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**China's government and companies' strategic communications and grass-roots lobbying strategies in Africa in the digital age: a case study on China's Confucius Institutes**

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## The 11th EUPRERA PhD seminar

### 10-page Paper

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**PhD research subject: China's government and companies' strategic communications and grass-roots lobbying strategies in Africa in the digital age: a case study on China's Confucius Institutes**

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### Introduction

Taking part in the EUPRERA PhD seminar at the early beginning of the second year, my objectives are:

- to make sure that my research is meaningful outside the French academic context in terms of theoretical scope.
- I have experienced difficulties putting together references from political, communication and management, anthropology sciences and in limiting myself. Advices are then welcome so as to my “ambitious” corpus as my adviser says;
- Since studying lobbying and influence processes is so complex and still taboo, I believe I would benefit from methodological discussions and advices on my questionnaires, interview guidelines, relation with the interviewees.

What is exactly strategic communication? What does it mean for different publics and scholars, within different disciplinary backgrounds and national contexts? If we look at a country as a unit of observation, does the strategic communication relate to a country's foreign policy and its soft power actions? It's difficult to define the concept of strategic communication, not only because it is an emergent concept, but also because “influencing people is hard” (Paul, 2012, p. 188) and influence processes are complex, and have to do with what goes on behind the political scenes. However, Chinese government efforts in this area seem to be successful, especially in Africa. Our thesis focuses appropriately on China's strategic communication mediated by the Confucius Institutes in Africa, particularly in Kenya and South Africa. It intends to analyse changing Chinese soft power and influence strategies in the digital and social media age. We rely on the perspective of “strategic communication” and “public diplomacy” combined with a “soft power” approach to highlight our first hypothesis: **how China uses cultural tools as well as media and social media framing effects, especially its African-based media and social media, to build a “good” image in Africa. The meaning of “good” image remains to be defined: an environment where**

**business is easier or else?** We mean to examine the innovative way in which the Chinese “Party-State” spreads a certain vision of Chinese culture(s) and ideology/ideologies on the African continent in order to promote its economic, cultural, even ideological interest. Our second hypothesis focuses on grass-roots lobbying (Barnes & Balnave, 2015; Schneider, 2015; Jalali, 2013; Reddick & Norris, 2013). Does the *Trojan horse* metaphor describe accurately the situation? How is this strategic communication perceived by its actors, publics and stakeholders?

As the essential destination of the “*One Belt, One Road*” (2017), the official name of Chinese renewal international relations’ strategy which was invented and developed by the first administration of Xi Jinping, Kenya has become a cultural and media hub for China. China’s cultural institutions opened their first African *Confucius Institute* over there. Being one of the members of BRICS, South Africa also grew into the business center of China in Africa. By the end of 2016, China had built 5 Confucius Institutes and 5 Confucius Classrooms in the country, and main Chinese language (Mandarin) has also become an optional second language in most South African public schools.

In recent years, the rise of the knowledge economy and educational industry has more and more attracted the attention of each government leader. Although the hard power is still as a core power for a country, but the other power factor is becoming progressively important: the master of knowledge and information – which described as “informational power” by Nye (1990). “Making use of the soft power of education” (Jeng-Yi, 2016, p. 425) developed into key areas of China's foreign policy. In 2004, the Confucius Institute Headquarters (in Chinese: *Hanban*) in Beijing established its first overseas education branch named Confucius Institute (CI) in Seoul in order to promote Chinese education and culture, to train foreign Chinese teachers, to develop Chinese learning tools and resources, to organise Chinese as a foreign language test (HSK), and also to be responsible for Chinese teacher qualification. The Confucius Institute is a Chinese public cultural organisation for promoting Chinese as well as China’s national and local cultures around the world, this institution is mainly composed by Confucius Institute and Confucius Classroom. Like *Institut Français*, *British Council* and *Institut Goethe*, the Confucius Institute promotes Chinese language and cultures for foreign college students and adults, nonetheless the Confucius Classroom is built directly in foreign primary and secondary schools. By the end of 2016, 512 Confucius Institutes and 1073 primary and secondary Confucius Classrooms had been established in 140 countries and regions. With the Chinese mainland supports and funding, Confucius Institutes have rapidly developed and also reinforced Chinese international soft power and cultural influence, so their objectives, communicational activities, organisational model, development strategies and tactics, also outcomes will be firstly studied through my PhD paper.

