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# STUDENTS AT THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE CHINESE DIASPORA AND INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS IN CHINA'S STRATEGY OF SOFT POWER

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*ABSTRACT:* In recent years, an increasingly assertive People's Republic of China (PRC) leadership has sought to extend the PRC's influence globally. To this end, it has developed diverse strategies ranging from soft power to more coercive means. The more visible strategies include the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese Dream, and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy. At the soft power end of the spectrum, Chinese overseas students are at the nexus between two strategies of soft power – the Chinese diaspora and the internationalisation of higher education. While there is an established literature analysing China's soft power worldwide, relatively little has been done on the role of higher education, particularly where this concerns overseas Chinese students. The article will examine China's use of overseas students to project its soft power. It then identifies the strategies that support this, viz. ideological and political education to prepare young people for this role and, once overseas, an appeal to a conception of the Chinese diaspora, as well as the organisations (e.g. embassies and student associations) that form potential channels to students and monitor and support them in their role.

*KEYWORDS:* Chinese diaspora, higher education, internationalisation, overseas chinese students, soft power

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasingly assertive People's Republic of China (PRC) leadership has sought to extend the PRC's influence globally. To this end, it has developed diverse strategies ranging from soft power to more coercive means. The more visible strategies include the Belt and Road Initiative (Ziegler, 2020), the Chinese Dream (Callahan, 2015), and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy (Wu, 2020), as well as an appeal to the Chinese diaspora (Agency, 2014). Within education, there is the internationalisation of higher education and the spread of Confucius Institutes (Jakhar, 2019). Indeed, as Lo and Pan (2020) note, higher education is

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increasingly used by the Chinese state as a form of diplomacy. Chinese overseas students are at the nexus between two strategies of soft power – the Chinese diaspora and the internationalisation of higher education. While there is an established literature analysing China’s soft power worldwide, relatively little has been done on the role of Chinese students in the diaspora and in higher education.

In 2014, it was estimated that 66 million ethnic Chinese were living outside China, the biggest migrant and diasporic group in the world (Wang *et al.*, 2015). In 2019, there were approximately 710,000 Chinese students worldwide (IImedia, 2020) and, until the pandemic struck in 2020, the number was growing year on year. The large numbers of Chinese students have changed the student demography at universities around the world, including Australia, the UK and the US.

While the PRC leadership frames membership of the Chinese diaspora in terms of being part of the great Chinese nation and civilization as well as the opportunity to benefit from China’s projects and economic development, the use of the diaspora has not been always been benevolent. In recent years, there have been incidents in the Asia-Pacific region and further afield that suggest the capacity of the Chinese state to co-opt the diaspora into its plans, including Chinese students at overseas universities. Attendant on this is the implication that the Chinese state has the means to monitor and engage its student diaspora and a willingness to use this.

In this article, we examine the efforts of the Chinese state to exercise soft power through its conception of the Chinese diaspora and the internationalisation of higher education, and the role of overseas Chinese students in this. We will draw on the words of the Chinese leadership to show their intent. We will then explain how, in its education system, the Chinese state prepares young people for their role as (perhaps unwitting) overseas ambassadors, well the strategies that are used once they are overseas: these include a conception of the Chinese diaspora, and the organisations (e.g. embassies and student associations) that form potential channels through which students are encouraged and supported in their role. We will draw on official speeches and materials published by the Chinese government, embassies and student organisations, the work of scholars and news reports, as well as the informal interactions we have had with Chinese students over the years.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are well established literatures on the Chinese diaspora as well as the exercise of soft power through the internationalisation of higher education.

Soft power is ‘the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes’ (Nye, 2011, p. 20–21). The Chinese authorities

first announced its use of soft power in the 1990s (Cho and Jeong, 2008). Since 2012, President Xi Jinping has framed a number of initiatives within the exercise soft power, including the Chinese Dream and Belt and Road (Xi, 2018). Other strategies of soft power include a particular conception of the Chinese diaspora, the Confucius Institutes, and the internationalisation of higher education

Internationalisation of higher education – which intensified in China in the late 1990s (Huang, 2007) – is commonly understood to be ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education’ (cited in Knight, 2014, p. 77). Knight (2014) notes that this ‘was originally conceived in terms of exchange and sharing of ideas, cultures, knowledge, values, etc.’, a process aimed – among other things – at preparing students to ‘live and work in a more interconnected world’ (pp. 81 and 85). In China, however, there is another understanding of internationalisation, and it is to ‘enhance the Chinese national discourse and voices in international communities’ (Liu, 2020). As will be seen, this understanding is in keeping with the political leaders’ strategy of using overseas Chinese students as instruments of diplomacy.

