Designing cultural diplomacy policy: structuring a flagship mechanism

Biyun Zhu & Margaret J. Wyszomirski

To cite this article: Biyun Zhu & Margaret J. Wyszomirski (2023) Designing cultural diplomacy policy: structuring a flagship mechanism, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 29:5, 558-575, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2022.2092102

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2022.2092102

Published online: 10 Aug 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 304

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
Designing cultural diplomacy policy: structuring a flagship mechanism

Biyun Zhu and Margaret J. Wyszomirski

Institute for Cultural Practices, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; Department of Arts Administration Education and Policy, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA

ABSTRACT

Cultural diplomacy (CD) research has focused on various elements of practice, such as the contexts, rationales, players, and methods. However, research explaining the interrelationships among such elements of CD is less common. This scarcity can inhibit an effective and accurate evaluation of CD programs. This article, by acknowledging the significance of this gap and being informed by policy design theory and foreign policy analysis (FPA), constructs a framework to articulate a policy design approach by focusing on comparative cases of flagship mechanisms of CD. It specifically considers flagships characterized by having a persistent presence, formal authorization, and global scope, which represents a structural approach to CD design that is aiming for a holistic view that addresses multiple purposes and is capable of adapting to particular international environments. To explain how this structural mechanism works, this article focuses on the practices of the United States, the United Kingdom, and China as they provide rich empirical data and concrete international and domestic contexts that can be used to interpret and apply the policy design and FPA concepts presented in the analytical framework. The conclusions point to the value of the interdisciplinary analytical concepts blended and potential transferability of the flagship mechanism.

Introduction

A growing body of literature has discussed cultural diplomacy (CD) from various perspectives: contexts (Winter 2021), rationales (Nisbett 2013), players (Grincheva 2013), and methods (Schneider 2003). This has broadened the understanding and application of CD. What has received little attention is the underlying relationship among these perspectives: whose interests are served in what contexts and through what methods? An inadequate understanding of the connections may isolate different aspects in the decision-making and implementation processes, resulting in conflictual goals and unintended outcomes. For governments, the fragmented understanding of the various components of CD presents a particular challenge concerning operationalizing their CD programs. This article addresses this challenge and constructs a framework of CD policy based on policy design theory, foreign policy analysis (FPA), and great power practices. The framework focuses on a flagship mechanism that offers a holistic view of how changing international and national contexts shape the purposes, governance, and tool selection in CD.

CONTACT Biyun Zhu biyun.zhu@manchester.ac.uk Institute for Cultural Practices, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

© 2022 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
In this article, we integrate FPA with four elements identified from the policy design literature: contexts, multiple purposes, multilevel governance, and tool selection. For each of these elements, we present a pair of propositions about challenges and strategic thinking in CD design. These eight propositions build on each other, constructing an analytical framework that is used to examine how the flagship mechanism operationalizes CD and cultivates culture-based soft power. In each individual section, we use empirical evidence from CD flagships of three great powers: the British Council (the UK),\(^{2}\) the Fulbright Program (the US),\(^{3}\) and the Confucius Institute (China).\(^{4}\) These countries are selected because they created and used their CD flagships in dissimilar historical and international contexts. The political and sociocultural differences between these three countries also span the boundaries of civilizations and language groups to provide variance to generalize a structural mechanism for CD design. Finally, we conclude that the flagship mechanism constitutes an ongoing platform that learns from practice and strengthens the stability and flexibility of CD programs through policy design.

**Literature review**

*Culture in FPA, cultural diplomacy, and soft power*

Culture has regained attention in FPA since 9/11 because of its relevance to foreign policies, international relations, and soft power. Its influence is summarized into three levels by Hudson and Day (2019, 122–124): culture as templates of human strategy, value preference, and organization of meaning. This means that culture influences what to value, prefer, and desire as well as how one system of shared meaning communicates with another.\(^5\) CD can be implicated in all these three levels, as can be seen from the following frequently cited definition of CD: ‘the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding’ (Cummings 2003, 1). Arndt (2005) describes CD as a similar process and acknowledges governments’ presence in this flow to advance national interests. In a similar vein, FPA highlights cultural differences and their effects on international negotiations and relationships (Cohen 1997). In the framework of soft power (Nye 2004), culture and CD are also seen as instruments to develop a nation-state’s capacity to achieve national goals through persuasion instead of coercion (Zamorano 2016). While this instrumental view partially explains increasing interest and debates in CD, it implies a state-centric perspective and discourages a holistic view that positions CD in a multilevel system.

**Wicked problem**

CD is governments’ attempt to shape cross-national cultural activities that grow organically. Because CD has individual and organizational participants at different levels, it intersects with the realms of domestic and foreign policies and operates in both national and global contexts, as indicated in Figure 1. As the operationalization of CD requires the negotiation and collaboration of various actors at multiple levels on a global scale, it fits into the definition of wicked problems, which are issues that are complex and uncertain and that have divergent values and viewpoints embedded in them (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head 2008; Hocking 1993). It is a challenge for the epistemic community of CD, as a wicked problem itself, to establish a consensual definition, and CD practitioners (and flagship operators) are challenged by variable definitions of what they are doing, how, and why. Such wickedness is further compounded by the ever-changing international context. This article is targeted at the wickedness of operationalizing CD and introduces policy design as a theoretical tool to provide a more holistic view and to facilitate the dialogue among various CD stakeholders.
Policy design

