



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

## Propaganda and beyond: A note on the 2020 Confucius Institute reform

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### Abstract

By restructuring the bureaucracy that runs its global network of language institutes, the CCP has consolidated it into its propaganda apparatus. The abandonment of the earlier model, in which the network was overseen by both propaganda and united front agencies, fits into the Xi era's trend towards 'unbundling' organisational systems and clarifying channels of control radiating from the top party leadership. We sketch the 2020 transition, stressing the bureaucracy's structural continuity: successive renamings did not alter its original leading small group-office setup, typical across the party-state. The language institute bureaucracy's increasingly transparent position in the CCP propaganda system is, we argue, ultimately secondary to its more effective role in external influence operations: like other propaganda organs, the institutes can serve as platforms for the cultivation of foreign targets, making them tools supporting the work of intelligence and other non-propaganda agencies.

## 0 Introduction

Confucius Institutes (CI) and Classrooms are PRC state-sponsored units embedded in foreign universities and other institutions to teach standard Mandarin in the simplified script and aspects of state-curated culture, often also organising events and building links with local institutions.<sup>1</sup> As their insertion in Western universities consolidated in the 2010s, criticism that identified CIs as propaganda organs was anchored in their position in the propaganda apparatus.<sup>2</sup> Since then, various approaches had been invoked in their defence: conceptual dilution into the palatable babble of "public diplomacy";<sup>3</sup> claims that they are "devoted to their primary mission of teaching language and cultural studies", not "politic[s]ed" and therefore "quite benign",<sup>4</sup> or that universities can, and often "successfully" do, bureaucratically "confine" them to

<sup>1</sup>The "semi-literacy" promoted by an exclusive emphasis on PRC government-standardised culture is discussed in Michael Churchman, "Confucius Institutes and Controlling Chinese Languages", *China Heritage Quarterly* 26 (June 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Marshall Sahlins, "Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 12.46 (2014).

<sup>3</sup>For a book-length example, see Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute*, Routledge, 2016; for a sample of the public diplomacy-themed cultivation of international relations commentators, see Jichang Lulu, "Chinese leaders often complain they are misunderstood, and I think they are right," said d'Hooghe...", Twitter, 16th Feb. 2020 and references therein.

<sup>4</sup>David Shambaugh, a US commentator on China and international relations, in "The end of U.S. engagement with China?", Brookings Institution, 7th Mar. 2018, p. 32.



the “tolerable” end of a spectrum, where their “advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages”;<sup>5</sup> indeed, they are an “imperfect solution” to shortcomings in Chinese-language instruction, and universities should “[s]trengthen existing safeguards” to “pre-empt pressure from both [the PRC and local] sides” that could inflict “damage to [universities’] reputation”.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, PRC *exoprop* media announced the CIs would henceforth be confined away, moving under a new structure whose independence would “disperse the Western misinterpretation” that CIs are CCP propaganda instruments.<sup>7</sup> The confinement has arguably defeated ‘critics’ who meet *exoprop* at its level: recent pamphletary has often limited itself to vague, unsourced assertions on the new entities’ relationship to the state (they “appear to duplicate each other in some ways”, making “any distinctions” between them “technical”).<sup>8</sup>

This note describes the 2020 reform, seeking to restore the factual, bureaucratic anchoring the study of CIs once had. Its findings show the CIs have consolidated their place in the propaganda system, leaving one where united front links were just as significant. These structures evolved from a leading small group (LSG) under the State Council, which later morphed into a council overseeing the CI ‘headquarters’ and with Hanban, a unit of the Ministry of Education, acting as its office. The 2020 reform replaced the LSG-turned-council with a GONGO supervised by the ministry and with further propaganda links, with the ministry also overseeing a ‘centre’ that replaced the office. The reform has thus only clarified the CI network’s place in the propaganda and education bureaucracy. Since it has not even superficially removed CI structures from party-state control, the restructuring seems unlikely to have been motivated by a desire to assuage foreign concerns; it is only to gullible audiences abroad, or to the system’s own partners, that the new setup might have been marketed as depoliticised. The process appears to reflect the Xi era’s more general streamlining of bureaucratic systems, which has indeed resulted in neater propaganda, united front and foreign affairs apparatuses.<sup>9</sup>

The core of this note (sections 1 and 2) was drafted in early 2021, intended for inclusion in a longer article, and circulated privately. This update on the CI bureaucracy was a straightforward exercise; only colleagues’ requests justify its separate publication. The CIs’ nature as propaganda organs seems, after all, only ancillary to their role in CCP influence work. We argue (section 3) that, embedded in foreign institutions, CIs are useful platforms to coopt élite figures, a task whose success owes little to the affiliations of its overseeing bureaucracy. Even more anecdotal are the bureaucratic minutiae on the target-country end: indeed, CIs’ work as cooption platforms would,

<sup>5</sup>Charles Parton, “China–UK Relations: Where to Draw the Border Between Influence and Interference?”, RUSI, Feb. 2019, pp. 5, 18.

