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EXPERIENCES, MOTIVATIONS AND
PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE LEARNERS IN CAPE
TOWN

*AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE
AND THE CHINESE SCHOOL IN CAPE TOWN*

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PhD

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Department for Applied Social Sciences

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Fenja Monique Rimkus

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
March 2018

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Abstract

Contemporary academic debates surrounding China-Africa relations are overwhelmingly dictated by economic, financial and ideological aspirations. Cultural interactions and concern for local perceptions still remain in a marginalized position within this global debate. However, one debate in particular concerning China's cultural interactions is becoming increasingly noticeable in academic debates: the debate surrounding Confucius Institutes. Scholars and journalists predominantly argue on the basis of macro-level research and consequently identify Confucius Institutes as soft power wielding instruments of the Chinese government, which the regime uses to enhance China's image and thus sustains the host country's current position. Within the context of China-Africa relations, Confucius Institutes are believed to be especially influential as there is no existing infrastructure for Chinese language learning on the African continent. In order to examine this generalized statement, this study is based on the African country with the most Confucius Institutes (five) present: South Africa (more specifically Cape Town).

The trend towards macro-level analysis in the existing scholarship on this topic unconsciously marginalizes the perceptions and motivations composing the micro-level and is heavily built upon the thought that soft power influences its recipients unconditionally. This dissertation sets out to prove therefore that the recipients have their own self-reflexive agency and are not merely susceptible to the influence a state entity wields through soft power. The aim is to unravel the voices on the ground through auto-ethnographic and ethnographic methodologies in order to study perceptions and motivations that are informed by previous experiences of the people who engage with the Confucius Institute, which is funded by the Chinese government and the local Chinese School, which is partly funded through the Taiwanese government. The findings show — through the inclusion of polyphonic opinions — that only people with specific past experiences tend to engage with the Confucius Institute or the Chinese School to study the Chinese language. Additionally, by including the social life-worlds of people in regards to this research topic, it becomes obvious that also the socio-demographic settings of these institutes play a role in the level of influence they are able to exert rather than soft power.

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List of Abbreviations

ANC: African National Congress

CI: Confucius Institute

CIUCT: Confucius Institute at the University of Cape Town

CT: Cape Town

FOCAC: Forum on China Africa Cooperation

GZ: Goethe 'Zentrum'

Hanban: Office for Chinese Language Council International/ Confucius Institute Headquarter

HSK: Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (Chinese Proficiency Examination)

IAPO: International Academic Programmes Office

IR: International Relations

KMT: Kuomintang

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

NOCFL: National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

PRC: People's Republic of China

ROC: Republic of China (Taiwan)

SADTU: South African Democratic Teachers' Union

RSA: Republic of South Africa

TAZARA: Tanzania – Zambia Railway

UCT: University of Cape Town

UN: United Nations

VOC: Dutch East India Company

WPCA: Western Province Chinese Association

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context

‘China’s Rise’, denoting China’s recent emergence as a political, economic and military global power, has become one of the most discussed global topics of the past decade. Experiencing extraordinary economic development since the introduction of a new economic era by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has expanded its financial and industrial wings across the world. This endeavor set out to create long-lasting bi-lateral relationships across the globe with immense pace, which to some extent left the rest of the world questioning China’s ambitions — especially with regards to developing countries. The African continent in particular occupies an important role within this much-discussed debate on China’s global engagement. While interactions between China and African countries cannot be considered a novelty, since they can be traced back to the 15th century, the intensity of China’s ‘new engagement’ in Africa has increased exponentially during the last decades. These interactions reached their peak and were further validated with the establishment of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, boosting the Chinese presence on the continent through manifold investments and bilateral agreements concerning virtually every sector. This engagement triggered not only global surprise but also exceptional quantities of scholars and journalists engaging with the development of this topic, creating a strand of scholarship that has tended to profoundly generalize the complex and multi-layered nature of the relationship between China and the African continent; a generalization that is not only based on predominantly political and economic lenses, but also carries a notion of post-/or neo-colonialism. Too often the focus is solely laid on ‘China’s involvement in Africa’, a frame that implies a lack of agency of the people on the ground. This results in an unbalanced and generalized representation within the debate that usually ignores the micro-layers within this complex depiction.

However, another dimension of ‘China’s engagement’ on the African continent is surfacing and gaining importance. This dimension is characterized by cultural exchanges and interactions. China is not only investing in infrastructure and telecommunication, but it has further turned its focus towards educational training as well as cultural and language promotional activities. Although this facet of China-Africa interaction is likewise not a new phenomenon as educational scholarships have been offered to African students in the past,¹ it has surfaced as another layer within the current debate that is yet to receive further torrents of critical opinion. Within this context, scholarly engagement with the umbrella theory of soft power is ubiquitous. Once again a predominantly political lens is applied that primarily concentrates on state-level or high-profile perceptions, arguing over China’s quest to improve its image on the African continent to retain its current diplomatic and economic position. Soft power in its most basic conceptualization can be defined as the “[...] ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”²

In the age of global interconnectivity, the exchange of cultures, knowledge sharing and cultural training have without doubt featured as essential components of international cooperation and have fed into the popularity of the debate surrounding the Confucius Institutes (CIs). These institutes are language and culture promotional associations, which are connected to the PRC government. In aspiring to create or maintain prosperous economic interactions with the PRC, numerous people around the world attempt to learn and understand Chinese language and culture precisely because they see the necessity of understanding the cultural background of Chinese individuals and institutions they engage or wish to engage with. For many, as portrayed throughout aforementioned scholarly and journalistic assumptions, it has become increasingly important — especially in the context of ‘China’s Rise’ and its future outlook³ — to deal with the newly emerging global power.

¹ (Sautman, 1994, p. 413)

² (Nye Jr, 2008, p. 94)

³ (see Acharya, 2014; Ikanberry, 2008; Lippit, 2011; Lynch, 2015)

This plays further into the perception of the globally growing demand for language and cultural training, accrediting ample importance to the Confucius Institutes, which are currently being established all over the world, parallel to the pace typically associated with the recent development of the PRC. Confucius Institutes are non-profit making institutions, which are — at least on paper — generally guided and to a certain extent controlled by the Hanban. The Hanban is in turn affiliated with the Ministry of Education and hence the Government of the PRC.

At the time of its 13-year anniversary in 2017, over 525 Confucius Institutes were in operation and additionally 1113 ‘Confucius Classrooms’⁴ have been established in more than 146 countries around the world.⁵ The largest number of CIs in a single country can be found in the United States of America with approximately 110⁶ institutes, while Europe displays the most continent-wise with 173.⁷ The establishment of institutes in developing countries is increasing continuously, especially in Africa, with approximately 54 institutes operating across the entire continent according to the annual development report of 2017.⁸ South Africa is currently the country with the most operational Confucius Institutes on the continent.⁹ South Africa has therefore been chosen as the entry point for this research.

Seemingly coming out of nowhere for many, the rapid pace of not only the establishment of the CIs but also China’s international economic, financial and now cultural involvement all over the world have left the international community largely unable to comprehend the complexity of China’s intentions, especially when it comes to China’s soft power expansion.

⁴ For the purpose of completeness: “Confucius Classrooms are local hubs that stimulate and support the innovative teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture. They are cooperative projects between an existing Confucius Institute and local educational institutions based on their common goal of enhancing intercultural understanding” (North Carolina State University, 2018) The classrooms will, however, not be subject of in-depth research in this thesis.

⁵ (Hanban, 2017, p. 5)

⁶ The final numbers can only be estimated, since they deviate from website to officially published annual development report.