As an important Chinese governmental communication in foreign countries platform, and a core instrument of Chinese new public diplomacy, do strategic communication efforts represent the mainstream of the Chinese government's international communication? At the meantime, do the Chinese media censorship and the propaganda system reflect the Chinese public diplomacy efforts? These contents are also going to be developed through my thesis.

This introductory paper will focus on the construction of a theoretical framework, based on a large literature review; I intend to clarify the theoretical development of soft power and public diplomacy in different countries (USA, France and China). This review will support an analysis of the connection bounded by the concept of soft power, public diplomacy

and strategic communication. A short note of my first exploratory survey at Tianjin Normal University in China will also be introduced, according to the new findings while the survey, our research questions and problem focused will also be renewed at the end of this paper.

## Method

In terms of methodology, we did a literature review progressing to be achieved. It principally focuses on strategic communication (Arcos, 2016; Argenti, Howell, & Beck, 2005; Eyre & Littleton, 2012; Grunig, 2006; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Huyghe, 2010; Paul, 2011; Preciado-Hoyos, Nivia-Flórez, & Corrales-Rivas, 2017; Thomas & Stephens, 2015), public diplomacy and “new public diplomacy” (Ang, Isar, & Mar, 2015; Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Kiouisis, 2001; L’Etang, 2012; Melissen, 2008; Signitzer & Wamsler, 2010), Chinese soft power and nation brand building across Confucius Institute (Anholt, 2008; Chan, 2013; DeLisle, 2010; Edney, 2012; Gudjonsson, 2005; Hubbert, 2014; Huyghe, 2011; Keohane, Jr, & Keohane, 1998; Martel, 2013; Noya, 2006; Nye, 1991, 2006; Papadopoulos, 2004; Schmidt, 2013; Sun, 2009; Sun, Gao, Yue, & Sinclair, 2011; H. Wang, 1993; Zanardi, 2016). Our aim is to combine British, American, French and Chinese points of views in order to perfect our vision of strategic communication with an approach of soft power applied in New Public Diplomacy. As Fitzpatrick claims, all practice of public diplomacy has primarily strategic dimensions (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 199). In order to analyse the concept of strategy, some of competitive intelligence theories will also be studied so that the conception of strategic communication could be exhaustively outlined.

Furthermore, according to the theoretical framework, the ongoing field study will evaluate our research questions and hypothesis with empirical observation in China and Africa. As confirmed by Jan Melissen, in foreign relations: “international actors believe more and more that they are necessitated to engage in dialogue with foreign audiences as a condition of success in foreign policy” (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 187; Melissen, 2008, p. 14). In this situation, the model of Tchakhotine (1939) of “Receiver passive” is not in case anymore, the “two-way” models of public relations advanced by Grunig and Hunt (1984) will help us to study how Chinese government mobilizes its cultural institutions and their staff to influence foreign audiences and exercise “international advocacy.” In China, firstly, we have already questioned some trainers of *Hanban* at Tianjin Normal University in this Summer time, we have obtained some interesting findings during this exploratory survey. These discoveries make us rethink the research’s questions, China’s soft power through its cultural diplomacy is nowadays richer and more complex than we expected. In our first survey in Tianjin, Wang, the senior trainer of Confucius Institute, confirmed principal missions of CI’s teachers: “*First of all, our mission is to spread the Chinese culture and to teach Chinese through the Confucius Institutes. Secondly, many teachers are “volunteers”, they are unified training through the assignment to other countries, they are the bridge of Chinese culture communication; again, teachers establish the friendship with their foreign students to enhance mutual understanding*” (exploratory interview with Wang, 18/07/2017). Yuan, CI’s teacher based in Nairobi, listed to us how they build a personal relationship with their students: “*We hold regularly some activities, such as making dumplings, transcultural parties, visiting some exhibitions, these activities can not only deepen students' understanding of Chinese culture, but also we can establish and develop friendship with the students*” (exploratory

interview with Yuan, 18/07/2017). According to these new data, we have mean to integrate in our research the less-reknown Chinese practice of “personal diplomacy”.