<sup>6</sup>Jackson Kwok, “Is there a problem with... Confucius Institutes?”, *China Matters*, 2018; idem, “Confucius Institutes and the challenge of academic freedom”, Lowy Institute, 11th May 2018.

<sup>7</sup>“New NGO to operate China’s Confucius Institutes, ‘disperse misinterpretation’”, *Global Times*, 5th July 2020.

<sup>8</sup>Rachelle Peterson, Flora Yan & Ian Oxnevad, “After Confucius Institutes: China’s Enduring Influence on American Higher Education”, National Association of Scholars, June 2022, pp. 28 sq.

<sup>9</sup>On the restoration of the united front work leading small group, see Alex Joske, “The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising united front work”, *Sinopsis*, 23rd July 2019. On the separation of the united front and foreign affairs systems as evidenced at the provincial level, Charmian Goh et al., “Unbundling systems: Foreign affairs reform in China’s provinces”, *Sinopsis*, 11th Apr. 2021. On the 2014 abolition of a separate Office of External Propaganda, Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš & Rachel Lee, “Xi’s centralisation of external propaganda: SCIO and the Central Propaganda Department”, *Sinopsis*, 25th Jan. 2021.



if anything, be aided if an administrative ‘confinement’ legitimated their presence in ways establishment voices have endorsed as ‘tolerable’ or ‘benign’.

## 1 Between propaganda and united front work: The pre-reform Confucius Institute system

Representing the organ’s original function, ‘State Hanban’ (国家汉办) was an abbreviated name for the office of the Leading Small Group (LSG) for the International Promotion of the Chinese Language (国家汉语国际推广领导小组). While Hanban was a unit of the Ministry of Education (MoE),<sup>10</sup> the LSG outranked it. Between 2007 and 2008, the LSG evolved<sup>11</sup> from an ordinary State Council body into the Confucius Institute Headquarters (CIHQ, 孔子学院总部) Council, a structure better adapted to external propaganda purposes, with non-executive appointments to foreigners obscuring the less publicised continuity of its party-state leadership core.<sup>12</sup>

The links between CIHQ and the united front system were manifested in the CIHQ Council’s leadership, chaired since a year after its creation by a former UFWD head turned vice premier (Liu Yandong 刘延东, then Sun Chunlan 孙春兰), as well as in the presence of united front agencies, such as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, among the council’s membership.<sup>13</sup>

The Hanban/CIHQ apparatus was, on the other hand, organically integrated into the CCP propaganda system, with propaganda organs represented at the CIHQ Council,<sup>14</sup> career propaganda cadre on the Hanban/CIHQ party committee,<sup>15</sup> propaganda leaders, including Central Propaganda Department heads, personally visiting CIs<sup>16</sup> and local propaganda departments involved in the organisation of CI events.<sup>17</sup>

Senior propaganda and education officials have explicitly referred to CIs as an “important component” of external propaganda.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup>“国务院办公厅关于调整国家汉语国际推广领导小组组成人员的通知 国办发〔2006〕39号”, gov.cn, 2006; “教育部直属单位 (主要社团)”, 教育部; “国家汉办”, 汉办.

<sup>11</sup>CIHQ was established in 2007; the LSG was abolished in 2008 (“孔子学院总部在京揭牌”, gov.cn; “国务院关于议事协调机构设置的通知 国发〔2008〕13号”, gov.cn, 2016). During that transition period, the bodies had a similar composition and might have been identical: sources from 2006-2009 show that the late LSG and the early CIHQ Council had the same chair, the same organs represented among the vice chairs, and all organs represented at the CIHQ Council (besides Hanban itself) having been represented at the LSG (“国务院办公厅关于调整国家汉语国际推广领导小组组成人员的通知 国办发〔2006〕39号”; “陈至立简历”, china.com.cn, 9th Oct. 2008; “孔子学院总部成立第一届理事会 陈至立担任主席”, 中新社 via 人民网, 12th Dec. 2007; “章新胜: 81个国家已建立256所孔子学院和58所孔子课堂”, 人民网, 12th Mar. 2009; “中华人民共和国国务院任免人员 2007年第6号”, gov.cn, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>“孔子学院总部”, 汉办; “领导简历”, 汉办. On foreign council members, see n. 33.