The scholarship of policy design started to surge in the 1980s with the recognition that the various elements involved in the policy process intertwine with each other such that their impacts on policymaking, implementation, and evaluation cannot be separated (Alexander 1982; Dryzek 1983; Bobrow and Dryzek 1987; Linder and Peters 1987). The conceptualization of policy design is an attempt to integrate the different elements. Policy design has a dual meaning – as a noun describing the content of policy and as a verb referring to the process of policymaking from formulation to evaluation (Schneider and Ingram 1988; M. Howlett 2009). The purpose of policy design is to achieve policy goals effectively and efficiently through appropriate policy tool selection and management that is supported by scientific and empirical data (Alexander 1979; May 1981; Weimer 1993). The breadth and depth of policy design have been continually enriched by policy scholars who focuses on different aspects of public policy and its relationships within the entire policy system. For example, scholars of policy implementation may start their research by discussing policy tools, then extend the discussion to consider the input and output of the tools, and finally conclude by suggesting the conditions and resources required to optimize policy outcomes (Ingram and Schneider 1990; Salamon 1989; Hood 2007).

Beyond these traditional foci on the policy process (e.g. implementation and evaluation), other literature approaches policy design from different levels of abstraction. For example, at the individual level, researchers have looked at target populations and stakeholders in policy design (Pahl-Wostl 2002; Ingram, Schneider, and DeLeon 2007). At a more abstract level, the contexts of policy design have been accorded great importance in influencing both the substance and the procedure of policy design (Torgerson 1985; Linder and Peters 1989). Other research summarizes the technology of policy design, such as layering, patching, and packaging (Kay 2007; Van der Heijden 2011; M. Howlett and Rayner 2017; Kern, Kivimaa, and Martiskainen 2017). From a cross-national perspective, Schneider and Ingram (1988) note that policy designs are likely borrowed from similar policies in other places and that these borrowed designs may be layered/packaged with pre-existing ones (Gunningham and Sinclair 1999). As a result of this borrowing, according to Rose (2019), programs of different nations in the same domain are likely to share more similarities than different programs within a given country. In this article, we focus on a ‘structural mechanism’ of policy design. The structural mechanism specifies the tool choices, rules, and behaviors selected to serve policy goals, articulates key assumptions, and describes why the selected tools can produce the desired outcomes (Schneider and Ingram 1988). We define a ‘flagship’ mechanism as an effective mechanism adopted by nation-states to structure CD programming.
**Cultural diplomacy flagship**

The term ‘flagship’ originally referred to the ship traveled in by the commanding officer of a group of naval ships. In cultural policy, ‘flagship’ is used to refer to major cultural organizations, particularly major museums and performing arts centers, that are valued for their visibility, the widespread recognition of their name, and their ability to attract people to a particular destination. Other urban benefits of cultural flagships include improving the local quality of life, improving a city’s image or brand, and strengthening a city’s competitive image (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007). A broader and looser usage of the term ‘flagship’ has been as a metaphor that refers to the organization with the highest profile within a university system, or a chain of retail stores, or within a broadcast network. In the three CD organizations discussed in this article as flagships, the term is used in the general meaning of being ‘leading’ or ‘preeminent’ among other CD programs of a particular nation. In the sense that flagship cultural organizations in the context of urban development are regarded as assets to visibility, city branding, and/or competitive advantage, the term flagship also conveys an ability to attract or appeal to nonresidents and thus suggests that they could be international soft power tools.

Each of the three national CD flagships is a structural mechanism that has acquired bureaucratic stability through a statutory or other legal authority that has provided long-term political authorization. This stability has facilitated the ability of each to accumulate a persistence presence – a positive public disposition, support over a lengthy duration, and cohesiveness of internal organizational operations as well as an established external reputation (McClellan, Rebelllo-Rao, and Wyszomirski 1999). Bureaucratic stability and a persistent presence help to cultivate longevity of the flagship status that can survive changes of government administrations or shifts in foreign policy interests and regional priorities. This stability also enables flagships to act as a host to, a partner for, and a developer of a number of different kinds of CD programs. Thus, a flagship structural mechanism presents a number of design advantages: organizational continuity, global scope, name recognition, established network contacts, a diverse programming record, skilled personnel, and often a toolbox of procedural and administrative tools. In contrast, other CD programs may be functionally specialized (e.g. touring performing arts or traveling museum exhibitions), intermittently scheduled (e.g. biennial events, festivals, and film competitions), or have limited geographic targeting (e.g. US focus shifted from the Soviet Union to the Middle East after 9/11). In order to design a structural mechanism that has the capacities just mentioned, we have identified the following elements that should be considered in CD policy design:

1. Contextual influences: Contexts shape the rationales for conducting CD. In policy design theory, contexts not only construct the perception and the content of policy tools but also influence the process of selecting and managing the tools. For example, different political cultures and regimes are considered to be contextual factors in CD policy design.

2. Multiple purposes: With increasing globalization, policy design persistently faces the need to address multiple problems and purposes simultaneously (M. Howlett, Mukherjee, and Woo 2015). In CD, the term multipurpose has a dual meaning. It refers to the set of purposes sought by a government, as well as the various purposes of different stakeholders in CD activities, which are explained by rational decisions and an assessment of the contexts as well as ‘irrational’/thymotic psychological factors shaped by culture, identity, and desire.

3. Multilevel governance: Governance has acquired multilevel complexity in CD due to the increasing participation of diverse players, and this is reflected in the collaboration and coordination at vertical and horizontal levels. Vertically, globalization has extended policy design from domestic levels to transnational levels to include national and international actors (Rhodes 1996; Peters and Pierre 2001). Horizontally, negotiation and collaboration take place not only across public and private sectors but also among multiple agencies within...
a given vertical or horizontal space to formulate and implement policies (Salamon 1989). This multi-level governance has become critical in mobilizing resources to legitimately manage wicked problems.