With regard to the internationalisation of higher education as soft power, the literature often presents this in terms of benefit to the host country. The flow of international students has traditionally been East to West and South to North, and the idea is that international students make lasting friendships and connections in the host country, are influenced intellectually and socially, come to appreciate Western democratic ideas and, on their return home, are inspired to act politically and influence policy accordingly (Atkinson, 2010; Kirkland, 2014; Nye, 2004, 2005). In the case of China, however, it is the sending country that seeks to benefit from internationalisation, and it does this by casting overseas students in the role of ambassadors who promote and defend state narratives. Indeed, a study by Bislev (2017) found that, while Chinese students who studied in the West reported an increased positive attitude towards the host country, they also thought of themselves as representing their home country. Similarly, Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) found that, although Chinese overseas students acquired a more international or transnational perspective and an appreciation of diversity, they also had an enhanced awareness of their own cultural roots and identity. In this article, we attempt to identify the reasons for this.

Overseas students may not always be included in diasporas as commonly understood. However, there is a sense in which they can be considered nascent members of a diaspora or a diaspora in the making.<sup>1</sup> Tölölyan (2012) notes that, until the 1930s, a diaspora was understood to be ‘a network of communities . . . that lived in often involuntary dispersion from their homelands and that resisted full assimilation or were denied the option of assimilating’ (p. 5). More recently,

to take account of the various groups that were historically dispersed, the term ‘diaspora’ has been used to mean ‘a special category of ethnicized dispersion’ where ‘communities of the dispersed ... develop varieties of association that endure at least into their third generation’ (pp. 7 and 8). In this understanding, students have a place in diasporas. Writing about Chinese overseas students, Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) thought that these students displayed traits associated with diaspora: they developed, through their overseas experience, a ‘diaspora conscience’, one that was marked by both an international outlook as well as a strong sense of being Chinese (pp. 950 and 958).

With respect to the Chinese diaspora, the two main Chinese terms are *huaqiao* (华侨) and *haiwaihuaren* (海外华人). Both terms have the meaning of ‘ethnic Chinese living overseas’ but are used by the Chinese state to refer to different categories of people. The former was traditionally used to refer to Chinese migrants, but was legally defined in 2009 to mean a Chinese citizen (ethnically defined) living in another country, as well as returnees (Overseas Chinese Affairs of the State Council, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, 2009). The latter is used to refer to persons of Chinese ethnicity who hold citizenship of the host country. We will use the term ‘Chinese living overseas’ to refer to both *huaqiao* and *haiwaihuaren*. Where overseas students are concerned, the term is *haiwai zhongguo xuesheng* (海外中国学生).

Research on the Chinese diaspora has largely focused on Chinese nationals living on the frontiers of China or in neighbouring nations (Hou and Luo, 2019; Wang, 2011; Zhou and Yang, 2017). Scholars like Wang Gangwu (Wang, 2000), Tan Chee Beng (Tan, 2004, p. 2007) and Leo Suryadinata (1997) have also written about the identity, culture and experience of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. However, relatively little has been written about overseas students as part the Chinese diaspora, particular their role in the internationalisation of higher education as soft power. This is a gap in the literature that the present article will address.

### 3. CHINA’S EXERCISE OF SOFT POWER

In recent years, the Chinese state has intensified efforts to improve its image and gain influence internationally through the exercise of soft power. In 2014, President Xi Jinping announced that ‘We [China] should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world’ (Xi, cited in Shambaugh, 2015, p. 99). Hamilton and Ohlberg (2020, p. 1) express this objective more starkly:

‘The Chinese Communist Party is determined to transform the international order, to shape the world in its own image, without a shot being fired. Rather than challenging from the outside, it has been eroding resistance to it from within [the host country], by winning supporters, silencing critics and subverting institutions.’