At the next step, we plan to make more semi-directive interviews with some Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers, CFL trainers, pedagogical specialists on CFL, organizers of international cultural activities, PR practitioners, “ChinAfrican” communication officers in *Hanban* (Confucius Institute Headquarters) and its collaborators. We consider them as Chinese governmental communication actors and China’s “civil” diplomates who influence their audiences with strategic processes: create interpersonal relations, diffuse information in a “soft-way”, receive and analyze audiences’ feedback and modify their communication processes. This first empirical study will help us to clarify the organizational resources of Confucius Institute, its place in Chinese new public diplomacy strategy, and also the strategic/tactic tools used in its external communication process. Next step, in Africa, we schedule to visit local Confucius Institute in Kenya and South Africa. Interviews with CFL teachers (Chinese & foreigner teachers), CI’s local leaders and CI’s students will be fulfilled. We also intend to question culture/communication officers in Chinese Embassies, PR practitioners and journalists in local-based Chinese media and other local journalists. A semio-discursive analysis was planned to analyze the development of Confucius Institutes in Africa (programs, publications, advertisements, etc.) in the traditional media and on social media, especially in the mobile application “Confucius Institute”. This empirical information will help us understand the Chinese strategic communication and its new public diplomacy plan in Africa.

## **Theoretical framework**

- **Strategic communication**

It is challenging to find a consensual definition on strategic communication (Paul, 2011, p. 3). It is an emergent and hybrid concept, because of the variety of strategic communication activities and its multi-level dimension: companies, NGOs, think tanks, universities and public institutions. On the one hand, at the government level, strategic communication was broadly defined as “*programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences*” (The White House, 2010) within the two fields of public affairs and diplomacy:

*1) Coordinating words and deeds, including the active consideration of how one country’s actions and policies will be interpreted by public audiences as an organic part of decision-making, is an important task. 2) Has a wide range of programs and activities deliberately focused on understanding, engaging, informing, influencing, and communicating with people through public affairs and public diplomacy.* (The White House, 2010, p. 2)

The concept of strategic communication has also been mentioned in the trade literature as a way to describe organisation’s *global public relations*’ actions, so to say “the planned and organised effort of a company, institution, or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the publics of other nations” (Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2014, p. 545). Grunig (2006) interprets strategic communication from a public relation’s viewpoint as a “*bridging activity*” (p. 171) between organizations that should be institutionalized (Thomas & Stephens, 2015, p. 4). In practice, it encompasses “coordinated actions, messages, images,

and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade target audiences in support of national objectives” (Paul, 2011, p. 3). Farwell, according to him, the strategic communication is as an influential practice which is based on “the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to change the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives”(Arcos, 2016, p. 265; Farwell, 2012, pp. xviii–xix).

On the other hand, strategic communication was broadly defined as communication activities that allows organizations to reach their objectives (Hallahan et al., 2007, pp. 3–4; Preciado-Hoyos et al., 2017, p. 3). Strategic communication was then described as “aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning” (Argenti et al., 2005). In the French academic field, strategic communication (*communication stratégique*) is known to be a fresh concept related to “public diplomacy” (Huyghe, 2011; Pahlavi, 2015, pp. 553–606) and is seen as the toolbox for diplomacy (Reynaud & Walas, 2015). French war studies’ academic researcher, François-Bernard Huyghe built a theoretical framework that relates competitive intelligence to strategic communication (Huyghe, 2006). He pointed out five aspects of strategic communication: a fortress strategy to prevent information breaches to keep high-value information secure; a strategy based on propaganda and believes as key factors of mobilization; a strategy based on image framing through the worldwide promotion of a given cultural model more basically said of a given way of life. His framework also strengthens the importance of “channels” both new and old: propaganda flyers and real-TV shows shouldn’t be underestimated in the digital age. Then it focuses on attention rather than on access or profusion of messages. A wise use of wording can help any community manager improve the page-rank of his blog-posts and being on top of page-rank means better chances to drive the public attention. An activist who enjoys the support of a community may manage to drive its attention. A Mister nobody who spends a lot of time on forums (BBS) may also manage to catch the public attention (Huyghe, 2010, pp. 103–108).