(4) Tool selection: Developing a toolkit containing multiple tools has become an effective method for CD flagships to serve multiple purposes and adapt to constantly changing foreign affairs contexts. Policy tools within the toolkit can complement each other or conflict with each other as policy designers try to manage efforts to optimize general utility and to communicate with cultural specificity (Salamon 1989; Gunningham, Grabosky, and Sinclair 2017).

Figure 2 presents a working model of the flagship mechanism of CD showing the interaction between changing international contexts, multiple purposes, multilevel governance, and tool selection. The flagship mechanism is presented as a circle to illustrate the interdependence between the four design elements and how policy learning and feedback are an integral part of the mechanism. Resting on a foundation of sturdy, official authorization and persistent presence, the flagship mechanism of CD has the capacity to address the wickedly difficult and complex problem of operationalizing CD practice.

In the next four sections, eight propositions shape the discussion of how the four design elements interact through the analysis of the three cases of CD flagships

**Contexts: changing international relations**

National and international environments influence the design of CD in different and important ways. In this section, we highlight the influences of the international environment on the rationales of CD.

**Propositions 1 & 2**

1. The changing international environment provides a contextual impetus for and presents challenges to CD design concerning how the mechanism positions a country in relation to others and how it is received by the international community.

2. International changes lead to CD policy design challenges. Although smaller CD responses have their uses, a flagship mechanism has the potential to effectively manage these challenges on a global scale.

For international environment, we consider a country’s changing relationship with other international actors. The relationship between different countries is structural, and it ‘generates capacities to act possessed by agents by virtue of their relations’ (Isaac 1987, 81). This relational power structure generates ‘international orders [that] are easier to sustain for the powerful if the dominated submit to their own domination’ (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 68). The attractiveness of maintaining and acquiring an advantageous position in the ‘international order’ becomes the fundamental rationale for nation-states to strengthen themselves and manage their international relations. Therefore, when power relations change, countries face the need to adapt their strategies and policies in response to the changes. Some scholars argue that the most effective way for a country to create, keep, and optimize its international status and its foreign appeal is to share significant norms and values with other countries (Mazarr et al. 2016), and culture reflects norms and value preference, as mentioned previously in relation to FPA. Following this logic, the exchange of culture, CD, has the soft power potential to promote a favorable environment where its norms and values are shared, conflict is minimized, and cooperation is encouraged. Hence, CD design needs to be sensitive and responsive to the changing international environment that has been historically shaped by ‘hard’ military, economic, and diplomatic power. The
Consideration of domestic contextual factors such as political culture and regime

Selection(s) based on contexts, purposes, and governance; adaptation of culture-based content

Nonhierarchical and collaborative efforts across agencies and actors at multiple levels

Multiple purposes, interests & desires

Many purposes of diverse stakeholders; national interests: defense, economic, world order, and ideological; Shifting regional focus.

Foundational Assets of Flagships:
Persistent presence, formal authorization, and global scope.

Policy learning & adaptation

Figure 2. The flagship mechanism of cultural diplomacy.
use of soft power, in a different way from the use of hard power, contributes to governmental legitimacy and moral authority (Nye 2008), which, in turn, helps reshape the contexts of international relations and policymaking.

In practice, CD flagships originally appear to be reactions to changing international environments. The British Council (BC) was established in 1934 when the country was beginning to experience a weakening influence in the world because of the Great Depression and decolonization. The founding purpose of the organization was to address this ‘weakened influence’ and the ‘absence of overseas British publicity and propaganda’ (Taylor 1978). The US Fulbright Program, the US CD flagship, was founded in 1946, soon after WWII had ended, when the US had just acquired its world leadership and faced the challenge of legitimizing its status by deepening relationships with allies and forging new relationships with emerging powers (Johnson and Colligan 1965). The Chinese Confucius Institute (CI) was initiated in 2004 as China sought to translate its economic growth into a bigger international role while countering the narrative of the ‘China Threat’ (Gertz 2000). The CI is an attempt to highlight China’s cultural assets and to put a more appealing face on its new international role. In each of these cases, a change in international power dynamics propelled a repositioning through governmental CD practices. The decisions to establish a structural mechanism planted seeds that then opened up greater possibilities for exerting soft power in international relations and exploring cultural policymaking. Smaller states facing international challenges have also used soft power tactics to reposition themselves in the world. For example, Norway has emphasized its commitment to human rights since the end of the Cold War (Leonard and Small 2003). Communist countries that existed in the shadow of the Warsaw Pact have often turned to national cultural institutes as CD flagships as a structural mechanism that can be used to reclaim their historic identities and reassert their membership among Western democracies (Paschalidis 2009).

Multiple purposes: whose interest and what interest

Propositions 3 & 4

(3) CD policy is challenged by complexity and ambiguity created by the multiple and dissimilar interests of various stakeholders, which are further complicated by psychological irrationality/thymotic desire.

(4) By recognizing multiplicity and irrationality, articulating goals, and addressing common interests with appropriate design, a CD flagship can enhance its legitimacy and effectiveness.