The strategies in China's exercise of soft power include the use of the Chinese diaspora and the internationalisation of higher education. The evidence for this is often piecemeal, e.g. with reports by universities in various parts of the world of difficulties with Confucius Institutes, and Chinese students seeming to challenge academic freedom at universities. Using Australia as a case study of a 'Chinese border state', Hamilton (2018) sets out in comprehensive detail the ways in which the Chinese state uses a wide range of strategies for the 'silent invasion' of a country (Hamilton, 2018). These include using prominent individuals to cultivate *guanxi*<sup>2</sup> with politicians, establishing control of the domestic Chinese language media, and ensuring that the Australian economy becomes dependent on trade with China. Hamilton also identifies as China's strategies the use of an ethnocultural conception of *huaqiao* to promote a sense of duty to the motherland (2018, p. 41) as well as the use of members of the diaspora to guide ethnic Chinese in Australia, eliminate critical voices, and influence Australians to become sympathetic to China (Hamilton, 2018, p. 31–32). He also notes the way in which Chinese students at Australian universities – including members of the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations – have sought to silence critics and promote the views of the Chinese state (Hamilton, 2018, p. 212).

In the next section, we will examine two main strategies of soft power – the conception and use of the Chinese diaspora and the internationalisation of higher education – and the role of overseas Chinese student in this.

#### 4. THE CONCEPTION OF AND APPEAL TO THE CHINESE DIASPORA

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, there have been intensified efforts to use the Chinese diaspora towards state goals. No aspect of the diaspora is exempt – *huaqiao*, *haiwaihuaren* or overseas students. Xi describes the relationship between China and Chinese living overseas in the following terms:

'The tens of millions of brother Chinese living overseas (海外侨胞<sup>3</sup>) across the world are all members of the Chinese family. In the best of Chinese traditions, generations of overseas Chinese never forget their home country, their origins, or the blood of the Chinese nation flowing in their veins. ... They have made a major contribution to the growth of the Chinese nation, to the peaceful reunification of the motherland, and the friendly people-to-people cooperation between China and other countries.' (our translation)

- Xi Jinping (Agency, 2014)

In addition:

'For Chinese people both at home and abroad, a united Chinese nation (团结统一的中华民族) is our shared roots, the profound Chinese culture is our shared soul, and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is our shared dream. The shared roots foster eternal brotherhood, the shared soul links our hearts, and the shared dream holds us all together ...' (our translation)

- Xi Jinping (Agency, 2014)

In his conception of the Chinese diaspora, Xi blurs the distinction between *huaqiao* and *haiwaihuaren*. In using the term ‘united Chinese nation (团结统一的中华民族)’, Xi refers not just to China as a nation but to all Chinese as an ethnoculturally defined community. Xi’s is an essentialist, primordialist view of Chineseness in which kinship is based on blood ties and a profound sharing of culture. It is one in which every person of Chinese ethnicity is ineluctably tied to every other Chinese person in an ‘eternal brotherhood’ and to China as the homeland. Every Chinese person is deemed to share and support the projects and dreams of the ‘motherland’ by virtue of their ethnicity. As will be seen, this too is expected of overseas students when they return home but, while abroad, they have a different role to play.

For centuries, Chinese immigrants have settled in communities all over the world. Many of these diaspora communities, which date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, developed their own clan associations or community groups. In the 1970s, the Chinese state began to engage with these communities by establishing links with them. To do this, it created the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (a department in the State Council) which has been responsible for setting up and overseeing a number of leading Chinese Friendship Associations, e.g. All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (中华全国归国华侨联合会), 2020). The relationship between the Friendship Associations and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office opens up the possibility for governance. Sending states may seek to govern diasporas and one way to do this is to engage them in a managerial process designed to ‘shape conduct through their desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs’ (Dean, , cited in Koinova, 2018, p. 192). In addition to Friendship Associations, there are professional and regional associations that have been set up and many of these too have established official or non-official links to the relevant state department. Later in the article, we will look specifically at the Chinese Students and Scholars Association UK.

While some Chinese living overseas may have come under forms of governance by the Chinese state, Hamilton (2018) goes further to suggest that some members of the diaspora may have been sent overseas as potential ‘agents of influence’ (Hamilton, 2018, p. 34). For example, a Chinese professor, Chen Hong, was deemed by the Australian intelligence agency to be a threat to national security, while the close relationship of another Chinese scholar, Li Jianjun, with a member of the New South Wales Parliament caused concerns that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had infiltrated Australian politics with the view to influencing it (Hurst, 2020; Khalil, 2020; Rubinsztein-Dunlop and Hui, 2020). Such was the concern of the Australian authorities that both these academics were reported to have had their visas revoked in September 2020.

