



Jennifer Hubbert. *China in the World: An Anthropology of Confucius Institutes, Soft Power, and Globalization.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. viii + 234 pp. \$68.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-7820-7.

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In the United States, Confucius Institutes (CIs) may be one of those rare controversies uniting otherwise opposed politics. For instance, Marshall Sahlins, organizer of anti-Vietnam War “teach-ins” during the 1960s, led a campaign against the establishment of a CI at the University of Chicago in 2014 and even wrote a book in 2015 titled *Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware*. This convergence of right-wing anti-Communist narratives and left liberal critiques of authoritarianism and censorship in the context of US higher education cooperation with the Chinese state has only deepened since.

Jennifer Hubbert’s *China in the World* is therefore a timely ethnographic look at what actually happens in US-hosted CIs. The book joins a series of works published in recent years bringing an ethnographic perspective to the “rise of China,” including *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* by Miriam Driessen (2019), *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* by Ching Kwan Lee (2017), *Reporting for China: How Chinese Correspondents Work with the World* by Pál Nyíri (2017), *Mapping the New African Diaspora in China: Race and the Cultural Politics of Belonging* by Shanshan Lan (2017), and *The World in Guangzhou: Africans and Other For- eigners in South China’s Global Marketplace* by

Gordon Matthews with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang (2017), to name only a few. The subject of Hubbert’s study is not universities, however, which have attracted the most controversy, but “Confucius classrooms,” which provide language training for K-12. Hubbert has interviewed teachers, students, parents, and administrators, and has observed about what happens in the classrooms. As she explains, the programs, funded and staffed with teachers by Hanban (China’s national organization for promoting overseas Chinese-language learning), are attractive to schools because they subsidize foreign-language programs and “worldwide experiences” that these schools, especially in more marginalized communities, would otherwise be unable to provide (p. 49). For parents and students, the decision to learn Chinese is primarily about increasing one’s own college and career opportunities in the US.

Hubbert’s primary objective appears to be complicating narratives that assume CIs are functioning as effective instruments for extending the Chinese state power. While Hanban’s explicit goal may be to promote Chinese “soft power,” the actual effects can be quite different. Readers looking for simple examples of CIs either censoring speech or being politically inconsequential language programs will misread the larger argu-

ment. What Hubbert presents is actually a tableau of ironies, wherein the goals, expectations, and practices often produce the opposite outcomes. For example, simply in terms of being a language program, while CI teachers sell Chinese-language learning to students and parents as an opportunity for increasing college admissions prospects, the challenge of retaining students who want to drop out because of the difficulty of the language means that teachers are encouraged by Hanban to go easy on them in matters of grading and discipline. The result is that students end up less prepared to do well on the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK).

The broader ironies relate to the political goals of “soft power.” Hubbert argues that “soft power engagements such as CIs reflect not only how nations assess both their assets and their locations in global hierarchies of power but also the complex ways that meaning is actualized by diverse constituencies and representations rather than by policy alone” (p. 76). The second half of the argument that the social effects and cultural interpretations of policies can be very different from what policymakers imagine should be familiar to anthropologists of policymaking, but the book assumes an audience that privileges the determinative power of state intentions, which may explain why the author considers it prudent to frequently restate the main argument.

The larger contribution of the book, however, is an ethnographically informed reflection on how Americans (and to a lesser extent the Chinese) conceptualize global hierarchies. As the book progresses, the discussion is ultimately less about the workings of CIs themselves and more an invitation to American readers to reflect on how they think about China. Hubbert argues that “the ways in which CIs are experienced reflect as much upon historical American ideological preconceptions and discomfort with the changing global order as they do upon the language programs themselves” (p. 189).

Her first target is the assumed correlation and equivalence between “China’s rise” and “US decline.” This feeds the perception that CIs represent a bid for cultural hegemony analogous to what cultural hegemony has meant for US political-economic power. Hubbert instead recasts the programs as “an attempt to stake claims to value in a world dominated discursively by Western ideologies and practices” (p. 44). For example, the “China” presented in the CIs’ official educational materials is often a simplified tableau of “traditional” artistic practices: martial arts, calligraphy, painted masks, and costumes. Hubbert does not find any attempt to either promote or defend the Chinese political system (much less its interpretation of “socialism”). Even the use of the name “Confucius” is based on “branding” principles of global name recognition rather than any philosophical program (p. 35).

Hanban and its teachers do attempt to rectify global hierarchies by making China and the Chinese-language objects of “desire” among American students, but these efforts either fall short or sometimes produce the opposite effects (p. 63). For example, students tell Hubbert that learning Chinese is “cool.” She discovers, however, that this is not necessarily because they consider China to be “cool,” but “in terms of the construction of a self ... being ‘different’ often signaled their own originality and value, rather than China’s, and referenced long-term orientalist ideologies about Asian exoticism” (p. 51).