- **Soft Power and Public Diplomacy**

The search for power is, according to many observers, a structuring determinant of international life (Wintgens, 2015, p. 19), because “*power is seen as the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do*” (Nye, 1991, pp. 25–26). Inspired by the Hobbesian concept of the lawless state of nature where human being competes each every (Brailard, 1977; Grieco, 1988; Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004, pp. 29–51; Walt, 1998, pp. 29–35), the realists maintain that nations are the main actors on the international stage. The world is understood as anarchic, which means that international relations are the result of violent power relations (hard power) which involve the implementation of military, human and material resources (Gallarotti, 2015, p. 248; Nye, 1990), but also financial and economic sanctions.

Because of economic integration and the trend of internationalisation, more and more common interests had appeared for international *stakeholders*, so that the cooperation has become an alternative paradigm of realism (Brailard & Djalili, 2016, p. 16). The neoliberalism and constructivism recognise international politics as “socially constructed”, the nucleus of constructivism indicates that: “1) *The structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces*, 2) *The identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by*

*nature*”(Wendt, 1999, p. 1). In fact, the neoliberal institutionalist theory has firstly developed by Keohane and Nye (Keohane & Nye, 1977), they discovered the increasing international connections, particularly in economy and culture, while the decline of power balancing and military force. Based on this finding, they have highlighted the importance of “soft power” which could help a state to “*get the outcomes you want without tangible threats or payoffs*” (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

As the confirmation of Eyre and Littleton (2012, p. 180), “the term ‘whole-of-government approach’ with its emphasis on integrating “hard” and “soft” power, is no longer a neologism.” The development of “soft power” ends the “*Carrot and Stick policy*” era on foreign policy, and is now generally acknowledged as a key resource of power. Seen as the “*second face*” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, pp. 947–952) of power, the soft power emphasizes the importance of social connection and is defined as a state’s national ability which uses and mobilises different immaterial resources, such as culture and art, for captivating, communicating and persuading target audiences in the reaching established goals. Keohane and Nye explain the stated objectives of soft power are “*get desired outcomes because others want what you want, on the other hand, to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion*” (Keohane & Nye, 2012, p. 216).

In French academic field, the concept of soft power joins in the “influential diplomacy” (*diplomatie d’influence*) (Martel, 2013; Tenzer, 2013) which represents one country’s “referential” (Muller, 2014) in its participation of international communication. Culture and knowledge encapsulate values, ideologies and beliefs and represent important resources of “soft power” (Desmoulins & Huang, 2017; Gupta, 2013; Martel, 2013; DeLisle, 2010; Courmont, 2009; Bläser, 2005; Keohane et al., 1998; Nye, 2006, 2004, 1991). In agreement with Huyghe’s viewpoint, emphasizing on soft power could solve “4I problem” – image, influence, ideology, interest (Huyghe, 2011, p. 85). By enhancing a country's worldwide image and by spreading its ideology, soft power activities work in favour of a country’s national interest as well as for the interests of its elites and flagship top national companies.

The concept of “soft power” has been enthusiastically integrated and largely studied in China. As the ability to “*influence others though agenda setting, attraction or co-option*” (Nye, 2004, p. 8), soft power was first introduced in 1993 in China by Wang Huning, a senior Chinese Communist Party official (H. Wang, 1993). Soft power has become the core power of Chinese “Peace and development” foreign policy. Chinese political and diplomatic scholars also found the similarity between Nye’s soft power and Chinese intellectual value, in *Dao De Jing*, Chinese Taoist founder, Lao Zi has explained that “*in this world below the sky, the gentle will outdo the strong. And the non-material is able to enter the impregnable. Thus I know and know for sure the gains that under-acting yields. But teaching by the word unspoken in this world few can master; The gains that under-acting yields in this world few realize* (Stanza 43)”(Roberts & Laozi, 2001, p. 118) . Chinese character “*rou*” (soft) was translated as “gentle” which refers to water, in Laozi’s viewpoint, the strongest power is to be “gentle”, just like attractive power which could gradually convince people without conflict and hurt.