<sup>13</sup>“章新胜...”; “第三届孔子学院大会召开 国务委员刘延东出席”, 中国教育报, via 中国教育新闻网, 10th Dec. 2008; “校领导出席第十二届孔子学院大会”, 南开大学, 14th Dec. 2017; “孙春兰在第十三届孔子学院大会上强调 推动孔子学院高质量发展 为构建人类命运共同体贡献力量”, 新华, 4th Dec. 2018.

<sup>14</sup>“章新胜...”

<sup>15</sup>“于天琪同志简历”, 汉办, 2017.

<sup>16</sup>“中共中央政治局委员、中宣部部长刘奇葆参观考察以色列特拉维夫孔子学院”, 汉办, 24th Oct. 2013; “刘云山访问哈萨克斯坦国立民族大学孔子学院”, 汉办, 6th Sept. 2010.

<sup>17</sup>“体验孔子学院总部基地: 中国的孔子 世界的儒学”, 海外网, 24th Aug. 2018.

<sup>18</sup>“扎实做好汉语国际推广工作 增进中国人民同世界人民的了解和友谊”, 人民日报, 25th Apr. 2007; “郝平: 孔子学院已成我国外交、外宣重要组成部分”, 新华, via gov.cn, 3rd July 2009; cf. “北京大学连线卡塔尔大学召开抗疫视频研讨会”, 北京大学, 20th Mar. 2020.



## 2 The new Confucius Institute bureaucracy: streamlining propaganda work

By June 2020, the dual CIHQ/Hanban structure had been replaced with a new Ministry of Education unit, the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (教育部中外语言交流合作中心), still led by Ma Jianfei 马箭飞, Hanban's party secretary,<sup>19</sup> with a new body instead of the LSG-turned-CIHQ Council, the China International Chinese Language Education Foundation (中国国际中文教育基金会).<sup>20</sup>

The new foundation is a GONGO supervised by the Ministry of Education, registered at an address previously used by a unit of the ministry.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after its establishment, its leadership consisted of a chair, Yang Wei 杨卫, an academic who was a CCP member and CPPCC delegate and had been a NPC Standing Committee member,<sup>22</sup> a secretary-general and vice chair, Zhao Lingshan 赵灵山, likely the executive leader, a CCP member with previous posts at the MoE party committee and the China Education Association for International Exchange (中国教育国际交流协会), another MoE-supervised GONGO;<sup>23</sup> and a council that includes PRC universities, yet another MoE-supervised, once CIHQ-guided GONGO, and at least two companies linked to the propaganda system.<sup>24</sup> The GONGO, the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching (ISCLT, 世界汉语教学学会), had Ma Jianfei as its secretary-general.<sup>25</sup> One of the companies is China Education Publishing and Media Group (CEPMG, 中国教育出版传媒集团有限公司), a centrally state-owned, MoE-overseen holding

<sup>19</sup>“教育部设立中外语言交流合作中心”, 青年网, 6th July 2020. The Center's continuity with its predecessor structure is evidenced by its use of the same social credit number as CIHQ/Hanban (“孔子学院总部(国家汉办)”, 天眼查, 12th July 2020; “教育部中外语言交流合作中心”, 天眼查, 10th Aug. 2020; cf. “*Extrato de termo aditivo N° 1/2018 Arinter*”, Imprensa Nacional, 31st Dec. 2018). The new ‘Center’ name was used in accounts of mid-2020 CI activities, such as an event with the Asia Society, a Hanban partner in the US (“2020 年线上全美中文大会顺利开幕 美国 4000 名中文教师共议国际中文教育创新发展”, 汉办, 25th June 2020; “关于教育部中外语言交流合作中心 2020 学年度公派出国教师选派工作的通知”, 西南交通大学). Online platforms and media in the Mainland and Hong Kong reproduced a purported Ministry of Education circular deprecating the use of the ‘Hanban’ name and CIHQ's renaming as the Center (红鲤鱼与绿鲤鱼与驴, “孔子学院总部改名, 不再叫‘汉办’了?”, 观察者, 4th July 2020; “孔子学院总部疑改名 官方未提”, 明报新闻网, 5th July 2020).

<sup>20</sup>“教育部设立...”

<sup>21</sup>“第 483 号基金会设立登记公告”, 中国社会组织公共服务平台, 13th July 2020; “集体户口地址和派出所”, 中国留学网.