⁷ (Hanban, 2014a)

⁸ (Hanban, 2017)

⁹ (Hanban, 2014a)

However many of the statements towards China's soft power strategies present a generalized image that marginalizes micro-narratives within an overarching debate that is loaded with political sentiment, especially in relation to Confucius Institutes. In our globalized world, speaking languages becomes a necessity to compete economically or to simply interact with each other. Yes, China is becoming more visible on the global stage, but that does not give us the right to judge their global distribution of culture and language institutions on the basis of an analysis heavily biased towards the macro-perspective. Especially when so many other language and cultural promotional associations from other countries have already existed for decades. In fact, what is missing within the existing debate is a representation of peoples' agencies on the ground, which is very often non-existent or at best reduced to a representation of generalized and objectified groups of people seemingly without identity and previously gained experiences that might have influenced their decision-making process. This becomes especially important in regards to the soft power quest that China is currently following to improve its image in the world, which ultimately disregards the individual competence of dealing with information selectively as well as self-reflexively. In order to discover how people actually negotiate the information received in language and culture promotional associations, we need to ask ourselves, why do people decide to learn Chinese or engage with other languages? Are their decisions really based or fortified by soft power influences? What are the nuances within these decisions and on what experiences are they based? Are these individuals really just recipients?

Entangled with the established image of China in academia and global news outlets, the general mission statement for the Confucius Institute brand, as published by the Hanban, reads thus:

“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 multiculturalism, and to construct a harmonious world.”¹⁰

This statement has triggered an underlying debate regarding the ultimate purpose and motivation of the Chinese government in the establishment of CI's across the world, which the Chinese government recently acknowledged as connected to China's diplomatic endeavors in a new official paper regarding these institutes.¹¹

This mission statement refers undoubtedly to a social audience that is expected to engage with the CIs. This audience is however largely under-represented in current soft power argumentations within this debate, because soft power as such seems to be treated largely as a 'one-way street', which is undoubtedly reminiscent of the 'magic bullet theory' or the 'hypodermic needle model'.¹² These concepts are heavily connected to mass communication models and theories about propaganda, implying that messages released by media can be implanted into the minds of an audience and consequently change their attitude without them knowing.¹³ This not only points towards a highly contentious image against the CIs in general, it once again shows how the agency of the audiences of the CIs in particular are mostly excluded within existing research on CIs. This is especially notable within the African context since research on this matter is only slowly catching up with the numerous new CIs that appear on the continent. Articles about South African CIs in particular are slowly increasing, as I will address in chapter 2. However, much of this research rarely acknowledges the voices of the audiences, let alone their experiences, their life worlds, the influence of the local setting or their personal perceptions on this matter. This is why my research sets out to assess this debate from a different angle with specific focus on one of the cities in South Africa — Cape Town. I aim to provide valuable anthropological knowledge and understanding

¹⁰ (Hanban, 2014c)

¹¹ (李穹, 2018)

¹² (see Berger, 1995; Lowery, 1995)

¹³ (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 82)

of the people who engage with the CIs by considering their experiences in order to scrutinize why they engage with the CIs or with Chinese in the first place. Within this context, it is further necessary to acknowledge that South Africa used to maintain official diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC) before changing its relationship to the PRC. Considering this will add valuable context in regards to the motivations and perceptions of Chinese learners throughout this thesis.

The realization of the need to address this research gap developed largely due to my own experiences in this field. After an exposure to the ‘China-Africa debate’ for almost a decade and the completion of my Masters’ studies working on Confucius Institutes in South Africa, I had the chance to work in a CI in Germany. This experience led towards a transition within my previously established academic understanding of CIs; suddenly I was exposed to people inside the CI as well as to people who engaged with the institute. I was able to listen to their opinions, perceptions and intentions. Having read academic and other — at times very negatively connoted — arguments about the CIs, I found myself observing the interactions between employees and people engaging with the CI quite intensely. To my surprise, almost none of the employees followed a strict pre-set structure of regulations regarding what they are able or not able to do, and they did not seem overtly influenced by the Hanban either. All of the local employees had spent several years of their lives in China even before ‘China’s Rise’ became a tangible subject to academia and a global phenomenon. They often shared their experiences of both the positive and negative aspects of China. One of the employees spoke about his extensive tours as a travel guide in Xinjiang Province and Taiwan in front of a class of a vocational school. Questions regarding the relationship between Xinjiang and China came up and without hesitating he explained his opinion, without ‘sugar-coating’ the Chinese government. I myself gave a seminar on the ‘One-China-Policy’. I was further witnessing that a large part of the projects this institute offered were engaging with children. I found myself supervising a lot of group projects that involved the painting of Chinese opera masks with children as young as four years. Even though parents attended those projects sometimes

there was no large questioning about the cultural features behind this activity, they simply enjoyed the fact that the children had a good time. I further observed that the Confucius Institute, although having a broad range of services and activities on offer, was not so much concerned in bringing in as many new people as possible, but rather a lot of seminars about topics concerning China were visited by 'regulars'. These regulars had most of the time spent time in China themselves or studied Sinology at university, and thus were able to look back on manifold experiences they themselves had gained even before the CIs were founded.

Therefore, from my understanding, it was not the soft power aspect that attracted the audiences, it was the fact that the institute functioned much more as a physical space to share pre-established experiences and meet people who share the same passion for a different culture. The only times the institute could actually attract people who were not already aware of its existence, was by participating in larger international cultural festivals as representative of China and Chinese culture. At these festivals, however, the main people engaging in the activities were either individuals who brought a pre-established interest in China, or parents with their children, since most of the activities offered at these events revolved around crafting endeavors such as painting opera masks, paper cutting, stamp carving etc. Although these activities are commonly associated with Chinese culture, not many people actually asked about their origins; they mostly just enjoyed the possibility to see something new and keep their children busy for a moment until they moved on towards the Japanese drum section or to taste Ghanaian food.

Besides the cultural activities, this institute in Germany further offered Chinese language classes and HSK examinations. A Chinese teacher usually taught the classes, but one of the German employees also engaged in teaching activities and tea ceremonies. This was especially interesting to see because there were also a lot of interactions with the local Chinese community surrounding particular activities such as tea ceremonies. A Chinese friend of one of the German employees, who was also a Chinese tea specialist, often engaged in

activities at the Institute, without having any contact to the Hanban in China. These examples further reveal that a generalization of CIs is more than inappropriate, since the portrayal of social ‘life-worlds’ of employees and people who engage form individual and small communities that differ in each and every of these institutes.

Delving deeper and deeper into the academic literature on this field, I realized the deterministic and structuralist depiction of CIs on paper, which entailed the creation of apparently universal inner-processes of people who engage with the institutes by neglecting the voices, stories and opinions, which they bring to the institutes. Not only are the voices of the people engaging with CIs marginalized, but it also became obvious that academics and journalists alike refrain from going through the process of engaging with one of these institutes themselves and commonly simply use soft power arguments without actually including the social life worlds of the so-called recipients. These researchers often remain within their ivory tower as outsiders to the actual topic — or as Cissé puts it in a recent publication:

“We need to engage beyond the quick judgement and explore this China-Africa topic with a view to contribute to overcome challenges and address existing issues (...). For that a better analysis is needed — not only based on a literature reviews [sic] and desk-based research but also on fieldwork relying on our research ethics to deliver balanced empirical results”¹⁴

To forge the bridge back to the topic of this research, as it is generally argued within the wider debate, CIs are set up in African countries to improve China’s national image through the implementation of soft power strategies intended to stabilize China’s current associations with African countries. This, however, presents an argument that cannot deny the involvement of the society in which the CI operates. Why individuals decide to engage with CIs and how they do this will be focus of this research. Tackling this gap within the discourse, this research will apply a cultural-anthropological lens in order to highlight the

¹⁴ (Cissé, 2014 as quoted in King, 2017, p. 107)

perceptions and motivations of Chinese learners or individuals who decide to engage with Chinese language and culture in Cape Town. To highlight the inner-processes of the people that show why they study Chinese and why they engage with the Confucius Institute, this research is additionally utilizing the phenomenological philosophy in combination with dialogism. This enables me to represent a fuller picture, escaping the individualistic limitations of phenomenology. Finally, it allows the possibility to draw on auto-ethnographic as well as ethnographic methodology to present data collected as an insider and further to interact with people on the ground immediately and to access this much-discussed debate from a different angle through giving voice to the often ignored soft power recipients.