However, Chinese perspectives on soft power still have some different arguments. Zheng and Zhang have discussed on Nye’s conceptual framework between soft and hard power was “too simple”, and they argued that a part of Nye’s discussions on soft power is somewhat “not scientific enough” (often used Chinese rhetoric) (Lahtinen, 2015, p. 6) which

divorced from the reality of international politics and, they claim Nye's examples of soft power, like American TV shows, "pop" culture, film industry and international entertainment development "do not have important implications for international politics" as long as "sovereign states are still the major players in international relations, and national interests are still the most important factor they consider when formulating foreign policy" (Zheng & Zhang, 2012, pp. 25–26), as a result, they have concluded that "whether a power resource is soft or hard depends on the feelings and perceptions of various actors in specific situations" (Zheng & Zhang, 2012, p. 21), so that the main actors of soft power could be a country, a government, a political party, an interest group, a social class, etc.

In the eyes of many Chinese scholars, the Western misunderstanding of China and the popular "Chinese threat" debate come from the lack of understanding of the Chinese core cultural value (Lai, 2012, p. 85). That is why Chinese researchers take the "culture" as the essence of soft power. Like CPC senior official Wang Huning argued: "if a country has an admirable culture and ideological system, other states will tend to follow it.(...) it does not have to use its hard power which is expensive and less efficient" (Lahtinen, 2015, p. 7; H. Wang, 1993). In fact, the scope of Chinese use of soft power idea is wider than other countries. The "soft power with Chinese characters" (H. Wang, 1993) includes diplomatic exercises and domestic political activities. Different from many countries which use their Pop-culture (like United States), film industry (like the USA, South Korea, India), tourism resources (like France, Spain) and political model as the most important part of soft power, the scope of China's soft power is focused on its traditional culture, long history, economic development model, multi-industrial cooperation, and the construction of "international circle of friends" (*Guoji Pengyouquan*: Chinese language rhetoric from Xi Jinping's discourses, that means an international network of relationship).

In practice, increasing soft power is often inseparable from the development of one country's public diplomacy. As an evolving concept, public diplomacy is not as clear and widely recognized as soft power on definition. One of large quoted definitions is proposed by Tuch: "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies"(Tuch, 1990, p. 3). It's also widely defined as a main tool to win over the 'hearts and minds' of foreign audiences, and to persuade them that they all have and approve the same values, goals and desires (van Ham, 2008, p. 48). In a communication perspective, public diplomacy is "the art of communicating with foreign publics to influence international perceptions, attitudes and policies"(Waller, 2007, p. 19). Yet, French theoreticians point out "two revolutionary impulses" of public diplomacy which are the decisive role of public opinion and the use of new communication technologies (Balzacq & Ramel, 2013; Pahlavi, 2015, pp. 553–565).

Indeed, after 9-11, a rising of researchers began to think the tie between public diplomacy, political theories, international relations theories and public relations theories with communication models and practices (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Kathy Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005). Jan Melissen's remarks, firstly, that the public diplomacy is no longer seen as "left-overs of diplomatic dialogue", and secondly, the public diplomacy will no more be considered as "an attempt at manipulation of foreign publics"(Melissen, 2008, p. 11).

Based on the public relations approach, Melissen indicates the concept of “New” public diplomacy which is not simply for promoting a country’s policies to foreign audiences, it’s also an operation relies on “*building relationships with civil society actors in other countries and about facilitating networks between non-governmental parties at home and aboard.(...)In order to safeguard their interests in a globalized world, countries need ‘permanent friends’ in other nations*”(Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 188; Melissen, 2008, pp. 22–23).

Even though public diplomacy is not a current term presented in China, but the Chinese version of “cultural diplomacy”, which is an essential instrument of China’s foreign policy and soft power, that has already shown the shadow of “new public diplomacy” emphasised by Melissen. Chinese scholars have also outlined the blueprint of China’s “culture diplomacy”: “*promoting traditional culture and value and acting as a responsible great power on the world stage; advocating a harmonious world and peaceful rise; demonstrating the virtues of the Chinese path of economic development; expanding its foreign assistance; and developing own discourse in world affairs*”(Y. Wang, 2006, pp. 134–140) ; In addition, the increasing of Chinese “personal diplomacy” at the elite level is another component of its new public diplomacy, which relies on people-to-people exchanges, scholarships, bilateral and multilateral cultural programs and increasing contacts, leads to build the “*high level of trust*” (Yu, 2009, pp. 10–11, 18) and mutual understanding, especially in the developing and less developed countries.