<sup>22</sup>“杨卫”, 清华大学; 江耘, “杨卫: 科研是高校培养高水平人才关键”, 中国新闻网, via 人民网, 11th Mar. 2014; “杨卫委员在十二届全国人大常委会第七次会议分组会上发言”, 中国人大网, 26th Feb. 2014; “杨卫委员: 要进一步加大基础研究投入”, 新华网, 15th Mar. 2018; “中共教育部党组关于杨卫、潘云鹤同志职务任免的通知”, 教育部, 4th Aug. 2006.

<sup>23</sup>“中共教育部党组关于赵灵山同志试用期满正式任职的通知 教党任〔2018〕273 号”, 教育部, 2018; “教育部党组第六巡视组向中国教育国际交流协会秘书处反馈巡视情况”, 中国教育国际交流协会, 4th Aug. 2019; cf. “中国教育国际交流协会章程”, 中国教育国际交流协会, 15th Dec. 2017; “杨振宁获澳大颁授荣誉博士学位”, 新浪教育, 1st Apr. 2015; “赵灵山 港澳台办公室常务副主任(副司级)”, 教育部, Nov. 2010.

<sup>24</sup>“冯云生董事长当选中国国际中文教育基金会第一届理事会副理事长”, CEPMG, 2020; “杨丹校长当选中国国际中文教育基金会第一届理事会理事”, 北京外国语大学, 23rd June 2020; “陈志敏当选中国国际中文教育基金会第一届理事会理事”, 复旦大学, 19th June 2020; “我校参与发起中国国际中文教育基金会”, 厦门大学, 23rd June 2020; “钱旭红当选中国国际中文教育基金会第一届理事会理事”, 华东师范大学, 22nd June 2020; “浙师大参与发起的中国国际中文教育基金会正式成立”, 浙江师范大学, 24th June 2020; 马海燕, “中国国际中文教育基金会: 孔子学院并未更名”, 中新社, via 澎湃新闻, 6th July 2020.

<sup>25</sup>“常务理事会与理事会”, ISCLT; “世界汉语教学学会章程”, ISCLT, 16th Apr. 2009; “世界汉语教学学会”, 教育部.



that has received Central Propaganda Department instructions.<sup>26</sup> The other, Chinese Testing International (汉考国际教育科技(北京)有限公司), was a subsidiary of a CIHQ/Hanban company that ran an online CI platform.<sup>27</sup>

The pervasiveness of politics in the CIs' work was authoritatively stated before and after the 2020 bureaucratic rearrangement. In 2018, an article by then CIHQ/Hanban party secretary Ma Jianfei invoked the "guidance of the spirit of the 19th party congress" and Xiist concepts including "humanity's community of shared future" to assert that CIHQ and "all teaching and administrative staff on the international Chinese language education front" would "unite around the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as its core".<sup>28</sup> Promoting Xi's "community" remains a stated goal of the new foundation.<sup>29</sup>

Showing that Ma's statement was more than a ritual invocation, the leading role of CCP members among CI staff has been made explicit at party meetings for CI teachers, both before and after being sent to CIs abroad.<sup>30</sup>

### 3 Beyond propaganda: Confucius Institutes as influence platforms

The CIs' firm institutional embedding in the party's propaganda system, only reinforced in 2020, should not be read as implying propaganda is their sole mission within external work. Bureaucratic dependency relations — which inexperienced observers abroad may see as revealing something forbidden or, in the more caricaturesque accounts, 'malign' — often provide cover for other functional relationships. The united front system — "opaque" and "secretive", in the caricature<sup>31</sup> — is arguably the party's most transparent, a consequence of the nature of united front work; a recognition is emerging of its role as intelligence cover.<sup>32</sup> While CIs' ability to overtly coopt admin-

<sup>26</sup>“集团简介”, CEPMG; “中国教育出版传媒集团有限公司”, Qichacha; “教育部关于冯云生等职务任免的通知 教任〔2015〕62号”, 教育部; “教育部任命冯云生同志为中国教育出版传媒集团有限公司监事会主席”, CEPMG, 6th Feb. 2013; “中央宣传部办公厅、国家新闻出版广电总局办公厅关于切实做好庆祝新中国成立65周年重点出版物出版工作的通知 中宣办发〔2014〕15号”, 北大法宝, extract; cf. “中央政治局常委刘云山等领导同志莅临集团展位视察”, CEPMG, 1st Sept. 2014.

<sup>27</sup>“汉考国际教育科技(北京)有限公司”, 企查查, 11th Aug. 2020; “五洲汉风网络科技(北京)有限公司”, 企查查; “Home page”, Confucius Institute Online.