Regardless of whether they are *huaqiao* or *haiwaihuaren*, therefore, there is an expectation by the Chinese state that that overseas Chinese have a deep

affiliation to China and a role to play in its economy and development. There have also been concerns by some governments that this role has extended to working in the interests of the Chinese state in the host country.

## 5. INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the largest groups of Chinese living overseas comprise Chinese students. As was seen earlier, the number of this group has grown dramatically in recent years. The Chinese state has prioritised the internationalisation of higher education for reason of national pride, technological advancement and economic development. Outside China, the aim of the internationalisation of higher education is to spread Chinese language and culture as well as state narratives.

An arm of this strategy is the Confucius Institute. These institutes are partnerships with universities and institutions around the world aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture. Confucius Institute directors are often appointed by *hanban*, the Office of Chinese Language Council International which is the headquarters for Confucius Institutes worldwide; *hanban* is in turn governed by a number of Chinese ministries and commissions and overseen by the State Council (Lo and Pan, 2020). Confucius Institutes are considered to be a strategy of China's projection of soft power (Lo and Pan 2016; Yang, 2010), and have been described as 'self-managed bubbles within their host institutions, within which Chinese government's censorship norms apply' (Lahtinen, 2015, p. 213); they have also been regarded as institutions that undermine academic freedom (Shambaugh, 2015), and as a potential source of foreign influence (Zhou and Smee, 2019). For these reasons, a number of universities in the US and other parts of the world have severed their relationship with them while, in Australia, the government opened an investigation into whether agreements between universities and Confucius Institutes violate anti-foreign interference laws (Jakhar, 2019; Redden, 2019).

Within higher education, another potential source of influence comprise overseas Chinese students. Lo and Pan (2020) have described this as a form of 'people-to-people diplomacy' (p. 6): the idea is that overseas students are mobilised to 'export China's values and standards ... socialising world audiences to Chinese visions and values' (p. 5).

## 6. CHINESE STUDENTS AT THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE CONCEPTION OF DIASPORA AND THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Hamilton and Ohlberg (2020), 'Xi Jinping (has) designated Chinese students abroad as a new and important focus for united front work' (p. 122). 'United front work' is a CCP strategy in which countries or groups are divided into the enemy, the neutral and the friendly, and the aim is to isolate the enemy and move everyone else to a friendly or, at least, neutral position (Parton,



2021). In 2016, a Chinese Ministry of Education publication announced the intention of the Chinese state to:

‘Harness the patriotic capabilities of overseas students, establish an overseas propaganda model which uses people as its medium and the sharing of personal ideas as its instrument, and create a propaganda effect where everybody plays a role, where every individual acts as a people-to-people ambassador, where every sentence uttered easily reaches the hearts and minds [of foreign publics]’.

- Ministry of Education 2016 (cited in Bislev, 2017, p. 82)

Indeed, Lo and Pan (2020) have characterised the internationalisation of China’s higher education as ‘soft power with Chinese characteristics’. Bislev describes it as using ‘non-governmental elements in its public diplomacy’ (2017, p. 82).

In the university classroom, person-to-person diplomacy can take the form of Chinese students expressing state sanctioned views, acting perhaps as unwitting apologists for the Chinese state. It is possible that, over the course of a degree, these students come to appreciate a diversity of views and find their voice and develop their own opinions. However, the sheer number of Chinese students in the classroom and the stridency with their state-sanctioned views are sometimes expressed can be intimidating to students who may not subscribe to such views, e.g. those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Western students may also be reluctant to challenge such views for fear of appearing racist or failing to appreciate cultural difference. This has certainly been the experience of one of the authors of this article.