Whose interest

CD is not an activity of a singular player or purpose. It is paramount to recognize the coexistence of multiple stakeholders and their diverse interests in CD programming. The design, operation, and participation of a CD flagship is orchestrated by the collaboration of individuals, as well as organizations at local, regional, national, and international levels. The cultural practitioners involved in the flagship may seek professional and economic benefits but may be unaware of or even disagree with the strategic calculations of governments. Meanwhile, the audience, government, and partners in the foreign country may have dissimilar visions of the country of origin of the CD. This article establishes a framework by focusing on the governmental perspective of the country that designs the flagship. However, this does not suggest that the interests of others are irrelevant or trivial. On the contrary, successful and long-lived CD design demands an artful design to optimize common interests and mitigate conflicts. For instance, The Fulbright Program serves the interests of various actors simultaneously. The US government, foreign governments, nongovernmental partners, scholars and students play a part in the program, and each group has its own interests. The program has been designed to serve these particular interests by managing bilateral relations as well as accommodating university and scholarly interests in such goals as
academic excellence. This is achieved through complex design efforts. For example, the supervising organization of the Fulbright Program, the Board of Foreign Scholarship, was created as an independent body to balance the power of the State Department and prevent it from using the program solely for its own policy agenda (Jeffrey 1987) while protecting the academic interests of universities, students, and scholars. In summary, if a ‘national interest’ advanced by CD is too narrow or unilateral, the legitimacy, sustainability, and ultimately culture-based soft power can be impaired.

**What interest**

National interests are subject to interpretation and can lack clear articulation in the context of CD. Broadly, national interests can have four components: ‘defense, economic, world order, and ideological interests’ (Nuechterlein 1976). In CD, these national interests are often translated into more specific goals, including the promotion of the national image and the enhancement of national influence and standing. How governmental interests are pursued in CD activities is widely researched by scholars (Hayden 2012; Nisbett 2013; Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015; Carter 2015). Building on this research, we argue that through policy design, the four kinds of national interests are prioritized and translated differently in different countries depending on general environments and foreign policy goals in the long term as well as the short term. For example, China’s deployment of CIs is motivated by its interests in building a new economic and diplomatic world order through culture in which China has a larger role (Zhang 2017). By April 2020, 56 out of 65 of the Belt and Road countries had established a CI.\(^7\) In total, 1/3 of the CI branches are in the Belt and Road countries.\(^8\) Alternatively, as is the case for the BC, national interests are manifested differently through customized regional goals. The Corporate Plan of the BC in 2019 (p.2) specifies the following regional goals:

- Building education and cultural partnerships with countries of the European Union and other developed countries.
- Strengthening educational and cultural opportunities and connections with India, China and other emerging and high growth developing economies.
- Strengthening long-term connections and relationships with the next generation in Russia and neighbouring countries.
- Contributing to stability and security in priority countries including in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia and responding to the Syrian refugee crisis.

In each of the mentioned regions, different national interests are prioritized. For example, while economic interest is prioritized in India and China, defense interest is the priority in the Middle East and Africa. Such diversification and customization of goals increase design complexity but also give the BC extra autonomy and capability to manage its program with accuracy.

**Interest or desire**

If national interests are calculated based on power sources such as natural resources, population, and geography and if international rankings provide the rationales for CD design, irrational forces such as what Fukuyama (2018) calls ‘thymos’ contribute to the ‘non-design’ part of CD flagship. Thymos is the desire for respect and recognition as well as the source of resentment, and it is driven by national identities, traditions, and beliefs. This desire for respect can manifest as either the need to be recognized as an equal to other countries or to be seen as superior.\(^10\) This helps to explain the differing CD-related purposes behind the scenes and to understand ‘listening’ and ‘telling’ as two divergent approaches of CD-related practices (Fisher and Bröckerhoff 2008). According to the current populist turn, thymos challenges ‘mutual understanding’ as the universal goal of CD and draws our attention to the psychology and behavior of leaders, individuals, and groups involved in building
a flagship mechanism. Rationality and intuitive desires coexist when a flagship mechanism is being designed. By acknowledging their presence and impacts, the design of CD can become more manageable in terms of both its content and its process.

**Multilevel governance: collaborative efforts**

**Propositions 5 & 6**

(5) Traditional public administration implementation is ill-suited to managing CD if it manifests linear design, centralized control, limited players, and a rigid format.

(6) In contrast, CD flagships tend to exhibit governance practices that are multileveled, nonhierarch-ical, and collaborative and reflect both national-political and sociocultural values.

Propositions 5 and 6 describe how governance bridges the multiple purposes of CD with concrete implementation methods in policy design. Smith (1997) and Peters and Pierre (2001) discuss multilevel governance by distinguishing it from traditional government that functions through command and control. Over the years, many CD flagships have institutionalized a less hierarchical and more diverse set of relationships between government, nongovernment organizations, and private entities at all levels. This multilevel governance can be structured by intergovernmentalism, intersectoralism, and/or interagency cooperation. CD design choices can exhibit any combination of these multiple structural devices. Such complexity and flexibility, in turn, rely on ongoing communication, frequent negotiation, and close collaboration either vertically or horizontally.

Multilevel governance is also highly contextual, which can be interpreted by the fourfold topology of the governmental roles in arts and culture advanced by Chartrand and McCaughey (1989). These four roles, facilitator, patron, architect, and engineer, are the encapsulation of nation-states’ dissimilar national beliefs, political cultures and regimes, and historical and cultural contexts, and they describe the general patterns and preferences of government tool choices in cultural policy. For example, in different political regimes, the degree of democracy and authoritarianism affects the number of decision makers and participants and resource distribution in CD. Nation-states with a higher degree of democracy tend to be facilitators or patrons, whereas the roles of architect and engineer are commonly associated with states characterized as being authoritarian regimes. Although these roles are not definitive or immutable, they suggest how domestic governance choices concerning cultural policy may carry over to influence the design of international CD governance.