1.2. Research purpose

Since China's global language and culture promotion project was only officially launched relatively recently (2004), the body of work on this topic — although slowly increasing — is naturally still limited, especially when considering research conducted within an interdisciplinary framework. Whilst the political and economic dimensions of the relations between China and Africa are clearly of critical importance within this field of study, I wish to add another dimension to this discourse by shining a light on the micro-narratives that are rarely explored within the academic and media discourses. Several voices of established professors like Kenneth King¹⁵ have pointed out that research on this matter faces many shortcomings within the current representation in academia. Confucius Institutes are, on the micro-level, premised on an audience that brings reasons and experiences to the institutes. Hence, the opinions and perceptions of those on the ground that are directly engaging with the Institutes at the local level should be heard in order to unravel what the voices of local people have to say in regards to it. This also entails a reconstruction of the Institutes' activities on the ground and which are not less important to comprehend more what impact the institute has on

¹⁵ During the conference “China-Africa relations: Building images through Cultural Cooperation, Media Representation and Communication” in Nottingham — Jan. 14-16, 2016 — I had the honor to talk to Kenneth King who consequently supported the addressing of this research gap.

engaging the local community. Therefore, this project will not only contribute valuable information of the methods through which the CIs operate and hence construct another layer within the discourse, but also it will further clarify and bridge current gaps within the debate by adding a more polyphonic and alternative input into the actual discourse. Moreover, this research will consider the social life-world of participants to allow the inclusion of the broader local setting they find themselves in, and discover other influences apart from China's soft power, like the socio-demographic settings of the CI in Cape Town or other possibilities to engage self-imposed with the Chinese language in a unstructured manner as facilitated through competing state-entities like the local Chinese School, which I will address in the following section. This then could consequently support or refute the potency of the predominant soft power claims in regards to the Confucius Institute and will — hopefully — open future research intentions to consider differences and local complexities in which CIs are being set, bearing in mind that societal and environmental variables can immensely influence their impact.

1.3. Research objective

“The human world can be and certainly is made to seem ‘impersonal’ — ontologised, institutionalised, sacralised, objectified, negated — but this is not its necessary or actual nature. Impersonalisation is a strategy, a rhetoric, an instrument to denaturalise the world. Notwithstanding, were one to look beneath the impersonal (categorical, stereotypical, generalised) surface of such a world, one would see the complexity, the multiplicity and diversity, the inconsistency and contradiction of a congeries of personal relations abutting against one another.”¹⁶

My research objective went through several self-reflexive processes and reformulation periods during my six months in the field (Jan. 25 – Jul. 26, 2016). Especially during the initial time in the field, it was reformulated over and over again, due to several obstacles I could not have anticipated even though I prepared extensively. I will portray these obstacles in-depth in chapter 4 during

¹⁶ (see Rapport, 1993; Rapport, 1997, p. 24)

my auto-ethnography. However, it is essential to mention how one discovery in the field had me reconsider many aspects of my study to a greater extent, especially because previous studies on the topic failed to discover or mention this altogether, which seems comprehensible when the largest part of research undertaken is based on perspectives from the outside.

During my second month in the field, following my intention to use auto-ethnography as a research methodology, I started to take classes at the Confucius Institute. During these classes I engaged in conversations with my classmates, who introduced me to the Chinese School. I then undertook some additional online research on how people would be able to find the CI online to enroll in classes. While doing so, I searched for ‘learning Chinese in Cape Town’. To my surprise the CI was not the first result that came up. Instead, a website connected to the Chinese School Cape Town appeared in front of me. This school is associated with the ‘Western Province Chinese Association.’¹⁷ It is a beneficiary of a funding stream that is distributed through the Overseas Chinese Culture and Education Foundations (財團法人海華文教基金會)¹⁸, which in turn receives to some extent financial input from the Taiwanese government.¹⁹ I will explain this in further detail in chapter 4.

This discovery not only caused me to rethink my research intention but it further supported my initial impression that the CI in Cape Town is not comparable to ‘a magic bullet’, especially not if there are several options to engage with Chinese language or culture in Cape Town offered by two internationally competing state entities — the Chinese government and the Taiwanese government. Having a second, Chinese-speaking influences on the ground makes a huge impact on China’s soft power efforts. Furthermore, it serves to highlight the complex issue of the ‘One-China-Policy’ and makes soft power claims in this context even more questionable.

¹⁷ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015c)

¹⁸ (財團法人海華文教基金會, 2018)

¹⁹ (Court of Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee Republic of China, 2015)

Therefore, inspired by my personal experiences as previously collected in the field for this research, as well as in reaction to current debates — or the obvious lack of debate — on this topic within academia, this work sets out to investigate the individual motivations, perceptions and experiences of local people engaging with Chinese language and culture. In order to adequately achieve this, the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School by in Cape Town will form the case studies for this specific research — the perceptions and motivations expressed by my participants about these institutes in particular. These two institutions are set up by competing state entities and therefore build a valid ground for questioning the potency of the existing soft power debate in regards to the Confucius Institutes.

In this context this research aspires primarily to present and highlight the social component in the form of self-imposed and unstructured Chinese learners within the debate as opposed to the mainstream reports that are oftentimes monopolized by institutional structures, theoretical and political generalizations, as exemplified by the soft power debate. This research acknowledges the fact that there are other possibilities to learn Chinese in Cape Town, for instance in the form of credit-bearing Chinese classes at the University of Cape Town (UCT), however based on the specific framework of this research and the fact that these are not available for the general public, these classes will not be a primary focus of this research and will only be mentioned in regards to the experiences some of the participants had.

In order to understand the self-imposed, unstructured Chinese learners I consider it necessary to step back from these international generalizations and towards a personal, individual experience that helps us understand the implications on the ground. Already Aldous Huxley emphasized that “[...]‘the general in any man’s conversation must always be converted into the particular and personal if you want to understand him’.”²⁰ This thesis therefore focuses closely on the personal narrative. In order to overcome impersonalizations and structuralistic, generalized institutionalization within this part of the debate I

²⁰ (Huxley, 1964 as quoted in Rapport, 1997, p. 12)

draw methodological inspiration from Rapport who argues that: “In eschewing the impersonalizing impulses of a Durkheimian social science, we can embrace a mode of writing which marries the literary to the social-scientific, which sees the social as always mediated by the individual, which accepts that ‘barbarous writing is bad social science’²¹”.²² This work is hence supposed to lead away from political institutionalization and structuralist understandings of the CIs and thus to counter the static discourse on CIs, in order to question the soft power argumentations by focusing instead on personalized narratives. Additionally, considering the Chinese School of Cape Town in this research will not only provide grounds for comparison but it will further foster a more pronounced understanding about the soft power undertakings of the PRC through the CI in Cape Town.