There are occasions where Chinese overseas students have been known to go further, mobilising to critique and drown out dissenting voices. He (2014) has written an account of how those seeking to keep alive overseas the memory of students killed at Tiananmen have been intimidated and verbally attacked as liars and criminals by overseas Chinese students (pp. 5 and 25). In 2019, following student protests in Hong Kong, overseas Chinese students were reported to engage in aggressive, sometimes even violent, action. At the University of California, Davis, in the US, supporters of Hong Kong protesters were ‘confronted by classmates who grabbed their Hong Kong flag, broke the pole and threw it into the trash’ (Goldberg, 2019). At the University of Queensland in Australia, counter-demonstrators similarly tore down banners of supporters of Hong Kong protestors, ‘punching and shoving’; they were subsequently praised by the Brisbane Chinese Consul-General, Xu Jie, for their ‘patriotic behaviour’ (Zhou and Smee, 2019). Such approval would have been understood as support for and encouragement of their actions.

Hence, the use of the internationalisation of higher education as soft power is usually conceived in terms of benefit to the host country. In the case of China, however, it is seen in terms of benefit to the sending country: whether or not they are aware of this, overseas Chinese students are given the role of people-to-

people ambassadors and expected to reproduce state narratives and, where appropriate, act to defend these.

Allowing a large and increasing number of students to further their education overseas addresses the demand for international education among the elite and middle classes in China. It also takes advantage of what is – for China – a fortuitous situation where many universities in the West are facing funding cuts and have, as a result, become increasingly reliant on international student fees to make up the deficit. As Chinese students have become a major source of this income, universities are increasingly exposed to their form of soft power and, as will be seen, the potential for this to be wielded more coercively.

In the following sections, we will examine the strategies that support the internationalisation of higher education as soft power, viz. ideological and political education, the conception of diaspora, and the role of embassies and student associations.

### *Ideological and Political Education (IPE)*

To begin with, Chinese students are inoculated against Western mores and ideas by a lifetime of ideological and political education (思想政治教育). Lo and Pan (2020) note that, within China, Xi Jinping has ensured the allegiance of universities to the CCP, but the point can be made that the allegiance of young Chinese to the party is ensured as well. From Year 1, or the age of 6, until they complete their education and enter the job market, Chinese students undergo mandatory ideological and political education (IPE), an examinable subject. Through this, they are socialised into loving the nation, the party and socialism (Party Committee of Ministry of Education, 2016). IPE is the platform through which the state fosters morality and patriotism, teaches socialism with Chinese characteristics, and promotes support for the party leadership (Chen, 2018; Li, 2011; Zhou *et al.*, 2011). Patriotism is described in an IPE textbook as the ‘spiritual gene for the *Zhonghuaminzu* (Chinese nation)’ (our translation, Ideological-Political Education Research Group 2018, p. 199); the term ‘spiritual gene’ implies a notion of Chinese identity with ethnocultural connotations. In the same textbook, the establishment of the PRC under the CCP is described as ‘the end of oppression and colonisation of the *Zhonghuaminzu* (the Chinese nation) by imperialist powers’ (our translation, Ideology-Political Education Research Group, 2018, p. 213). Here, there is not only a reference to the hundred years of humiliation to which China is often portrayed as having been subjected, but also the role of the CCP in ending it. In addition, the textbooks also emphasise, as part of patriotism, the need to uphold national dignity when abroad (Vickers, 2009). There is therefore the clear message that young Chinese need to protect China’s image, reputation and interests, particularly when ‘hostile forces’ seek to ‘tarnish’ China (Cui, 2015).

At university, students are required to take courses in ideological and political education, where they are taught the ‘thought’ of political leaders. By the time they leave for education overseas, they are very familiar with the narrative of China’s hundred years of humiliation by the West, well versed in ideas such as socialism with Chinese characteristics, well armed with arguments against potential criticisms by ‘hostile Western forces’, and alert to the dangers of subversive ideas (渗透) (Chen, 2016). The use of IPE does not of course necessarily ensure its effectiveness. There is the role of personal agency in the learning process that needs to be considered. There is also anecdotal evidence that students find IPE lectures boring and some use the time to do other things, like taking naps or checking their email (Chinese students, personal communication).