<sup>28</sup>“办好孔子学院 贡献中国智慧”, 中国教育报, 24th Jan. 2018.

<sup>29</sup>“冯云生董事长当选中国国际中文教育基金会第一届理事会副理事长”.

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., the accounts of party meetings for CI volunteer teachers undergoing training at the CIHQ/Hanban “Southern Base” at Xiamen University (厦门大学汉语国际推广南方基地), (“2019年赴泰国、欧洲、非洲等国汉语教师志愿者临时党支部成立大会顺利召开”, 厦门大学, 13th Mar. 2019; “理想信念与志愿精神演讲比赛圆满落幕”, 厦门大学, 27th Dec. 2019; “2019年赴欧洲、非洲等国汉语教师志愿者临时党支部成立大会顺利召开”, 厦门大学, 17th May 2019; “抗击疫情 党员先行——记2020年孔子学院总部赴泰国、非洲国家汉语教师志愿者岗前线上培训二班临时党支部第一次支部活动”, 厦门大学, 2nd Apr. 2020; “创新党建工作思维, 全面加强基层党组织建设”, 厦门大学, 30th Nov. 2019; cf. “厦门大学汉语国际推广南方基地/孔子学院办公室”, 厦门大学, 9th July 2013; “教育部办公厅关于做好普通高等学校毕业生赴国外担任汉语教师志愿者服务期满相关工作的通知”, 教育部, 2012; “关于2017年汉语教师志愿者转外派教师的通知”, 汉办, 9th June 2017; “汉语教师志愿者”, 汉办) and statements on party work by an Irish CI's Chinese director (“做孔子学院有所作为的院长”, 上海大学, 16th June 2016; cf. “Shanghai delegation visits UCC”, University College Cork, 15th Nov. 2013; Cork City Council, “Tfitzgeraldcork paid tribute to Mr Yongbin Xia...”, Twitter, 21st Sept. 2017).

<sup>31</sup>References for these and similar misrepresentations are charitably omitted. They are effortlessly reconstructed.

<sup>32</sup>Intelligence's role “orchestrat[ing]” CCP influence activity “masquerad[ing]” as united front work and other overt modes of influence, are a main theme in Alex Joske, *Spies and Lies How China's Greatest Covert*



istrators and academics makes their influence platform role most obvious, it is not limited to universities.<sup>33</sup> The remainder of this section recalls well-known examples of the use of propaganda-system affiliations, including that of the CIs themselves, as cover for more general influence work, notably as carried out by intelligence personnel.

In Florence, the first foreign affiliate of the Association for Yan Huang Culture of China (AYHCC, 中华炎黄文化研究会), generally devoted to activities that “actively connect with the Chinese government’s ‘Chinese culture going-out’ strategy”, sought the attendance to its opening of a former official who had turned to liaising between CCP agencies and local governments. The Chinese Culture Promotion Society (CCPS, 中华文化促进会), closely linked to the Yan Huang association, has claimed to have a “strategic partnership” with the Institute for Chinese Culture (Istituto per la Cultura Cinese, ICC), established by Italian parliamentarians and the PRC embassy. Both organisations are formally supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, a component of the propaganda system. The background of their leaders points elsewhere. AYHCC’s executive deputy chair is Gao Yichen 高以忱, a former vice minister of state

*Operations Fooled the World*, Hardie Grant, forthcoming, pp. 3, 7, ch. 3 et passim; idem, “The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system”, *ASPI Policy Brief* 32 (2020), p. 16, notes officers from the MSS and the PLA Political Work Department’s Liaison Bureau, respectively two main civilian and military intelligence agencies, have concurrently held united front roles that may have been intended as cover. The most visible case of united front-labelled influence on Western politics, that of the real-estate investor, political benefactor and University of Technology Sydney “professor” (陶社兰, “澳洲学者: 澳中可借 “一带一路” 携手发展与第三国经贸关系”, 中国新闻网, via 新华网, 27th Apr. 2017, q.v.) Huang Xiangmo, itself appears to point to intelligence work with united front work as mere cover, as Joske notes (Jichang Lulu, “Decoding united front work from Australia to Europe”, Sinopsis, 15th June 2020). United front cover for PRC underworld figures who resurface as pro-CCP influencers abroad suggests a pattern that may merit further study; the case of Tom Zhou in Australia illustrates it, while the CCP’s tradition of exploitation of organised crime furnishes a framework (Nick McKenzie, Nick Toscano & Grace Tobin, “Crown’s unsavoury business links: how Australia’s casino got tied up with criminals”, *The Age* [28th July 2019]; Emmanuel Jourda, “Le Parti communiste chinois, le Front Uni et les triades: patriotisme, business et crime organisé”, *Sociétés politiques comparées* 47 [2019]).