I therefore ultimately argue that the soft power debate that undergirds the purpose of the Confucius Institutes on the world stage in applied terms, as demonstrated by the given example of Cape Town, is deceptive and mostly ignores local agency. I further claim that the fact of engaging with Chinese language and culture depends on previous established experiences and the meanings these events created for each individual. These experiences — gained outside of the institutional setting — have a direct impact on the experiences students gain inside the institutes, which ultimately are more influential than any institutional set up or soft power-wielding attempt.

In order to reveal the peoples’ motivations and perceptions in particular as well as reconstructing experiences and values that led the participants to attend courses at the CI or the Chinese School, this study is based on a research framework that facilitated deductive as well as inductive measurements in order to overcome one-sided limitations. I further consider ethnographic data and auto-ethnographic experience essential to answer the two following research objectives:

²¹ (Campbell, 1989 as quoted in Rapport, 1997, p. 28)

²² (Rapport, 1997, p. 28)

- I. What were my participants' motivations to learn Chinese? What do they think about China/Taiwan and what are their plans in regards to Taiwan/China?
- II. Did they hear about the Confucius Institute/the Chinese School before engaging with it?
Why do they engage with the Confucius Institute or/and the Chinese School? What do they think about the Confucius Institute or/and the Chinese School?

1.4. Chapter overview

The following dissertation is comprised of six sections. The first section (following the introduction) — chapter 2, will provide an in-depth secondary literature review that establishes the necessary context for the research objective of this thesis. It provides an overview of the main frame in which the debate on CIs is predominantly depicted (soft power), and further provides the historical context of the two respective institutions in question. This chapter will then subsequently focus on reviewing the most important contributions in this field so far. Additionally, it will provide insights into the historical relations between South Africa and Taiwan and South Africa and China to create the adequate context for the two institutions in question. In the third chapter I will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the research as well as the methodology and its implications for the research. Chapter 4 will be the written account on the auto-ethnography I conducted in the field, which fostered my understanding towards my participants and creates validity for the reader regarding the next chapters. Chapter 5 and 6 will be concerned with answering my research objectives through presenting my ethnographic data on my participants' experiences, motivations and perceptions. Finally chapter 7 will summarize the outcomes of the research and point towards limitations and possible future undertakings.

2. Literature review — research in context

There are numerous academic articles, publications and websites contributing to the debate on China-Africa relations that address decades of interactions, with the main focusing on economic relations, financial assistance and diplomatic cooperation. However, with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000²³ and the subsequent formulation of an action plan for the African partners, as well as the release of the African Policy Paper in 2006,²⁴ the scope of cooperation has been widened and the focus has broadened to cover not only economic aspects of the relationship, but also to emphasize cultural exchange and educational training.²⁵ Ultimately, it also underlined the seriousness with which China is expanding its presence not only in Africa but also on the international stage.

Confronted by global critiques regarding its involvement in Africa, China began to formulate a strategy intended to improve its image among the nations of the world, consequently leading scholars and the media to shift their attention towards these newer features of China's engagement plans. A much-discussed pivotal element of this strategy is China's expansion of access to its culture and language, focusing on specially designed programs and institutions implemented by the Chinese government and the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL) — founded in 1987 — to promote the Chinese language and culture abroad.²⁶ Since the expansion, Confucius Institutes are, nowadays, an integral component of this strategy, intended to establish a transnational network for the promotion of Chinese language and culture. While these are not the first attempts to introduce the Chinese language on the African continent, along with the example of the Taiwanese influenced Chinese School in Cape Town²⁷ mentioned in the introduction earlier, the Confucius Institutes have become the subject of numerous studies, periodical articles and are

²³ (FOCAC, 2013)

²⁴ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2006)

²⁵ (Wenping, 2007, p. 28)

²⁶ (Ding, 2008, pp. 117-119)

²⁷ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015c)

subject to an exponentially growing debate that is almost entirely observed in the context of soft power and as a tool for China's public diplomacy. While globally these — often-negative — paradigms are carried on the basis of critiques that concern academic infiltration or espionage²⁸ these critiques are often based on tremendous generalizations as scholars like Kenneth King and Cissé have pointed out. Other high-level individuals like Liu Xiaoming, compare the flood of negative coverage on CIs with a “cold war mentality”.²⁹ To add further layers of confusion to the debate it is necessary to emphasize that although only a comparatively small amount of research has been undertaken within the field of China-Africa relations with regards to the establishment of CIs in Africa,³⁰ academics like Kenneth King highlight that there are less critiques existing about CIs then in other countries.³¹ While I will go into more detail about the existing research on CIs in Africa, with special focus on South Africa, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that these critiques are formed by merely addressing the institutional and political significance of these institutes.

Nonetheless, CIs are carried by an undeniable social component, a fact that most existing research refrains from acknowledging so far. This component appears through the people and their experiences, both within and outside the institutes. Informational exchange concerning China or the Chinese language occurs in various ways, often not related to state entities, that is why it is imperative that research acknowledge the actual people who engage with the CIs within their social life worlds so as to observe the actual bottom-up effect of the institutes themselves. Not only does the current body of research omit the social component, it almost entirely omits the particularities of the location or the presence of other state entities that might offer Mandarin classes. As I will show later in detail, the Taiwanese presence on the continent, albeit marginalized in its official diplomatic presence due to the ‘One-China-Policy’, offers opportunities to engage with culture and language as well. One example

²⁸ (King, 2017)

²⁹ (Liu cited in Ma, 2014, p. 4 as quoted in King, 2017, pp. 102-103)

³⁰ (see King, 2017)

³¹ (King, 2017, p. 105 ff.)

are the “Amitofo Care Centers”³² that are currently set up in eSwatini (former Swaziland) Namibia and Lesotho.³³ Keeping these facts in mind already implies a questionable effect of soft power when it comes to the CIs, not only within the context of ignoring the perceptions of the ‘recipients’ but also because the PRC does not seem to be the only Chinese speaking presence on the African continent.

The following sections aim to provide a sufficient overview of the pre-existing state of the art concerning the debate on CIs in South Africa by integrating it into the larger debate of the China-Africa relations, CIs on the African continent and general academic concepts that have been constructed regarding the CIs. Following this, I will provide the theoretical and methodological framework for this research in chapter 3.

This apparent connection between the CIs and soft power has been the initial entry point for creating the research objective of this thesis. Since this obviously unquestionable link exists, I believe it is crucial to provide an outline of the actual concept of soft power within the next sections.

2.1. The predominant concept within the Confucius Institute debate

The debate surrounding the Confucius Institutes as mentioned above revolves predominantly around soft power and cultural diplomacy frameworks. Nowadays, often fueled by Xi Jinping’s cultural soft power speeches,³⁴ these institutes are overwhelmingly portrayed or discussed as tools for the Chinese government to enhance their soft power or as an “instrument of cultural diplomacy”³⁵ especially on a global stage. These discussions never consider or give an adequate representation of the people who engage with the institutes

³² (Tukiri, 2017)

³³ (Tukiri, 2017) Note: The ‘Amitofo Care Centers’ are only mentioned for the purpose of exemplifying the Taiwanese presence on the African continent.

³⁴ (Shambaugh, 2015; Xinhua, 2014; Xinhuanet, 2007); Note: China’s diplomatic endeavors have been addressed by previous presidents as well, for more details (see 2013).