In facilitator and patron states, working with third-party agencies is one of the main ways of administering CD programs. Nongovernmental organizations at all levels are given great autonomy. In the Fulbright Program, the major managing organizations at all levels have an independent status. At the transnational level, binational commissions are established, funded, and staffed by both US and foreign governments to carry out the programs. These shared resources and interests help legitimize the Fulbright as the flagship. At the national level, the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, as an independent entity, assembles academic representatives across the US to make policies, review applications, and select awardees. The Institute of International Education (IIE), as the national cooperating agent, implements the Fulbright program as a contractor to the U.S. State Department. Additionally, the Fulbright program has regional partners such as America-Mideast Educational and Training Services to serve targeted populations. At the local level, universities are in close communication and collaboration with the program to select and host students and scholars. Each of these components is independently structured, controls different resources, and has different responsibilities, and yet all must work together to embody the Fulbright flagship.

Similarly, the BC shares interests and resources with its national and foreign partners. Instead of having binational commissions, the BC is more hierarchically structured with national offices reporting to regional offices. Another significant difference is that the BC system is capable of relative financial self-sufficiency through the revenue it generates from teaching and testing
English at many of its national branches. The BC partners with IDP Education and Cambridge Assessment English to administer the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) worldwide. Furthermore, the BC as a flagship has the structural capacity to receive funding from the national government as well as to raise money from private and corporate sources. These partners at multiple levels are indispensable to program delivery and the relative self-sufficiency of the BC. Also, the BC system works with many independent artists and arts organizations to deliver its programs. These governance structures have formed a massive network that is able to mobilize and distribute resources and programs efficiently and effectively as well as respond to international changes and regional differences through the customization of partnerships. Both the Fulbright and the BC flagship structures exhibit characteristics of facilitator and patron states models. In Britain, the BC coordinates primarily with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office acting as both patron and facilitator and providing partial financing resources and giving directions and legitimacy to the overall governance network. In the US, a more horizontal interagency set of actors exercises facilitator and patron roles with regard to funding, setting a geopolitical agenda, and program delivery.

The Confucius Institute (CI)’s multilevel governance takes on a different set of policy roles that are more appropriate to the Chinese context. China tends to act as an architect or engineer in cultural policy. The Chinese government directs, plans, funds, manages, selects, and trains personnel for the flagship. The headquarters of the CI, Hanban,11 was created and managed by the Ministry of Education. Originally, Hanban had multiple responsibilities that, like in the Fulbright case, were shared by private and public organizations at various levels. This governance approach made the CI flagship primarily responsive to the interests of the Chinese government. However, this governance arrangement attracted criticism regarding the level of government control of the CI. Hayden (2012) comments that this CI governance design tried ‘too hard.’ As such criticism accumulated, the CI sought to reform its governance toward adopting a more collaborative approach to that observed in the BC and the Fulbright cases. This learning process will be discussed more extensively later in the section that considers propositions 7 and 8.

In all three flagships, the linkage between institutional changes and CD design is evident. The demand to fulfill multiple interests, legitimize, expand, and sustain the program has triggered the development of multilevel governance. Conversely, evolving governance arrangements have facilitated policy changes managed by a unique flagship mechanism that can handle the complexities and wickedness of CD.

**Tool selections**

**Propositions 7 & 8**

(7) Propositions 1–6 are all taken into account regarding the questions concerning tool selection: which tool should be selected to satisfy what purposes, through what kind of governance, and in what context?

(8) As the flagship operates globally, its tool selections display a series of decisions, each of which is customized for the particular country it seeks to influence. The flagship has to continually return to tool selection questions to assemble a versatile toolkit.

**What are cultural diplomacy tools?**

Salamon (1989) defines a ‘policy tool’ as follows: ‘A tool resembles an individual program in that it is a concrete mechanism for achieving a policy goal.’ This definition clarifies the relationship between a policy tool, a program, and a policy goal: (1) a program can be viewed as a single policy tool, and (2) a policy with multiple purposes may need multiple tools. Linder and Peters (1989) alert us to the nominal differences between functionally similar programs. In other words, programs with different
names can be the same tool due to their functional similarities. For example, language education bears different program names in the BC, the CI, and the Fulbright Program, but all of the programs belong to the same tool category.

The tools of CD listed in Table 1 were developed from practice and keep evolving in response to changing international power dynamics and adapting to new needs. Depending on their purpose, the tools can be categorized differently. Placing the tools on a spectrum or continuum configured by specific parameters is a popular approach of such a typology, such as that used in the work of Evans and Steven (2010) and Zaharna (2009). In this article, we develop our tool classification directly from great power flagship practice and present it in the format of a toolbox. The goal of this toolbox is to provide expansive options for CD tool selection instead of limiting it. The table lists selective/sampling programs from the three CD flagships.

Each flagship operates many kinds of programs. We have only selected a few here to explain how a toolbox for CD is developed from practice. These selected programs are presented in 7 categories based on their functional similarities. For example, all three flagships engage in language teaching and learning activities. This convergence generates language education as a tool category of CD. In addition to these 7 common categories of frequently used tools, we have identified 4 less frequently used tool categories that only show up in one or two of the flagships: infrastructure construction and aid, cultural tourism, and cultural trade-related, high-profile international events (e.g. Olympics and Expo), and legacy radio and television broadcasting. For example, infrastructure construction appears to be a tool of the CI that is used in particular countries to strengthen bilateral ties, but the tool is not observed in the other two flagships. Another example, cultural trade-related programs, such as the DICE (Developing Inclusive and Creative Economies) program, are operated by the BC to export the idea of creative industries. Furthermore, some tools in CD do not stand alone as independent programs but are integral parts of other programs. The Internet and new media, listed at the bottom of Table 1, are such examples. Legacy radio and television broadcasting is another example. These tools can be flexibly layered with other programs to enrich their content and increase their accessibility and visibility.

