AAUP did not argued as it seems that transparency and locations remains the main obstacles to the right functioning of the CI. The report concludes that “some reliable evidence was detected, but no concrete evidence of policies prohibiting discussion of certain topics are a source of concerning” (Peterson, 2017 p.85).

Both statements, the one from the AAUP and the other from the NAS, are proof of the scope of the criticism. Critics have reached a high political and institutional level, both suggested recommendations to improve what they consider a threat to the country and its universities. In the institutional level, it must be clear that both associations have their specific interests, sponsors, and lobby. They’re both biased by the personal experiences of the authors and it can put in doubt the credibility of the authors and the institution itself. It seems that most academics and their institutional representations don’t understand the functioning of the program. The debate shouldn’t have scaled to an institutional and political level if we consider the complex and global scenario where the international relations are build up. It should be the AAUP and the NAS the first ones to defend the CI because it represents an opportunity for faculty members, students and the community in general so discussion and free thought can be preserved, even if those thoughts includes those funded by the Chinese government (China File, 2014b).

Final remarks and theoretical-practical implications

At a theoretical-conceptual level we state that recent developments in different countries, from Great Britain to United States and linked to a wide range of issues, elections or trade, make internations relations strongly societal with people at the centre of the historical developments. To shed light on the growing role of non-government actors in international politics it is a necessity to begin building a theoretical corpus. Our proposal is to begin with subnational actors as useful
conceptual tool to explain the criticism of some American scholars against the CIs as an expression of multi-layered set of actions that give shape to academic diplomacy.

Most of the criticism analysed here is biased by the perceptions of some subnational actors that fear the mining of their liberties because of Chinese cultural diplomacy that they see as threatening. The debate deepened to the point of reaching the attention to the US Congress because certain scholars have accused the CI of espionage, communist propaganda and a violation of human rights.

Critics are formulated in a way that consider that China is either a friend that should play with American rules, or is an enemy. The statements of the AAUP and the NAS remain the most valuables in the debate because they not only point to the CI as a threat to academic freedom and as a platform to export China’s agenda, they question the performance of the American institutions in protecting national interests and take in consideration what is best for most of the universities that can’t afford the language programs.

The aim of the cultural diplomacy, materialized in the CI, is to build a platform in which ideas and cultures from both nations can meet, and by presenting their cultural features the perception of what it can be considered as a threat can change. Since the beginning of the program, Hanban made it clear that the aim of the CI is to promote the cultural and academic exchange and the willing to cooperate with the rest of the world. In this debate, there’s no a good or bad side. There’s no defenders and detractors, or those who threat, it is simply the will of a country to improve its perception, its wish to cooperate and the opportunity that this represents to the academic institutions that, for many different reasons, see the CI as a way of sustaining the academic programs and watch over the future of the students.

SOURCES