³⁵ (Hartig, 2010, p. 6)

and form the foundation of its service. Although the PRC admitted those soft power policy intentions within its general foreign policy framework, official statements and research about the CIs still provide an ambiguous image that often creates more doubts than gives answers.³⁶ Recent developments show, however, that the Chinese government has set out to acknowledge the importance of the CIs within diplomatic endeavors.³⁷

In 2009, James F. Paradise presented a comprehensive analysis of Confucius Institutes and their purpose, characterizing them as a soft power mechanism of the Chinese government employed to win allies around the world in order to justify its political beliefs. Paradise states that the Chinese government supervises most of the cultural and language promotional activities carried out by the CIs. In his article he examined to what extent Confucius Institutes are used as a tool to promote a more positive image of China in the world and to overcome the lack of attraction faced by the Chinese government, due to its divisive governing methods and ideals.³⁸ Paradise implemented of a comprehensive research program based on interviews combined with analysis of published institutional data and secondary sources, allowing him to ascertain findings with some certainty. He argues that the operation of Confucius Institutes in general cannot be seen purely as an instrument for soft power, although they do provide some integrated characteristics, which suits this idea. He characterizes them more as a “[...] type of impression management, an effort by China to craft a positive image of itself in a world fraught with danger”.³⁹

Being one of the first accounts on this topic in particular,⁴⁰ Paradise provides a general starting point for many other researchers.⁴¹ Putting this in the context of the research purpose of this thesis, there are two limitations that bear

³⁶ (see Sudworth, 2014)

³⁷ Note: This was addressed during the second meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Jan. 23, 2018. (李穹, 2018)

³⁸ (Paradise, 2009)

³⁹ (Paradise, 2009, p. 662)

⁴⁰ Note: Kurlantzick published a book in 2007, which mentions Confucius Institutes but the main topic of this book however are China’s global soft power endeavors. (Kurlantzick, 2007)

⁴¹ (Hartig, 2010; Hartig, 2012; Hubbert, 2014a; Lahtinen, 2015; Ngamsam, 2013; Pan, 2013)

mentioning. First, although he provides a coherent overview of the work and the administrative structure of the Confucius Institutes, he generalizes the geopolitical setting of the Confucius Institutes. He eliminates the idea that Confucius Institutes in different countries or locations may differ in some ways. Since this study will focus on Confucius Institutes in Africa, especially on one in South Africa, his work will contribute to the general informational and theoretical base. Second, Paradise's research was conducted in 2009; therefore recent developments within his study are not included but will be addressed within this research project. Although his study includes extensive qualitative research, the voices in his research remain high profile — there are almost no representatives of non-academic or non-political people engaging with the institutes or accounts on their personal motivations or experience. This is, in my opinion, the essential gap that needs to be addressed within the debate about the Confucius Institutes so as to properly understand how people engage with them, how they perceive them and their offers and, overall, to comprehend if they can persuade people as easily as many publications have emphasized.

But before delving deeper into the CI debate it is important to briefly address the original notion of soft power, its function and its interpretation especially in regards to China's ambitions within the existing body of research. I consider this imperative in order to provide deeper understanding and additionally open up the pathway to the existing research gap that this research wishes to address.

“What is soft power? It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.”⁴²

During the late 1980s, Harvard Professor Joseph Nye delved into the theoretical account on the concept of soft power, which helped establish a certain fame surrounding his person especially after publishing the book

⁴² (Nye Jr, 2004, p. x)

“Bound to Lead”.⁴³ Aiming to explain the extent of modern hegemonic stances in the globalized world with the focus on the US foreign policy intentions, Nye invoked the overarching concept behind political power. He initially distinguished between two different types of power — hard and soft power — that can be implemented within the respective national foreign policy. Both types of power strategies are used to achieve a certain goal usually important within bilateral or multilateral relations, hence it can be associated with foreign policy measurements on a macro-level, representing a top-down power mechanism. This power mechanism is sought to be applied by a respective state to achieve a certain outcome that can either be forced through inducements or coercion like military power or economic sanctions (hard power) or a state can promote certain values or ideals, which can guide others to emulate their example or simply increase attraction (soft power).⁴⁴

This comprises the so-called “second face of power”⁴⁵, or ‘co-optive power’, which operates mostly through attracting others by their “[...] national cohesion, culture, ideology and influence on international institutions.”⁴⁶ In short, soft power is mainly based on culture, political values and foreign policies⁴⁷ and can be defined as the “[...] ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”⁴⁸ Particularly, culture is often conceived as useful tool to stimulate attraction. Nye presents his understanding of culture in this context as a “[...] set of practices that create meaning for a society [...]”.⁴⁹ Upon further examination, the concept of culture as Nye understands it appears to be rather rigid, as he explains culture as being apparent in different allotropes. These allotropes are still frequently distinguished into high culture and popular culture features. While the first category is known for appealing to elites, referring to literature, the arts and education, the latter describes cultural activities like mass

⁴³ (Nye Jr, 1990)

⁴⁴ (Nye Jr, 2004, pp. 5-6)

⁴⁵ (Nye Jr, 2004, pp. 5-6)

⁴⁶ (Ding & Huang, 2006, p. 23)

⁴⁷ (Nye Jr, 2008, p. 97)

⁴⁸ (Nye Jr, 2008, p. 94)

⁴⁹ (Nye Jr, 2008, p. 96)

entertainment such as movies or pop music, etc.⁵⁰ Indeed, this explanation is comprehensible, however, it is also strikingly superficial. As the concept of culture is much discussed in academia, especially among anthropologists, it is necessary to consider that culture as such means very different things to each and every one of us,⁵¹ breaking it into an understandable concept makes it simpler to elaborate on it but it does not cope with the agency of individuals or their experiences. Above all, it does not provide insights on how these individuals comprehend notions of cultures or interact with what for them, represents the cultural essence of a certain country or ethnicity. This is indeed a fact that will be important to keep in mind for the upcoming data chapters.

The use of soft power only recently obtained a fairly important status within the implementation process of bilateral and multilateral agreements, being especially discussed within the global fight for national recognition. It further became indispensable within the scope of creating partnerships between countries based on mutual understanding and shared values. However, the use of various power strategies, as emphasized among others apart from Nye (2004), within a framework of international relations is not a recent phenomenon. Centuries ago, when warfare and aggressive interactions between nations were an essential part of establishing power relations and acquiring prestige, there was less need for creating relations based on mutual beneficial grounds. Power was used in the form of posing threats or fear in order to ensure superiority. With industrialization, advanced technologies and an increased extension of e-communication around the world, this approach has changed. Information and knowledge can be translated into power and hence the strategic approach to achieve the desired outcomes is different. A stronger emphasis on benevolent power execution has become the focus of attention within the global stage of interaction.⁵²

Although becoming famous in research and foreign policy making, especially along with China's rapid economic expansions on the global stage, the term

⁵⁰ (Nye Jr, 2008, p. 96)

⁵¹ (Hobart, 2000)

⁵² (Nye Jr, 2004)

soft power spurred extended research concerning this concept. So much that it became a fashionable concept that increasingly showed up within publication titles and Google search results not only in academia but also in press and media releases within the last decade,⁵³ transforming the term a form of superficial “popular vernacular.”⁵⁴ Soft power further developed into a welcomed concept to address China’s not so ‘hard’ ambitions on the international stage especially revolving around China’s engagements within developing countries like Africa where educational exchange, as well as economic support and investments progressively increase as addressed above (chapter 2).

China’s international expansion of Chinese language learning in the form of Confucius Institutes falls into the soft power category. However, with the tremendous rise of focus on soft power, manifold critiques and different approaches appear as well. These numerous opinions and approaches have created a state of confusion⁵⁵ around soft power and its facilitation. Furthermore, it resulted in creating a ‘China’s soft power’ debate especially among academics and in the media.