<sup>33</sup>In addition to CI director appointments, memberships at the CIHQ council and awards have offered foreign academics and administrators symbolic rewards empowering them at home, while helping build CI structures’ pretence of an international, apolitical character. Non-executive CIHQ council members as of late 2018 included Li Yuanyuan 李元元 (Huazhong University of Science and Technology (华中科技大学)), Sibrandes Poppema (Groningen University, The Netherlands), Keith Burnett (Sheffield University, UK), Sandro Roberto Valentini (Sao Paulo State University, Brazil), Samuel Stanley (Stony Brook University, US), Daniel Mote (National Academy of Engineering, US) and Wojciech Nowak (Jagiellonian University, Poland) (“孔子学院总部理事会上, 这些声音格外吸引人”, 国家汉办, via 微信, 5th Dec. 2018). An earlier member, then University of Queensland vice chancellor Peter Høj, left his position after legal advice indicating it might force him to register under Australia’s new counter foreign interference legislation (“UQ gains seat at key China table”, University of Queensland, 14th Nov. 2013; Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, “The Chinese Government co-funded at least four University of Queensland courses”, ABC, 15th Oct. 2019). Høj and Nowak also received Hanban or CIHQ awards (“UQ Vice-Chancellor receives Confucian award from China’s Vice-Premier”, University of Queensland, 7th Dec. 2015; “Nagroda Hanban dla Jego Magnificencji Rektora Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego prof. Wojciecha Nowaka”, Instytut Konfucjusza UJ, 2019). In the Czech Republic, Ondřej Kučera, who as an early-career academic became a co-founder and inaugural deputy director of the country’s first CI in Olomouc, went on to become a salient figure in CCP influence work, participating, e.g., in the promotion of Xi Jinping’s writings, before transitioning to a ‘neutral’, mainstream image leading an EU-funded grant project, a successful case of propaganda laundering through the cultivation of junior figures (任鹏, “孔子学院落户捷克”, 光明日报, 30th Sept. 2007; “帕拉茨基大学孔子学院”, 汉办; “Ondřej Kučera”, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci; “Seminář ”Zkušenosti pro řízení a rozvoj státu””, Poslanecká sněmovna, 21st Mar. 2016; Lukáš Zádrapa, “Čínská bezpečnostní slepá skvrna, aneb jak se spolu sešli marxisti, konzervativci, ekonomové a oportunisti”, Sinopsis, 20th Apr. 2016; “Meet the team!”, Sinofon).



security. Both entities are further linked to other key civilian and military intelligence agencies.<sup>34</sup>

In the Czech Republic, what looked like an unremarkable ‘borrowed boat’ arrangement between a CCP propaganda organ and a local media outlet was part of the setting for an intelligence agency’s cooption of voices in the region’s academic circles. In CCP propaganda, “to borrow a boat to go out to sea” (借船出海) refers to the use of foreign media outlets as localised proxies.<sup>35</sup> Beginning in 2017, *Literární noviny*, a magazine associated with the reform movement in the 1960s, yet ultimately fallen into the ownership of communist-era state-security agent, has acted as one, publishing propaganda material largely produced by the party newspaper *Guangming Daily* (光明日报).<sup>36</sup> A broader cooption operation was behind the typically ineffective propaganda act. The coopted *Literární noviny* carried, in addition to *Guangming Daily* content, CCP-aligned pieces by Marek Hrubec, a senior researcher with the Czech Academy of Sciences, as well as some of the output of his grant-funded work. Hrubec, also a frequent commentator for PRC media, was a member of the international academic committee of the Budapest-based China-CEE Institute (中国-中东欧研究院), nominally run by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) but currently led by Feng Zhongping 冯仲平, a senior intelligence officer formerly with the Ministry of State Security’s 11<sup>th</sup> Bureau, also known as the think tank CICIR.<sup>37</sup> The MSS’s presence at CASS is conceivably not its only one in the operation: *Guangming Daily* is itself known to provide journalist cover for MSS officers abroad.<sup>38</sup> The case further highlighted the previously overlooked overlap between former Eastern bloc state security collaborator networks and those of CCP intelligence today.<sup>39</sup>