To sum up, it seems that, as an important instrument of one country’s soft power, public diplomacy has already become an international relation practice based on dialogue and respect for mutual values and designed to promote and develop trans-cultural understanding (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Kathy Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). Public diplomacy has also engaged in establishing connections between different cultures, developing interactions and dialogue, and participating in a process of mutual sharing of meanings between each culture (Grunig, 1992; Kent & Taylor, 2002). The strategic actions, behind all of one state’s public diplomacy motivations, have been also highlighted (Habermas, 1987). In the observation of Signitzer and Wamsler, public relations and public diplomacy are both “*strategic communication functions and process of either organisations or nations-states*”(Signitzer & Wamsler, 2010, pp. 41–43).

To conclude, strategic communication could help pushing a particular point or more generally it may take part in the promotion of a country’s culture and national interest in the long term. Strategic communication also encompasses the tightening of durable personal relationships with important people through both elite-level and grass-roots-level exchanges (Edney, 2012, p. 902; Nye, 2004, pp. 108–110).

- **Strategic Dimensions**

The practice of new public diplomacy as a process of strategic communication. In fact, all practice of public diplomacy, whatever traditional, contemporary or so-called “new” public diplomacy, includes at least three dimensions: connecting with information or knowledge, practicing communication and bringing influence, and political participation. The concept of “strategy” has been defined by lots of research fields, but its common sense focuses on the conscious action “in development of building the future decisions” (Arcos, 2016, p. 1; Mintzberg, 1978, p. 935). This could lead to a series of guidelines or to standardize operating procedures (SOP), as “patterns in a stream of decisions” (Mintzberg, 1978, p. 935; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Théorêt, 1976, pp. 246–275). In the “strategy-as-

practice” approach, scholars point out the relations between “discourses” and practices. Discourses are indeed performative (Austin, 1962, p. 4) in international relations. Strategic intelligence deals with “actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (Thomas & Stephens, 2015, p. 4; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007, p. 8). If we define strategic communication through “soft power” lenses, strategic communication becomes a “soft” kind of political communication, that relies on methods such as storytelling, psyops, spin doctors, nation branding, or perception management (Huyghe, 2011). However, before the “work-out” of strategic communication for a state’s public diplomacy action, the research, collection and analysis of information should be firstly considered in the decision-making process.

The PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) defines PR as “*a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics*” (Wilcox et al., 2014, p. 33). Its cyclical process often described as *RACE* (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) (Marston, 1963) or *ROPE* (Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation) (Hayes, Hendrix, & Kumar, 2013). The “research” and “analyse” are taking a key place for the strategic communication achievement. Because the “*research provides useful intelligence*” like a “*central source of information on the organization, the public’s image, the industry or field, and the social, economic, and political trends*” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2005, p. 113).

In the competitive intelligence frame of reference, “*precise knowledge of self and precise knowledge of the threat leads to victory*” (Charles & Sunzi, 2013), getting intelligence and collecting all useful information contribute to diagnose the main problem and the potential risk. If we put the management concept of “absorptive capacity” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) in the international relations situation, it should represent an organisation’s ability to recognize different values, assimilate and exploit new information (or knowledge) for its political, social, and cultural purposes. Indeed, the strategic communication activity related to public diplomacy depends on three different elements of soft power: strategic resources, strategic capacity, and strategic programming (Huang & Wang, 2017).

First, strategic resources refer to tangible and intangible heritages and resources. An internal audit and external information monitoring facilitate a global understanding of all resources and the management of knowledge which could be mobilised in future diplomatic campaign. Second, strategic capacity links knowledge and communication channels. Desmoulin and Huang (2017) identify the soft power as a relational form of power and mention that “*no matter how poorly gifted a country is as regards to energy resources, it can be powerful if it is well integrated in international organizations and transnational academics of think tank networks*”, the soft power still benefits from a “framing power of media” (Bläser, 2005, p. 289). Furthermore, the strategic programming corresponds to a tool box of communication actions for the diplomatic operation. These three elements also conform to the operational process of competitive intelligence analysis: objective defining, information monitoring, data analysis, strategic reactions and information diffusion (Desmoulin & Cansell, 2017).

### **Research questions:**

In this paper, we aim to analyse Chinese strategic communication dealing with the creation and development of Confucius Institutes focusing on Confucius Institute activities.