The worldwide establishment of the Confucius Institutes has been time and time again connected to China’s soft power expansion. Especially the academic debate has drawn from this politically charged context. It is obvious, however, that most of these academic debates fail to acknowledge the sociological component within context of CIs. While there is a strong connection to the Chinese government visible in regards to the CIs, an underlying discontent and above all general suspicion is resonating among academic researchers working on this topic, many of them found in the US.⁵⁶ It becomes further visible that the existing literature is lop-sided when it comes to anthropological research; research that focuses on the people who attend their classes, those who are considered the recipients of soft power. What further contributes to the lop-

⁵³ (see Flew, 2016; Lai & Lu, 2012)

⁵⁴ (Flew, 2016, p. 279 ff.)

⁵⁵ (Flew, 2016)

⁵⁶ (Peterson, 2017; Sahlins, 2013, 2015)

sided nature of the existing research is the fact that soft power is representing an influential construct that functions broadly and mostly through the establishment of attraction by using national culture, food, art, shared values etc.⁵⁷ While it is possible to apply soft power on a personal level, researchers normally refrain from doing so and, instead, the concept gets strongly connected to political goals, asserted through governments on a multinational stage. Nye states that “[s]oft power depends on a receptive audience [...]”,⁵⁸ which in the case of the Confucius Institutes is often portrayed as a one-way street. This, however, denies the agency as well as the ability to reflect of the people and the social environment they inhabit. While I do not wish to neglect the connection of the CIs with the soft power measures the Chinese government is currently installing through their foreign policy goals for the CIs,⁵⁹ I would like to emphasize the importance of the social life of the people who are the target audience, in this case in order to uncover the perceptions of the people about the CIs and China, and to argue that soft power asserted through the CIs is not simply absorbed by the people that are exposed to it and hence might not be a critique point to worry about when it comes to the CIs at all. I would further like to raise awareness about decision-making processes that are reliant on a person’s sum of previous experiences. These directly or indirectly wield influence on the perceptions of the individuals who engage with these institutes. These social worlds cannot be duplicated and hence play a major role in forming preferences but might not rely on soft power influence led by a certain language and culture promotional association no matter which state-entity is connected to it, as I will prove within the upcoming data chapters.

⁵⁷ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. 5 ff)

⁵⁸ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. 95)

⁵⁹ (李穹, 2018)

2.1.1. China's cultural diplomacy and its use in Africa

China's cultural/or public diplomacy is inevitably connected to its soft power intentions. For the purpose of completion, the following section will provide some insights and definitions into existing cultural diplomacy engagements of China on the African continent.

*“China's use of cultural diplomacy dates back to the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China; it is not something invented by the Chinese government in the last few years, as the popular myth of China's engagement in Africa via well-established “grand geopolitical strategy” suggests.”*⁶⁰

This research chose an African country as starting point in order to understand China's current public and cultural diplomacy strategy, especially on the African continent within the context of establishing CIs. To facilitate this, I consider it important to re-visit the reformation of the PRC in the 1950s. During this period of time Mao Zedong set out to completely revolutionize the existing cultural policy body. The aim was to establish a new socialist order away from old traditional norms leading to a reformed, new society. Culture, as one of the pillars to be transformed had to be re-modeled in order to suit socialist content; traditional cultural features like the Beijing opera were re-structured into a modern version to ensure the political mission statement that “[...] the past [had] to serve the present.”⁶¹ The result was that “traditional cultures were entirely transformed from a self-disciplined, spontaneous space into a government — dominated ideological tool.”⁶² Mao did not only domestically transform China's cultural landscape; his intentions further touched upon foreign cultural policy applications. This became especially visible when he applied his thought that “[...] foreign things serve China.”⁶³

Similarly, to overthrow traditional culture within China, old diplomatic relations that did not abide with the new socialist regime were terminated and foreign cultural and educational presences of any kind were prohibited within China. New relations with other socialist countries were sought in order to

⁶⁰ (Liu, 2008, p. 9)

⁶¹ (Zedong, 1964 as quoted in Liu, 2008, p. 14)

⁶² (Liu, 2008, p. 13)

⁶³ (Zedong, 1964 as quoted in Liu, 2008, p. 14)

promote the internal success of Mao's regime and "cultural exchanges with all socialist countries took place in all subject areas from literature, arts, education, physical education, and publishing to media, broadcasting, movies, libraries, museums, and the preservation of relics."⁶⁴ However, the socialist reform resulted instead, in a prosperous international cultural exchange, in China's isolation. Zhou Enlai, "[...] one of the central figures within the Communist Party [who later also] occupied the third rank within the community hierarchy [...]"⁶⁵ therefore opted for adopting a new course in terms of international relations and instead of focusing only on socialist countries, he emphasized an increase in economic and cultural relations. Delegations sent abroad focusing on art and culture were increased and cultural relations pronounced as one of the two pillars to carry foreign policy.⁶⁶ The use of culture to interact with foreign states is therefore not a recent phenomenon when it comes to China's foreign policy.

Moreover, in order to overcome the internal struggle and convince people of the pure necessity "[c]ultural diplomacy was [...] explained by the Chinese government as a way to develop civil (people-to-people) diplomacy, and civil (people-to-people) diplomacy was considered to be diplomacy with common people, non-governmental people, as both its subject and object,"⁶⁷ to make it more accessible. Similarly to the internal path, foreign policies were adjusted to foster trade and cultural exchange and were still interweaved. Isolation and the Cultural Revolution stained China's image, which needed to be cleared and cultural diplomacy appeared to be the obvious choice.⁶⁸

In the decades following 1976⁶⁹ China's course was set on economic development. Old cultural traditions were re-discovered and "the 'four modernisation' policy"⁷⁰ led to the integration of Western ideas and principles

⁶⁴ (see Liu, 2008, pp. 14-15, p. 15 for this specific quote)

⁶⁵ (Barnouin & Changgen, 2006, p. 3)

⁶⁶ (see Liu, 2008, p. 15)

⁶⁷ (Miu, 2006 as quoted in Liu, 2008, p. 15)

⁶⁸ (Liu, 2008, p. 16)

⁶⁹ Note: The Cultural Revolution continued to 1976 (see Barnouin & Changgen, 2006).

⁷⁰ (Liu, 2008, p. 16)

that should help their own development.⁷¹ This resulted in an increased importance of art works, artifacts and performances, as well as language being exhibited with the intention to initially attract expatriates and then the whole world.⁷² The country's culture was soon developed as a serious pillar to promote economic relations but also as signifier of a national identity in the age of globalization, especially from the 1990s onwards.