*Guangming Daily* is not the only propaganda organ that serves as intelligence cover. In the 2000s, Lei Da 雷达 was a Nordic correspondent for the *People’s Daily* and other party media.<sup>40</sup> In 2008 and 2009, Lei recruited Uyghur and Tibetan refugees in Sweden to spy on their respective communities.<sup>41</sup> Lei seemingly returned to China after the Uyghur agent he recruited was sentenced by a Swedish court in 2010, resurfacing later as a *People’s Daily* Publishing House reporter.<sup>42</sup> His Tibetan recruitee Dorjee Gyantsan དོར་ཇེ་རྒྱལ་མཚན་ would, however, continue a relationship with the MSS through the Warsaw

<sup>34</sup>AYHCC and CCPs’s institutional links and Italian activity are discussed in (Livia Codarin, Laura Harth & Jichang Lulu, “Hijacking the mainstream: CCP influence agencies and their operations in Italian parliamentary and local politics”, Sinopsis, 20th Nov. 2021, pp. 25 sq., 38 sq.). On CCPs’s Swiss affiliate, Ralph Weber, “Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland”, Sinopsis, 18th Dec. 2020, pp. 18, 38.

<sup>35</sup>王庚年, “建设国际一流媒体 积极争取国际话语权”, 中国记者 8 (2009), via 求是. On CRI’s network of radio stations, see Jichang Lulu, “China’s state media and the outsourcing of soft power”, University of Nottingham China Policy Institute blog, 15th July 2015; Koh Gui Qing & John Shiffman, “Beijing’s covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world”, Reuters, 2nd Nov. 2015.

<sup>36</sup>The remainder of this paragraph incorporates research first published in Martin Hála, Filip Jirouš & Ondřej Klimeš, “Borrowed Boats Capsizing: State Security Ties to CCP Propaganda Laundering Rile Czech Public”, *China Brief* 21.23 (2021).

<sup>37</sup>Peter Mattis & Matthew Brazil, *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer*, Naval Institute Press, 2019, ch. 1; “Profile of MSS-Affiliated PRC Foreign Policy Think Tank CICIR”, DNI Open Source Center, 25th Aug. 2011.

<sup>38</sup>Xuezhi Guo, *China’s Security State: Philosophy, Evolution, and Politics*, CUP, 2012, p. 367.

<sup>39</sup>The archival evidence for this case is discussed in Hála et al., *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup>雷达, “生活水准无显著下降 冰岛人对破产一说不以为然”, 人民日报, via 中国新闻网, 16th Oct. 2008.

<sup>41</sup>*B 2778-17*, Dom, Södertörns tingsrätt, 15th June 2018, pp. 8, 13, 23.

<sup>42</sup>“Säkerhetspolisen 2009”, p. 24; *B 2778-17*, p. 8; 雷达, “驻华记者, 别身在福中不知福”, 环球时报, 10th May 2012.



embassy, his own arrest eventually leading to Lei's public exposure as an intelligence officer in Swedish court proceedings.<sup>43</sup>

Confucius Institutes' own proximity to intelligence agencies may itself contribute to the propaganda system's role as intelligence cover. Two of Brussels' three CIs were closed in 2019 after Song Xinning 宋新宁, the Chinese director of one of them, who openly acknowledges a "good relationship" with former MSS minister Geng Huichang 耿惠昌, was banned from the Schengen under suspicion of participating in interference and espionage activities.<sup>44</sup> Belgian intelligence had previously advised against that institute's establishment.<sup>45</sup> Song's Brussels appointment allowed him to promote CCP narratives at mainstream institutions, from the city's main 'international relations' institutes to Poland's first CI-friendly university in Cracow.<sup>46</sup> In Denmark's Aalborg University, academics who have been involved in work funded by the local Confucius Institute also participate in their employer's partnership with the MSS's University of International Relations.<sup>47</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

As this note has shown, Hanban's demise brought the network Confucius Institutes into deeper, clearer integration with the CCP propaganda system. The move away from the previous arrangement, in which the institutes sat astride the propaganda-united front interface, parallels the 'unbundling' of systems that characterises Xi-era bureaucratic reform: Xi's propaganda, foreign affairs and united front systems trend towards centralisation. A more local account of the Hanban reform than the mere instantiation of general unbundling would be unparsimonious.

<sup>43</sup>B 2778-17, pp. 8, 23. A useful, though unsourced, account by a human-rights organisation appears to conflate Lei with an MSS officer under diplomatic cover at the Warsaw embassy ("The Tibetan refugee who turned spy for China in Sweden", Safeguard Defenders, 18th Nov. 2020). Tasks the MSS gave to Dorjee Gyantsan in Warsaw included identifying people planning to protest Xi Jinping's 2016 Prague visit (B 2778-17, p. 9). On the mobilisation of pro-CCP elements that accompanied that visit, including violence against protesters, see "Dozvuky policejních kroků", Sinopsis, 12th Apr. 2016; Oliver Jahn, "Čiňani mi sebrali vlajku a kopali mě na zemi", Echo24.cz, 29th Mar. 2016.