Nonetheless, the messages in IPE reflect and reinforce the wider narratives of patriotic education (*aiguozhuyi jiaoyu*); this is a society wide campaign in the 1990s that emphasises, among other things, ‘interference in China’s domestic affairs by hostile foreign forces’ (Zhao, 2004, pp. 232–233). Young Chinese are therefore primed to see foreigners as potential ‘hostile forces’ and to interpret what they say and do as a censure to the motherland which necessitates their having to defend it. In addition, the sheer number of overseas students means that – as a group – they are a tool that can potentially be wielded more coercively. In 2020, following deteriorating relations with Australia, China imposed a series of measures on Australian goods, including tariffs on barley and suspension of beef imports (Khalil, 2020). In addition, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education jointly issued the ‘The First Overseas Study Warning’ which stated that there were ‘numerous racist cases targeting ethnic Chinese in Australia’ during the Covid-19 pandemic, and recommended that Chinese students might like to carefully consider their plans to study in Australia (our translation, Ministry of Education, 2020). Although racist incidents involving Chinese students had been reported in a number of Western countries during the pandemic, the warning notice was only issued for Australia. Education agencies in China subsequently reported that enquiries about international study in Australia had ‘plunged’ (骤降) (National Business Daily, 2020), although an Australian news report noted that the drop in applications from China in a pandemic year was ‘only’ 44% compared to figures from other countries (Bolton, 2020). The strength of a threat to turn off the supply of students is likely to be proportional to the dependence of the university or the higher education sector on international fees from these students.

Hence, ideological and political education is designed to turn young Chinese into apologists for their country while, as a group, there is the potential for converting this form of soft power into a more coercive instrument.

*Appeal to the Conception of Diaspora*

In addition to appealing to students' love for party, nation and socialism, there is also an appeal to their ethnocultural identity. It was earlier seen how an essentialist, ethnocultural conception of diaspora is directed at Chinese living overseas. The same conception is also aimed at overseas students. During a visit to Australia in 2014, Xi was reported as saying to Chinese students:

'We are all descendants of the dragon and Yan Huang Zisun [descendants of mythical Chinese ancestors Yan and Huang] and there is the same shared emotion flowing between us for a common vision to work together ...' (our translation)

- Xi Jinping (cited in Xinhua News Agency, 2014)

In this, Xi appeals to a mythical common ancestry shared by all ethnic Chinese. In another speech, he calls on students' patriotism and pride in 'the increasingly powerful motherland' (Xinhua News Agency, 2017). As he wrote to Chinese students at Lomonosov Moscow State University:

'If young people have ideals, talent and responsibility, our nation will have promise and our Chinese nation will have hope. To bring about a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the Chinese Dream, we cannot do without the efforts of Chinese young people from one generation to the next generation. I hope all of you carry forward the tradition of international study to serve the Chinese nation, aim high, [and] work hard to become excellent talents ...' (our translation)

- Xi Jinping (Xinhua News Agency, 2017)

In a similar way to Chinese living overseas, therefore, Chinese students are valued for their ideals and talents, which are deemed necessary for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the attainment of the Chinese Dream. The appeal to patriotism and the reference to 'serving' the Chinese nation could also be interpreted to mean carrying out united front work in the host country. To support students in this role, there are organisations like student associations and embassies which link them to the Chinese state.

*The Chinese Embassy and Overseas Students*

Chinese embassies abroad – including those in the UK and US - have a department known as the *Qiaowu Chu* (Department of Overseas Chinese Affairs (Embassy of PRC in the UK, 2020; Embassy of PRC in the US, Embassy of the PRC in the US, 2020). This department supports and maintains ties with overseas Chinese associations. To (2014) traces the current emphasis on *qiaowu* (overseas Chinese affairs) to the aftermath of Tiananmen Square and the subsequent efforts of the CCP to regain control of its image. To describes this emphasis as 'pro-actively guiding, fostering, manipulating, and influencing OC [overseas Chinese] identity and behaviour for the purposes of constructing

an international environment friendly to China's global ambitions' (To, 2014, p. 286). This effort applies to students within the diaspora as well.

Once they arrive overseas, the Chinese state maintains relations with, and monitors and seeks to influence the conduct of students through its embassies. Chinese embassies support overseas students as most embassies do. During the 2020 pandemic, for example, Chinese embassies sent to the residential addresses of students at British universities care packages containing face masks, sanitary gel and medicines which were then in very short supply (Chinese student, personal communication). The package that these came in featured prominently the words, '祖国永远在身边' or 'The motherland is forever at your side' (Chinese student, personal communication). This had the effect of reminding students that the Chinese state cared about them at a time when they were isolated and 'abandoned' by the host country. It could also be a reminder that the Chinese authorities were figuratively and literally never far from them.