Additionally, at the same time during the 1990s, the international audience started to notice China's rise increasingly resulting in the creation of various, often-critical discourses around its culture and intentions.⁷³ Reacting to this global discourse the Chinese government realized the real potential of the country's culture, domestically and internationally, promoting "[...] culture as a bridge for business".⁷⁴ This consequently resulted in a strong emphasis on cultural promotion and image branding around the world. Allies that had been collected after the establishment of the PRC, African countries building a strong core here as explained above in the chapter on China-Africa relations, experienced this out-going strategy quite impressively. Liu refers here to cultural festivities like the 'Chinese Thematic Year of 2004' which "featured events such as 'Chinese Culture going to Africa'"⁷⁵ as the new starting point for China's cultural diplomacy intentions in Africa.⁷⁶ Since internally China steadily tried to expand the focus on its culture — even within the economic sector — it created a strong cultural industry to balance out the import-export quota.⁷⁷

The use of cultural diplomacy towards African and also Latin American countries was portrayed as a safe bet because different political structures and ideologies would offer an easier entry if applying traditional cultural

⁷¹ (see Meissner, 2002, p. 185)

⁷² (Liu, 2008, p. 17)

⁷³ (see Knight, 2006)

⁷⁴ (Liu, 2008, p. 17)

⁷⁵ (Liu, 2008, p. 17)

⁷⁶ (Liu, 2008, p. 17)

⁷⁷ (Liu, 2008, p. 18)

performances.⁷⁸ This further resulted in Western countries starting to criticize such activities as ‘creating leverage’ for China. The Chinese government furthermore implemented survey-based research to understand the local cultural markets. Additionally a lot of symposiums were held with high-level individuals from Africa and China to discuss the increasing “people-to-people”⁷⁹ contact and judging what does and what does not work for the greater public on the grounds. However, these activities were implemented while ignoring the actual practices on the ground as depicted by Schneider who states that this is a common routine when using cultural diplomacy (see above).

Guiding this back to one leg of this research, the Confucius Institutes, it becomes however obvious, that in comparison to other large scale economic and cultural exchanges, the establishment of those institutes on the African continent with currently about 54⁸⁰ institutes is rather slow. And although growing, this number is still comparably low if observing the numbers in North America with 122⁸¹ or Europe, 173⁸². Liu goes further by rather enthusiastically describing that the establishment of the Confucius Institutes is mostly economic in nature, to build a pathway to open up new markets for China’s cultural industry. She additionally states that before those institutes were introduced, Chinese culture centers already existed, presumably led by the PRC, as it is not quite clear judging from her text.⁸³ Confucius Institutes as a concept are therefore not entirely new to the continent but still considered to be part of “China’s peaceful ascent”,⁸⁴ although the presence of the ROC has been tangible for decades.⁸⁵ Even today, China’s mission is still seen as placing the institutes as a strategic move on the African continent for its overall foreign policy ambitions.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ (Liu, 2008, p. 20)

⁷⁹ (Liu, 2008, p. 21)

⁸⁰ (Hanban, 2017, p. 65)

⁸¹ (Hanban, 2017, p. 67)

⁸² (Hanban, 2017, p. 67)

⁸³ (Liu, 2008, pp. 32-33)

⁸⁴ (Liu, 2008, p. 34)

⁸⁵ (see Rich & Banerjee, 2015; Sim, 1971)

⁸⁶ (Liu, 2008, p. 34)

China's 'soft relations' with Africa as detailed described by Liu shows a good example for cultural diplomacy being observed as a 'one-way street'. This is especially tangible since she refrains from neither exploring interactions with the people on the ground nor the fact that not only the PRC was active on the African continent, but also the ROC — in terms of providing aid, or scholarships, just to mention a few examples.⁸⁷ Many of those interactions — as mentioned by Liu — are, however, only based on high-level exchanges like summits, which are seemingly only created for this very purpose. Although providing a somewhat useful overview about China's cultural diplomacy, her article also points towards a general inability to find a common definition for such a broad topic, which consequently creates confusions and a general lack of understanding. As visible, cultural diplomacy is further often only considered through purely economic and international relations perspectives. This then often eventuates in a rather lopsided portrayal of what this concept entails, leaving aside what the recipients on the ground concerns on a daily basis. It therefore refrains from questioning the opinions and perceptions of these ordinary people. The audience that is supposed to be on the receiving end of these diplomatic actions remains in the shadows.

Liu's research provides an in-depth overview into China-Africa relations under a cultural diplomacy angle, which exemplifies the confusions and differences between explaining China's understanding of it and those understandings from the West. Nevertheless, she fails to critically engage with the undertakings of the Chinese government and the obvious role it is playing in establishing a more positive image of China on the international stage, especially through establishing CIs. Although I do not think, that the CIs are able to influence the people on the ground, I do think it is necessary to engage critically with the representations given not only from the West, but also from China.

Concluding with this part of the literature review concerning soft power and Confucius Institutes, it can be said that soft power and its underlying mechanisms of public and cultural diplomacy are common techniques that are

⁸⁷ (Sim, 1971)

believed to induce certain attractions to facilitate political oriented outcomes. The aim was to demonstrate these mechanisms as somewhat emphasizing reciprocal interactions. In-depth examination with the matter shows however, that “[s]oft power is [...] difficult to wield, because [...] many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audiences.”⁸⁸ Connecting this to the debate on Confucius Institutes would imply that the people engaging with the Institutes and the local people are categorized as recipients. As formalized within the sections above, however, there is a notable research gap that points in this very direction. In current discourse, the perceptions of this key group are mostly neglected.

Additionally, some scholars have stated, “[...] publics have become more wary and sensitized about propaganda. Among editors and opinion leaders, credibility is a crucial resource, and an important source of soft power.”⁸⁹ This tends to be a pre-established notion within the context of the Confucius Institutes, as they are portrayed on academic and political levels as a mechanism to stabilize China’s credibility, especially within the China-Africa debate. The target audience however stays in the background. “Soft power rests on some shared values. That is why exchanges are often more effective than mere broadcasting. By definition, soft power means getting others to want the same outcome you want, and that requires understanding how they are hearing your messages and fine-tuning accordingly.”⁹⁰

Soft power is considered a mechanism in foreign policy employed to attract other countries. Hanban — or the CI Headquarters — which is located in Beijing, is connected to the government via the Ministry of Education. This is how CIs are usually connected to the soft power universe using public/cultural diplomacy. Hence it is assumed that the Hanban exercises certain controls on the individuals working in the institutes, so that they convey a critique-free, positive image of China.

⁸⁸ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. 99)

⁸⁹ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. 106)

⁹⁰ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. 111)

In my opinion, which is strongly based on my own experience, this dismisses the fact that the institutes are set up between a *local* institution and a Chinese one and hence it dismisses the actual interactions on the ground. Dispatched Chinese teachers may not conceal topics that are considered sensitive in the eyes of the Chinese government, and locally-employed staff, may not feel required to convey what the Hanban emphasizes. This by no means neglects the possibility that employees do convey what the Hanban dictates, but I argue that this differs from individual to individual — which is why it is necessary to include a polyphonic micro-perspective into the discourse in order to create a broader understanding of the actual situation. By focusing on the people who engage with the offers of the CIs, I further argue that they are very capable of engaging in cultural activities offered at an Institute without uncritically accepting the positive narrative promoted by the Hanban, as is detectable in the studies by Hubbert, which will be reviewed in more detail within the next chapter, the existing research body on Confucius Institutes (section 2.5.). China may well be just offering Chinese language classes to the world to meet global demand for Chinese language training in order to be able to participate or engage with China's economic opportunities. A generalization of this endeavor however hides the micro-level of individual contemplation. It further omits — in almost all cases — the creation of informed understanding to uncover if soft power actually works within the context of CIs and their audiences. Besides, the current debate keeps portraying the CIs without context in terms of setting and locational particularities like the existence of other state-connected entities that offers the possibility of engaging with the Chinese language and/or culture. While I understand that the soft power concept is designed to engage with this macro-political power play and international relations, I propose to work with a theoretical framework that turns towards the micro-dynamics in order to add another dimension to this somewhat static debate. By focusing the research intention on the micro-layer within a specific setting in Africa, namely Cape Town, I will be able to consider the existence of the local Chinese School comparatively to understand how and why the individuals engage with those institutions.

The following sections of this chapter will therefore provide a proper embedding into the existing discourse in terms of outlining the China-Africa debate and from there forge a bridge towards China's, as well as Taiwan's, relationship with this research's target country, South Africa.