This is most poignantly demonstrated in a chapter on the China Bridge program, a Hanban-organized field trip for American high school students to China. Hubbert, who joined one of these trips as a chaperone, describes the itinerary, which privileges visits to shopping centers and factories as “witnessing the modern” (p. 77). The visits are intended to demonstrate China’s economic development and narrowing material commensurability with the United States, but they fail to impress the students who turn out to be most

excited by an off-schedule unplanned trip (led by the author herself) to a night market. When later asked to produce a written reflection on what they enjoyed most about the trip, the students excitedly recall going to the night market and trying unfamiliar foods rather than the elaborately planned Hanban activities, much to the disappointment of their Chinese hosts. Hubbert attributes these reactions to students' identifying "their own subject positions as grounded in and attributed to a universal global" but identifying China "as the parochial local that rendered their own resolute globality possible" (p. 82). From this subject position, manifestations of Chinese modernity can only appear as imperfect copies, and the students instead look through them in search of self-affirming alterity. One of the strengths of the book is how Hubbert uses such situations to question American ways of seeing, but the connections sometimes leap too quickly. For example, another explanation for the students' adoration of the night market, as Hubbert herself allows, is the degree to which the casual excursion departed from the overly structured itinerary of the trip, which allowed students little free time to explore on their own.

Hubbert also interprets the students' positive response to Chinese strangers wanting to take photographs with them as "seeing the desired object [as] the Western/foreign self, reinforcing the very global hierarchies of power that these soft power engagements seek to modify" (p. 53). The discussion at this point might have benefited from a closer engagement with the problem of race in global China, specifically the privileging of "whiteness" and English as markers of cosmopolitan modernity as discussed by Jan Schutte in his 2018 doctoral dissertation, "Third World Cosmopolitanism in White Spacetime."^[1] How do diverse American students get "raced" in a Chinese context? Hubbert describes how local Chinese media coverage features the white students rather than the Chinese American students, but it is unclear to what extent it is "whiteness," "foreignness," or

both that is being highlighted. The discussion is relevant also because soft power initiatives also target audiences from the global South who "witness the modern" in China from very different subject positions. And they too may be asked by Chinese strangers to appear in photographs. In other words, recognizing global hierarchies can be overdetermined by one's own assumptions about those global hierarchies.

In the last couple of chapters, Hubbert addresses the main criticism of CIs: concerns about censorship and state propaganda. Hubbert does not entirely dismiss these concerns but reframes the discussion by introducing much-needed reflexivity on how "free speech" is being conceptualized. She describes having begun her research looking for examples of censorship, and she does find that teachers avoid controversial topics. Hanban instructs teachers to avoid political discussions, and the class materials are conspicuously depoliticized, presenting China primarily in "cultural" terms. Being a language class, expectations otherwise have always been overdetermined. As Hubbert points out, however, the unintended irony is that students recognize these efforts to depoliticize as itself a manifestation of political repression. The absence of "politics" in the classroom, moreover, depends on how one defines the boundaries of the "political." Hubbert rightly notes the subtle politics of such ordinary classroom decorations as maps of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which include Taiwan as a province, notwithstanding how ordinary and unmarked they may be for PRC citizens.

When teachers do speak about politics, however, they find that their American counterparts only consider such speech "free" if it expresses criticism of the Chinese state. This places Chinese teachers in a bind, as Hubbert critically points out: "By assuming teachers could be 'free-thinking' individuals only if they agreed with Western perceptions of a repressive Chinese state, the audience for their speech denied the teachers the

subjectivity of the modern self either when they agreed with the state, for then their speech was viewed as merely propaganda, or when they criticized the state, in which case they were perceived to be speaking as renegades rather than ‘appropriate’ or ‘normal’ Chinese citizens” (p. 143). The added irony is that criticism of the Chinese state from teachers actually strengthened its “soft power” for American listeners by holding out the promise of China becoming more like the US (p. 120). In other words, “the less ‘state-like’ the teachers seemed, the more their everyday practices actually worked in the service of the state and implied both China and the state as increasingly affable entities” (p. 124).

Hubbert’s insight suggests two things. On the one hand, it demonstrates how individual Chinese abroad are sometimes more effective at improving the image of China abroad than top-down initiatives. In Hubbert’s book, the individual Chinese teachers themselves play the main role in shaping impressions of China among the students and parents they encounter. On the other hand, although this may be beyond what Hubbert is focusing on in the book, it may usefully reveal one of the limitations of the American liberal imagination, seeing state power and authoritarianism only if it is explicitly repressive.

The main contribution of *China in the World* may be to challenge critics of CIs to be more reflective about their conceptual assumptions. In a moment when discussions about global China are becoming dangerously polarized in the context of crises in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and US-China geopolitical competition, and when scholars debate the ethics of taking stands, the kind of patient ethnographic analysis Hubbert provides is even more important than usual. I suspect for some readers, however, that a limitation of the book is that it is less a study of CIs themselves than a situated ethnography of how Americans respond to them. US-centrism is a limit of the book more broadly, but this is only a limitation if read-

ers take the book to stand in for CIs as a whole. It is unfortunate that despite Hubbert’s critique of US claims to “globality,” the locality of the ethnography does not appear in the book’s title. As Hubbert herself writes regarding the motivations for studying Chinese, “Why CI students study Chinese thus may provide less insight into China itself and/or the CCP’s [Chinese Communist Party] foreign policy goals than how situated policy targets and strategists tactically deploy the language to negotiate positions of authority in their local networks of belonging” (p. 72). If this is true in the United States, the same is true anywhere, including in countries whose relationship with China is different in terms of history and inequalities in power and hierarchy than the United States. An ethnography of CIs in these countries, therefore, may need to start from a different vantage point, but *China in the World* will be a valuable point of departure and comparison.

Note

[1]. Jan Schutte, “Third World Cosmopolitanism in White Spacetime” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2018).

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