Through a constant comparison between the flagships, we have summarized a toolbox for CD containing 7 frequently used tools and 4 less frequently used tools. However, this toolbox is not exhaustive and evolves with policy initiatives. It serves as a starting point for addressing the tool selection questions in proposition 7: which tool should be selected to satisfy what purposes, through what kind of governance, and in what context. The questions highlight that the decision concerning tools is not isolated but reflects all the other elements in CD design. In the next section, we present China's Confucius Institute (CI) as a case to demonstrate how these tool selection questions can be addressed with the propositions and how a flagship may assemble its toolkit through a series of tool selection decisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool Category</th>
<th>British Council</th>
<th>Fulbright Program</th>
<th>Confucius Institute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language education</td>
<td>English for Adults, Kids, and Teens</td>
<td>English Teaching Assistant Program</td>
<td>Confucius Institutes and Classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festivals, seasons, and other cultural events</td>
<td>UK-Russia Year of Music</td>
<td>At discretion of bilateral commissions or embassies</td>
<td>Chinese Bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term exchanges</td>
<td>Higher Education Strategic Partnership</td>
<td>Fulbright Student Program</td>
<td>Confucius Institute Scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsored short visits</td>
<td>Artists’ International Development Fund</td>
<td>Senior Specialist Program</td>
<td>Short visits of foreign university presidents and teachers to China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country studies and research</td>
<td>Institutional links (collaborative research)</td>
<td>Fulbright American Studies Award</td>
<td>China Studies Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks, meetings, and conferences</td>
<td>Teaching Center Network</td>
<td>Fulbright Annual Conference</td>
<td>Base for international promotion of Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet and new media</td>
<td>Conversation of Our Times</td>
<td>National Geographic Storytelling Fellowship</td>
<td>Online Confucius Institute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How are cultural diplomacy tools selected? the case of the CI

The CI is well known for Chinese language teaching, which is the first program listed in Table 2, as well as a primary tool of this flagship. This particular tool selection is a result of the unique contexts, purposes, and governance preference at the time the selection was made. The language teaching program was created at the same time as the CI in 2004. The official statement that explains the purposes of the CI can be found in the agency’s ‘constitution and by-laws’ (Hanban n.d.):

Confucius Institutes devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multi-culturalism, and to construct[ing] a harmonious world. (Chapter 1: General Principles)

This statement was crafted in the context of China’s rise at the beginning of the 21st century. This context also led to the spread of the China Threat theory, as noted by Gertz (2000) and Krauthammer (1995). China’s GDP reached $1.96 trillion in 2004, which was more than 5.4 times its size of $360.86 billion in 1990 (World Bank 2020). This rapid growth caused the world to feel uncertain and anxious and resulted in the China Threat theory, which sees China as a challenger in the military, economic, and ideological arenas. In response, China put forward a foreign policy slogan, Peaceful Rise and Harmonious World, which is emphasized in the CI’s mission statement.

This illustrates how the creation of the CI was a part of this foreign policy strategy. The purposes of the CI, as previously stated, are to help foreign people (1) learn Chinese, (2) understand China, (3) strengthen cooperation and cultivate relationships, and (4) build a harmonious world. A chain of influence from the individual level to the organizational level and from the national level to the international level is implied in the statement. Selecting language education as the first tool best serves this hierarchy of purposes and offers the following advantages: (1) language education helps to reduce the barriers to international communication and supports many other programs that follow, and (2) it is a widely used and successful tool that allows China to justify the decision to launch the CI. Hanban (2014) introduces it as follows: ‘Benefiting from the UK, France, Germany and Spain’s experience in promoting their national languages, China began its own exploration through establishing non-profit public institutions which aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries.’ These traits of language education fit into the context of increasing connections between China and foreign countries and seeking to counteract the China Threat theory. Learning Chinese is a tool that furthers an understanding of China, cultivating relationships and building a friendly international environment.

At its initial stage, this particular tool selection reflects the government’s role as an architect in CD design. Hanban, as the headquarters, organized the CI’s Chinese language teaching primarily through its partnerships between Chinese and foreign universities. Both Hanban and the Chinese

Table 2. Program innovation in CI’s toolbox, 2004–2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>New Program</th>
<th>Tool Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Confucius Institute and Confucius Classroom</td>
<td>Language education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching materials, research, development, and promotion</td>
<td>Language education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Proficiency Test</td>
<td>Language education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Bridge Competition</td>
<td>Cultural events &amp; television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Confucius Institute Conference</td>
<td>Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Air Confucius Institute and Class</td>
<td>Language education &amp; legacy radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Online Confucius Institute</td>
<td>Language education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Platform for International Promotion of Chinese</td>
<td>Language education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Confucius Institute Scholarship</td>
<td>Network &amp; research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Experience Center</td>
<td>Long-term exchanges &amp; short visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>I Sing Beijing (phased out from 2013)</td>
<td>Cultural events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Model Confucius Institute</td>
<td>Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China Studies Program</td>
<td>Country study and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Understanding China Program</td>
<td>Country study and research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
universities were supervised by the Ministry of Education, limiting the range and type of partners in the CI governance. The relatively simple structure and centrality meant that resource allocation and management for a newly founded flagship were centrally provided, but it also became a target of widespread criticism as the network of flagship branches developed. The criticism aroused negative feedback from the international environment of the CI, and this shaped the subsequent purposes and governance of the CI’s tool selection decisions.