The role of the Chinese embassy may go beyond that of most embassies. For example, Chinese embassies are known to organise events for students on themes relating to patriotism, e.g. discussion forums on national security issues like the Diaoyu Island and the South China Sea (Embassy of PRC in the UK, Embassy of PRC in UK, 2016; UK Study Service Web, 2012). At one forum, an embassy official urged overseas students to 'advance the friendship between China and the UK, and carry forward the tradition of patriotism among overseas students in the UK' (UK Study Service Web, 2012). This would have been understood by Chinese students to mean that personal and national interests were intertwined, with the implication it was in one's interests to defend the latter.

Apart from contact with and directly seeking to influence students through its events, Chinese embassies can also monitor and influence students through student associations.

#### *Chinese Student and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) and CSSAUK and the relationship with Chinese embassies*

With substantial numbers of students overseas, a growing number of student organisations have been set up at overseas universities, and Chinese students are likely to come into contact with these groups during their time abroad. Numerous Chinese universities have alumni associations in the UK. There are also groups set up on the basis of past affiliations, e.g. UK Tsinghua Association (UK Tsinghua Association (全英清华校友会), 2020) and Peking University Alumni Association UK (Peking University Alumni Association in the United Kingdom (北京大学全英校友会), 2020). A group that is found in most universities is the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA). In the UK,

these associations are co-ordinated by an overarching organisation, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association UK (CSSAUK).

With respect to the CSSAUK's organisational structure, there are similarities between this and that of the CCP (CSSAUK, 2020; The Communist Party of China (CCP), 2020). Where the CSSAUK has the Presidium, the Secretary Office, the Organisation Section, the Liaison Section, and the Publicity and Network Section, the CCP has the Politburo Standing Committee, the General Office, the Organisation Department, the International Liaison Department, and the Publicity Department (Figure 1).

Even though the CSSAUK is a voluntary organisation founded and run by students, its organisational structure and relationship with the Chinese embassy makes it a 'partially official' organisation (former CSSAUK insider, personal communication). According to a former CSSAUK insider, the Chinese embassy's Education Section (*Jiaoyu Chu*) oversees the CSSAs and CSSAUK, and provides guidance and funding to them. Activities organised with these funds may not necessarily be political in nature but the provision of funds establishes a governing relationship between the embassy (and, through it, the Chinese state) and student organisations. The closeness of the relationship between the embassy and student groups depends on the Education Counsellor (the leader of the Education Section) in post, but generally the CSSAs and CSSAUK comply with the guidance provided by the Education Section.

In recent years, the CSSAUK has organised student activities including discussions on the counter-protests against the supporters of the Hong Kong demonstrators (CSSAUK, 2019b). Such activities have the potential to encourage students to become involved in promoting state narratives and, in so doing, contribute to united front work in the UK.

Saul (2017) has described Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) in the US and elsewhere as working with Chinese embassies and Beijing to 'promote a pro-Chinese agenda and tamp down anti-Chinese speeches on Western campuses'. She provides examples where CCSA members have tried to influence decisions and activities at universities, e.g. reverse the decision of University of California (San Diego) to invite the Dalai Lama to make a commencement speech. A *Foreign Policy* report found that CSSAs in the US 'regularly accept funds from local consulates and many officially describe themselves as under the "guidance" or "leadership" of the embassy' (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2018). Occasionally, innocuous activities by overseas student associations and links between the CSSAs and embassies shade over into something that is seen as problematic. In 2019, the students union at McMaster University in Canada stripped its CSSA of official club status; the specific incident that led to this was the disruption of a talk by a Uighur activist by Chinese students who filmed the event and reported it to the Chinese consulate (Mowat, 2019; Owen, 2019).