According to our theoretical framework, the field work has begun in the summer of 2017 and will be continued until the end of 2018. We have selected Kenya and South Africa as the focus of the study area. In the summer of 2017, we visited at Tianjin Normal University which established the Confucius Institute in Nairobi, Kenya, as the first African branch of Confucius Institute. During our exploratory survey with the head of International Exchange Institute and some trainers of Confucius institute, we have remarked that China's Confucius Institutes do not only use education and culture as their communication and international influence tools for reaching their cultural diplomacy, but also they do mobilize their own national media, African local media and social media as an essential platform for diplomatic operations. The people-to-people diplomacy has already developed from elite level to the grass-roots level. With these new findings, we have divided our following research questions and field work into five parts:

**RQ1. The background of so-called Chinese cultural diplomacy.** In this part, what is the background of Chinese renewed strategic communication? What is China's strategic communication seeks at the cultural diplomacy level, even at the new public diplomacy level? As Chinese soft power focuses not only on diplomatic exercises, but also on its domestic policy, will China's domestic media control policy be reflected in its cultural diplomacy? What are the history and the current situation as regards to Chinese propaganda? What are the doctrinal texts that shape China's soft power strategy?

**RQ2. What is China's "media" strategy whereas frontier in between the public and the private cannot be drawn?** What are Chinese media in Africa and media and IT companies? What are the "pipelines" for China's diplomacy and strategic communication (Confucius Institutes, local universities, local media, etc.)? How these "pipelines" work together for Chinese diplomatic purpose?

**RQ3. What are the organizational resources and the strategic communication related activities (networking, etc.) of the Confucius Institutes?** In practice, how does China's government labels and promotes Confucius Institutes? How Chinese government (through Confucius Institute and its institutional partners) mobilizes its communicational tools to promote a given, a desirable vision of Chinese culture in Africa? How does the Chinese government train its Confucius Institutes' teachers to take part in China's strategic communication? What's the role of Chinese teachers in Confucius Institute?

**RQ4. Provocatively, we want to end up with a question on Confucius. Why Confucius after all?** What is left of the Confucian thinking in the Confucius Institute activities? How and why does China promote a given vision of "Confucius" as a philosopher, thinker on everything from art de vivre to lobbying, yet a precise culture, a prophet or a label?

**RQ5. Chinese people-to-people diplomacy and Chinese concept of "Guanxi"** (in English: Relationship). What is the definition of Chinese practice of "personal diplomacy" in the scheme of its public diplomacy? In Chinese perspective, what is the meaning of "Guanxi"? What was the key role played by "Guanxi" in China's society? How Confucius Institutes exercise people-to-people diplomacy in their educational and communicational agenda? What is the relation enclosed by the concept of "Guanxi" and "two-way" model of communication? What is the connection bounded by "Guanxi", "public diplomacy" and "public relations", "win-win" business partnership? In people-to-people diplomacy that

Chinese governmental institution carries out, what are the contacts and distinctions between relation-building strategies and informational/grass-roots lobbying strategies?

The thesis will examine the current logic of China's strategic communication through the narrow prism of China's Confucius Institutes. It is based on the concepts of soft power and grass roots lobbying. The main research question is: Is there anything special aspect in China's strategic communication? What are the many different activities that take place at Confucius Institutes or thanks to Confucius Institutes? How do these activities take part in China's strategic communication? How are they promoted by **African-based media and social media, to build a "good" image of China in Africa?**

In short, this study is about China's cultural presence in Africa, we want to use strategic communication as an analytical framework to tackle Chinese soft power and grass-roots lobbying strategies. Our study encompasses the communication actions of China's national educational institute – Confucius Institutes in Africa by focusing on two main countries: Kenya and South Africa.

During the EUPRERA PhD seminar, we are waiting for your remarks and feedback on our theoretical framework concerning the mix of strategic communication, soft power and (new) public diplomacy. According to you, which part has to be improved? What kinds of other concepts have to be considered? Furthermore, we hope that you can give us some advice on the field work strategy. In fact, we are planning to achieve our field work in Africa between February and April 2018. We are wondering how can we get more useful information during our empirical research? And what kind of survey methods could be more practical and effective in public relations research? We really would like to exchange all of these questions with you.

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