When the CI returned to tool selection questions in subsequent years, its strategy changed. More emphasis was placed on cultivating a new image of CI that is open, diverse, and collaborative. Less direct tools for international communication were adopted, such as cultural events and research programs. Table 2 shows the initiatives and development of CI’s toolbox from 2004 to 2014. In addition to program diversification, more efforts were invested in reforming and justifying the CI’s governance. For example, through building networks at home and abroad, an increasing number of stakeholders have been involved in funding the CI and training its personnel.

Policy learning and transfer also played a significant role in this changing strategy. The CI has become similar to the BC in terms of its tool structure – it now offers a combination of educational, artistic, and cultural programs. The CI has also evolved to be more like the Fulbright Program in terms of its funding mechanism: it implements cost sharing in partnerships. As a result of policy learning, the CI has become a synthesis of multiple flagship tools. This enlarging tool collection reflects China’s changing role as a great power and its ambition to lead not only economically but also culturally in the world. Despite these changes, the criticism of the CI continued, concentrating primarily on the potential damage to academic integrity. In this regard, the American Association of University Professors (2014, 1) argues as follows:

Confucius Institutes appear designed to emulate the cultural ambassadorship and programming associated with, for example, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, and Alliance Française. These latter three entities are clearly connected to imperial pasts, ongoing geopolitical agendas, and the objectives of ‘soft power,’ but none of them is located on a university or college campus.

To understand the continuing criticism, the article written by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 350) on policy learning and transfer provides some insights. They identify a variety of possible ‘lessons’ that can be learned in policymaking and transfer: ‘policy goals; structure and content; policy instruments or administrative techniques; institutions; ideology; idea, attitudes and concepts, and negative lessons.’ The case of the CI exemplifies virtually all these elements of learning about policy, except two: ideology and content. Hanban developed and supplied its teaching materials to the CIs in foreign universities, which means that the Chinese side retained control over the content. This content and the ideology behind the language program had worried many in the Western world, which led to the criticism and even closure of some CIs. The CI’s difficulties in the US provided a vital lesson for CD design: simply selecting a tool is insufficient. To generate culture-based soft power, the cultural content of CD tools must be adapted depending on the resources and characteristics of both parties in a cultural exchange/communication.

**Implications of the CI case**

**Tool mix**

The tool selection of a CD flagship is not a single decision but a series of decisions that span many years. The flagship itself becomes an adaptable platform that is constantly learning from its practice and making adjustments. As demonstrated with the tool selection of language education, each tool selection decision is unique and hinges on specific purposes, contexts, and governance preferences that are present at the time. Building a harmonious relationship among the tools and constructing a tool mix that is flexible and versatile become challenges that are presented to the policy designers of the CD flagship. The strategy used to build a tool mix varies. As discussed in the work of Zhu (2021), one of the approaches is to build spin-off and support and infrastructure programs around
the core programs. In the CI case, Chinese language education, as the core program, is enriched with a wide range of spin-off programs, such as cultural events, and supported by infrastructure programs that cultivate networks and improve program quality.

**Tool adaptation**

The lessons learned by examining the CI case demonstrate that tool selection for CD is not complete without the adaptation of tool content. The teaching content developed and supplied by the CI caused controversies among US universities. Cultural content distinguishes CD from other diplomatic activities and contributes to its effectiveness.

Attention to tool content also appears in other case studies. For example, Jazz as content of US CD was well received in the Cold War period as it has an inclusive nature that supersedes particular ideologies and communicates to people beyond borders. The host of the *Voice of America Jazz Hour*, Willis Conover, comments: ‘Jazz is a cross between total discipline and anarchy. The musicians agree on tempo, key, and chord structure but beyond this everyone is free to express himself. This is Jazz. And this is America,’ cited in Richmond (2003, 207).

In the CI case, over the years, CIs in foreign countries have developed a bottom-up mechanism for using their resources and tools flexibly based on local conditions. Before the reorganization, CIs submitted their annual budget plans to Hanban for approval. Besides regular Chinese education and program operation costs, many CIs also submitted proposals for activities such as festivals and conferences and requested additional sponsorship for the visits of various Chinese cultural heritage artists. In addition to gaining support from the Chinese side, these activities often had local partners and sponsorships. The spontaneous and collaborative nature of these events helped broaden the CI’s public outreach and obtain media coverage. What has been learned from these experiences of CD that either worked or failed is that tool content should appeal to and encourage the ‘telling’ as well as the ‘listening’ acts of both parties in CD, and ideally, they should have equal responsibilities for and influence on the CD program content and contribute equally to it as well. On a spectrum with listening (relational approach) at one end and telling (informational approach) at the other, Fisher and Bröckerhoff (2008) position CD in the middle of the spectrum. This implies that CD, especially a CD flagship with a selection of different tools, has the capacity to adapt to both the ‘listening’ and the ‘telling’ purposes that sit at opposite ends of the spectrum. This also explains why a CD flagship as a mechanism is favored by nation-states identified as having different political cultures, regimes, purposes, and governance modes, and how CD flagships can learn from experience and criticism and reposition themselves on this spectrum.

**Conclusion: wicked problems, policy learning and transfer, and CD flagships**

Operationalizing CD and applying soft power is a wicked problem that confronts many nation-states, not only great powers. As discussed earlier, wicked problems are wickedly difficult, ambiguous, and complex. The CD flagship – a durable structural mechanism capable of managing complexity, customization, and flexibility amidst changing international environments and applications – presents a useful response for addressing the wickedness of CD policy and programming.