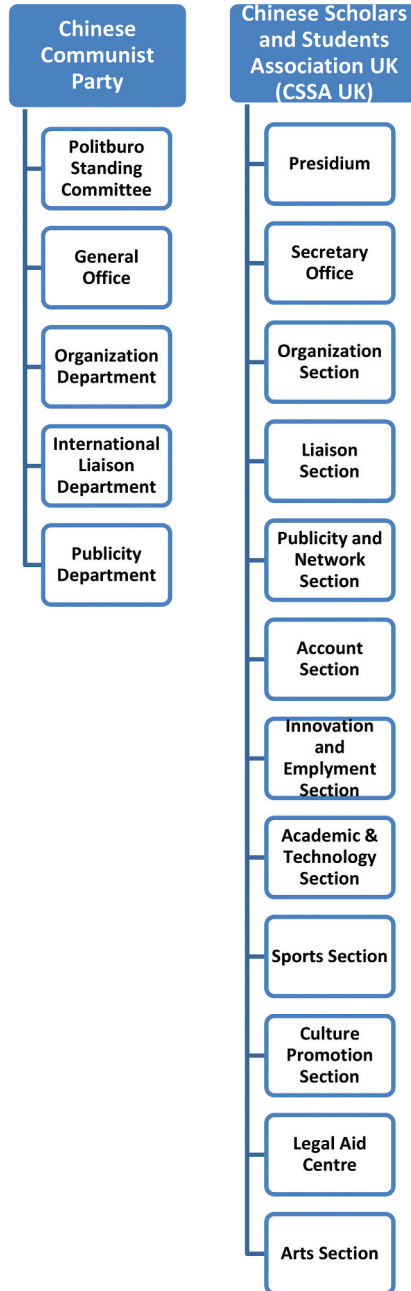


Figure 1. The organisational structure of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association UK

In summary, the relationship between CSSAs and the co-ordinating organisation the CSSAUK and Chinese embassies creates a channel that allows the Chinese state to extend a form of governance over overseas students. In addition, the relationship between student organisations and Chinese embassies is part of a broader set of strategies – including a conception of the diaspora and a lifetime of ideological and political education – that prepares students for and supports them in their role as (perhaps unwitting) apologists and ambassadors of the Chinese state.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Overseas Chinese students are located at the nexus between two strategies of soft power – a conception of the Chinese diaspora and the internationalisation of higher education. The former strategy calls on overseas students to contribute to China's projects and economic development, while the latter requires them to be patriotic and act as ambassadors of the motherland. In order that students fulfil these roles, the Chinese state employs a number of supporting strategies.

To begin with, students are prepared by a lifetime of ideological and political education in which they are imbued with a set of state approved views as well as a sense of pride arising from their membership of a rising China and the Chinese diaspora. They are primed to interpret views that differ from state narratives as criticism of the motherland and to defend 'national dignity' from 'Western hostile forces'. Once abroad, they are guided in their role in person-to-person diplomacy by the local embassy and student associations. It was argued that the relationship between student groups like the CSSAUK and the local embassy creates a channel for the state to exercise governance over the students.

Finally, students are not only tools for diplomacy at an individual level, there is potential for them – as a group – to be wielded in a more coercive way. Where there have been bilateral disputes – e.g. between the PRC and Australia – the supply of students can potentially be turned off to demonstrate the other's vulnerability and provide incentive to comply with China's strictures.

While soft power in the internationalisation of higher education is often conceived in terms of benefit to the host country, the Chinese state is distinctive in that it sees this in terms of benefit to itself as the sending state. In their – perhaps unwitting – role as person-to-person ambassadors, students are expected reproduce state sanctioned views in the classroom to try and persuade lecturers and fellow students of the reasonableness of the Chinese state. There have been troubling reports of instances where students have taken stronger action, sometimes – it appears – with the tacit support of the local embassy.

China's approach is also distinctive in terms of its comprehensiveness: there is the lifetime of ideological and political education that forms the preparatory work, the conception of the diaspora that is promoted by Xi himself, and the



relationship between the student associations and local embassies that need to be nurtured and maintained. All this requires considerable organisation, co-ordination, commitment and resources. Together, these create the potential for the governance of overseas students in their role in the national agenda of Chinese soft power.

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#### DISCLOSURE OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Diaspora in the making' is a term that has been used, among others, by Choi (2003), Mai (2005) and Sadouni (2009)
- <sup>2</sup> *Guanxi* refers to social networks or relationships in Chinese societies associated with sentiment, human feeling, 'face' and reciprocity (Gold *et al*, Gold *et al.*, 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> '海外侨胞' is usually translated as 'overseas brotherhood'. A more inclusive translation would be 'overseas fellowship'.

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