<sup>44</sup>Bruno Struys, "Waarom de Chinese directeur van het Confuciusinstituut aan de VUB ons land niet meer binnen mag", *De Morgen* (29th Oct. 2019); idem, "VUB breekt met Confuciusinstituut: 'Samenwerken met China is cruciaal, maar instituut past niet in ons beleid'", *De Morgen* (10th Dec. 2019); Caroline Pauwels, "We steunen buitenlandse studenten, niet hun leiders", *De Standaard* (11th Dec. 2019); "VUB zet samenwerking Confucius Instituut niet voort", VUB, 11th Dec. 2019; "L'ULB cesse sa collaboration avec l'Institut Confucius : 'Trop peu de retombées et d'activités académiques'", RTBF, 17th Dec. 2019. The ban was later overturned on a technicality (Bruno Struys, "De wraak van Confucius: België in de fout bij inreisverbod van directeur Confuciusinstituut", *De Morgen* [16th Apr. 2020]).

<sup>45</sup>Jan Lippens, "Big Brothertechnologie: rector Pauwels onderzoekt samenwerking VUB-prof en China", *Knack* (11th July 2018).

<sup>46</sup>Geoff Wade, "Song Xinning 宋新宁, China Director...", Twitter, 29th Oct. 2019; "EU-China 15 years Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", VUB, Egmont Palace event; "The Taiwan Issue and EU-China Relations", BACES, 4th May 2017; "寻求欧盟—中国合作: 16+1 与一带一路倡议" 研讨会在克拉科夫孔子学院举行, 5th Sept. 2017.

<sup>47</sup>Jichang Lulu, "Repurposing Danish academia...", Twitter, 20th Dec. 2017; Jesper Willaing Zeuthen, Ane Bislev, per litteras, March 2018; Thomas Foght, "Aalborg Universitet har samarbejde med spion-mistænkt universitet i Kina", *Radio24syv*, 1st Nov. 2018; Keld Vrå Andersen, "Aalborg Universitet modtager millioner fra det kinesiske styre - andre universiteter har takket nej", TV2, 10th Dec. 2018; Sarah Weiler, "Responding to surprise: China's economic miracle as a challenge to established theory", MA thesis, 24th May 2022 (supervised by Liu Junyang 刘俊阳 (UIR) and Jesper Willaing Zeuthen (AAU)). On UIR, see "University of International Relations", ASPI China Defence Universities Tracker.





Externally, the change was claimed to somehow clear the institutes of the accusation of being propaganda organs. Whether that claim — strictly contrary to fact — may have been echoed abroad lies beyond our scope: in forums taking such claims seriously, empirically grounded argument would matter little. That an elucidation of the reformed structure’s propaganda links — a straightforward exercise — was seemingly neglected by multiple CI critics raises the question of their own interest in such grounding of discourse. Indifference to facts tilts the odds in the stronger propagandist’s favour.

The note justifies its late, reluctant publication by downplaying its ultimate relevance. The institute system’s debate with its discontents would seem to largely turn around whether it is a propaganda organ. They trivially are, as we have shown. But, less banally than by policing the teaching of cuisine, such organs can act as effective platforms for more targeted influence work. Their role as cover, discussed in the previous section, is arguably primary. It matters little to their usefulness as cover how tightly the institutes are tied to the propaganda apparatus.

Since the institutes can hardly indoctrinate, a focus on that caricature of their activity leads to ignoring their role in influence work. Their embedding in foreign universities can, however, facilitate the cooption of administrators and senior academics. Coexistence with CCP organs allied to university authority brings the party into academia as an effective academic gatekeeper to shape the habits of future China scholars. The institutes can thus help build what we have elsewhere called a “climate of conformism and collaboration” that, we conjectured, might complete the CCP’s *Gleichschaltung* of Sinology within perhaps two generations.<sup>48</sup> Thus embedded — and irrespective of such administrative detail as the transparency of their finances — institutes offer a stage for cooption outside university walls. As seen in Belgium, these localised university affiliations help legitimise voices that then percolate mainstream policy forums. In this broader context, the institutes thus appear to instantiate propaganda agencies’ role as cover for other influence work.

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<sup>48</sup>“Self-censorship and the *Gleichschaltung* of Sinology”, Jichang Lulu blog, 18th Feb. 2020.