Over time, policy learning can occur within a flagship as it draws upon its organizational memory, performance feedback, and networked information resources. Thus, the CD flagship mechanism provides an ongoing platform that is positioned to manage the series of ongoing decisions involved in operationalizing the generation and application of soft power. This platform facilitates adaptation to different national contexts without the need to politically justify each adaptation and contributes to an effective CD flagship’s ability to sustain its persistent presence and reputation for global efficacy. Alternatively, each of the cases illustrates that policy transfer has occurred between nations with or aspiring to have a CD flagship. The CD flagship mechanism also provides a comparative framework for other nations – including non-great powers – to determine what can be learned and
what needs to be adapted as they strategically plan their CD policy. Designing an effective flagship mechanism can make a valuable contribution to the implementation of a nation’s CD but further research is needed to better understand the roles that other CD policy tools play in effective CD practices.

Despite the long-term capacity and potential of the CD flagship structural mechanism, it should be remembered that the utility of any tool also depends on the skill with which it is wielded. Research on wicked problems has moved from identifying wicked problems to understanding how they can be managed. One stream of interest focuses on the role of leadership, particularly adaptive and collaborative leadership rather than transformational or command-and-control leadership (Head and Alford 2015, 729–731). Other research proposes that ‘network forms are particularly effective in tackling “wicked problems”’ after examining eight cases of UK health-centered policy (Ferlie et al. 2011, 308). A 40-year literature review calls for a ‘second-generation approach to understanding “wicked problems” that continues to recognize the centrality of complexity and uncertainty’ as well as a need for creative thinking, but makes better use of public policy concepts like problem framing, policy design capacity, and policy contexts (Head 2019, 180). Each of these developments in understanding wicked problem management has focused on cases of domestic policy.

In contrast, this analysis addresses a wicked problem that concerns the case of CD and soft power that lies at the intersection of international relations, foreign policy, and cultural policy. In doing so, it also speaks to the ‘second generation’ of wicked problem concerns, namely incorporating a strong element of policy design and observing the value of broad international network building within CD flagship structures. This analytical framework has the potential to be useful in three ways. First, for researchers, it could assist comparative and case study approaches to the study of CD. The parameters of the framework offer guidance for data collection as well as a basis for comparison in different contexts. Second, participants in cultural content in CD programming could build a better position for themselves and recognize the common interests they have with other governance stakeholders and their interests. Finally, for policy makers, this framework demonstrates the virtue and adaptability of policy design through the example of the flagship structural mechanism that can serve many purposes and different nations with many different levels of international power status.

Notes

1. Based on a search of journal articles published by Taylor & Francis, 5 articles published between 2001 and 2005 contain the words ‘cultural diplomacy’ in their titles. This number rises to 34 between 2006 and 2010, 51 between 2011 and 2015, and 92 between 2016 and 2020.
3. The Fulbright program website: https://eca.state.gov/fulbright.
5. Here we focus on culture as content in foreign policy. The influence of ‘political culture’ as contexts will be considered in the later section.
6. Now called the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board.
7. Calculated based on the data provided on the Hanban website. Although this website is no longer available due to its recent reorganization, the original webpage is archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20200427183558/http://www.hanban.org/confuciusinstitutes/node_10961.htm. Accessed in April 2020.
8. 162 countries had established CIs by April 2020. Data source: ibid.
9. Howlett and Mukherjee (2014) use ‘non-design’ to describe the irrational activity and process in policy design, e.g. log-rolling and opportunism.
10. Fukuyama (2018) uses ‘megalothymia’ and ‘megalothymia’ to describe these two scenarios.
11. In 2020, there was a CI reorganization, and the Center for Language Education and Cooperation replaced Hanban as the new managing agency.
12. The Fulbright Program refers this approach as ‘bilateralism’.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Biyun Zhu is a lecturer at the Institute for Cultural Practices, The University of Manchester. She received her PhD in Cultural Policy and Arts Management from The Ohio State University. Previously, she earned a master’s degree in Public Policy from King’s College London. She has also researched and worked in government and international organizations including the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and United Nations. Her research draws on knowledge from multiple disciplines including public policy, international relations, history, and management. Her recent work constructed a multi-level policy design framework to understand, communicate, and inform the practice of cultural diplomacy in a changing international environment. Her current projects focus on network-building methodology and evaluation in cultural diplomacy policy.

Margaret J. Wyszomirski, Ph.D., is Professor Emerita in the Department of Arts Administration Education and Policy at The Ohio State University where she was a professor from 1998 to 2020. For most of that time, she was Director of the Graduate Program in Arts and Cultural Policy. In 1990, she became the Staff Director of the Bipartisan Independent Commission on the National Endowment for the Arts and then joined the agency as its Director for Policy Planning, Research, and Budget (1991-1994). She has also been a faculty member at Dickinson College, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, the Cornell in Washington Program, Georgetown University, and Case Western Reserve University. She has published and consulted on topics ranging from public art, arts entrepreneurship, public funding for the arts, cultural policy design and transfer, and international cultural relations. Her books include America’s Commitment to Culture (with Kevin Mulcahy); Art, Ideology, and Politics (with Judith Balfe); and Understanding the Arts and Creative Sector in the United States (with Joni Cherbo and Ruth Ann Stewart). Currently, she is working on projects concerning professionalism in the arts as well as America’s international cultural relations.

ORCID

Biyun Zhu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2587-296X

References