2.2. China & Africa — existing frames of research

The existing research and notions on China's (PRC) involvement in Africa builds the groundwork to understand the debate that has surfaced on CIs in Africa. Its rapid expansion and actions in supporting infrastructure and economies have raised suspicion, which mirror in academic and journalistic opinions about the CIs as well. To understand the nature of general attitudes towards the CIs in Africa, and in South Africa in particular, it is necessary to first draw a substantial picture of the overarching China-Africa debate. While I do not wish to create a frame that implies neo-colonialism through portraying predominantly China's involvement in Africa, I consider it necessary because the critiques about setting up Confucius Institutes on the African continent derive from even this lop-sided portrayal of engagement. This consequently should stabilize my argument — that the agency that comprises the micro-layer within the debate is marginalized surrounding the research gap I am identifying with this thesis — even further.

When delving into the existing body of literature on China-Africa relations some key factors become obvious. As mentioned previously, most of the debate is set on an angle that refers to China's 'involvement' in Africa instead of a portrayal from both sides and within this frame researchers consistently refer to several important key events, which characterize the significance of Africa to the PRC.

China's presence on the African continent is not a recent phenomenon. Although China-Africa relations have experienced an immense increase in importance within the last three decades, relations can be dated back to the 1500s. Scholars well versed in history frequently stress the historical evidence that the first trade encounters occurred during the 15th century when the Ming

dynasty was ruling China.⁹¹ The goal of the Ming rulers was to regain the old central strength of the state within East Asia based on the model of the former Han and Tang dynasties. They therefore re-established the previously abolished tribute system, sending out numerous emissaries to potential tribute states in the years 1405-1433. The greatest voyages were the maritime expeditions undertaken by the eunuch, Zheng He. His seven great expeditionary maritime voyages had covered a huge area from South East Asia and the Middle East to the East Coast of Africa by 1415. In comparison to the European voyages, exploration was not the main concern of the Ming expeditions; their primary goal was to create a wide-ranging empire based on the tributary system.⁹² Nevertheless, after nearly four centuries of engagement in global trade and the exposure to new goods and ideas, the expeditions were disestablished because of cost-inefficiency, and the scope of interest was realigned to domestic issues.⁹³

These first direct contacts between China and the African continent are especially stressed in contemporary accounts concerning this debate, because they are often utilized to highlight China's non-imperial intentions. In the time after Zheng He, when connections between Ming China and Africa discontinued, European forces made their way to the African continent and slowly took over as colonial oppressors.⁹⁴

The beginning of modern relations between China and the African continent are often dated back to the Bandung Conference in 1955 in Indonesia. This conference took place in order to enhance economic and cultural cooperation between 29 Asian and African countries, most of them newly independent, to counter the neo-colonialism and imperialism of the Soviet Union and the United States and further to address the tensions between the People's Republic of China and the United States.⁹⁵

⁹¹ (Brautigam, 2009, p. 231; Ding, 2008, p. 97; Large, 2007, p. 155)

⁹² (Buckly Ebry, 1996, p. 207)

⁹³ (Buckly Ebry, 1996, p. 207)

⁹⁴ (Strauss, 2009, p. 781)

⁹⁵ (Edinger, 2010; Liu, 2008, p. 19; Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2016, p. 109)

With Zhou Enlai representing the Chinese delegation and bringing the eminent ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ to the attention and subsequent incorporation into the ‘Ten Principles of Bandung’, which play a big part in China’s modern Africa policy,⁹⁶ this event is often referred to as the contemporary commencement of China-Africa relations. In the course of the Bandung Conference, Egypt became the first African country to establish official diplomatic ties with the PRC.⁹⁷

During the 1960s, this initial contact was taken further as foundations for modern China-Africa relations were gradually built. Since this period, China’s foreign policy approaches have concentrated on the promotion of “ideological solidarity”⁹⁸ amongst the ‘underdeveloped’ countries, in order to counter “[...] Soviet revisionism and American imperialism [...]”⁹⁹ and promote their own ideologies. At the end of 1963,¹⁰⁰ the then Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai started his ten-country journey to the African continent, signaling a new era of bilateral relationships between China and a solid base of key African countries. Within the following decade, ten more official diplomatic relationships were established between the PRC and African countries.¹⁰¹

These previously established relationships were vital in initiating active support for African liberation movements by the Chinese government. Although facing a lot of criticism by the West, nationalist leaders like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe were continuously granted assistance for their election campaigns and became stable partners of the PRC, due to gradually promoting its “rhetorical policy”¹⁰² among the African countries and emphasizing that both sides were looking back to a similar history of ‘colonization’, although their colonization experiences differed greatly.¹⁰³ The PRC subsequently

⁹⁶ (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012, pp. 33-34)

⁹⁷ (Strauss, 2009, p. 781)

⁹⁸ (Ding, 2008, p. 138)

⁹⁹ (Ding, 2008, p. 138. With special focus on US hegemony further elaborated in: Campbell, 2007)

¹⁰⁰ (Ding, 2008, p. 138)

¹⁰¹ (Strauss, 2009, p. 781)

¹⁰² (Ding, 2008, p. 139)

¹⁰³ (Strauss, 2009, p. 780)

convinced numerous African states of their goodwill. Following Zhou Enlai's first journey to Africa, which was intended to promote a sincere will to establish long-lasting relationships, the construction of the TAZARA railway between 1969 and 1976 is also frequently quoted as an important symbol for the start of official cooperation.¹⁰⁴ By the end of 1970s, 44 out of 50 independent African states had established official ties with the PRC.¹⁰⁵

When addressing the China and Africa debate it is further necessary to emphasize the internal struggle between the newly established PRC government and the ROC government, which was established after the Kuomintang (KMT) fled from Mainland China to the island of Taiwan in 1949. The KMT continued ruling from Taiwan as the legitimate China until the PRC took over the seat at the UN Security Council in 1971 to proclaim its status as the legitimate China in the world.¹⁰⁶ Until 1971 the Taipei government was indeed able to establish ties with 20 different African countries and supported them mainly through foreign aid in form of agricultural assistance and education.¹⁰⁷ After the change in legitimation on the world stage Taiwan continued to provide aid to African countries, but further did the PRC expand its diplomatic game all over the continent. This debate surrounding this "diplomatic battleground"¹⁰⁸ in Africa since then became a branch within the China – Africa debate discussing the diplomatic 'tug of war' between the two actors. While Taiwan lost all its official diplomatic allies on the African continent apart from eSwatini (former Swaziland), China is enforcing its 'One-China-Policy' increasingly, especially on the African continent. However, to forge the bridge back to the soft power concept, we have to keep in mind that, although Taiwan lost many official ties, unofficially it is still present on the African continent, especially in South Africa¹⁰⁹ as we will see further below in section 2.3. Before focusing more on South Africa individually, this chapter

¹⁰⁴ (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012, p. 39; Strauss, 2009, p. 779)

¹⁰⁵ (Strauss, 2009, p. 781)

¹⁰⁶ (see Brautigam, 2008; Rich & Banerjee, 2015)

¹⁰⁷ (Sim, 1971, p. 21)

¹⁰⁸ (Oneko & Sandner, 2016)

¹⁰⁹ (Grimm, et al., 2014)

will continue to explore the developments within the broader China-Africa relationship.

During the 1980s the importance of Africa in China's foreign policy declined, due to the fact that China underwent extensive internal modernization programs, which aimed to readjust the Chinese economy in order to achieve substantial economic growth and development; part of this was the open-door policy.¹¹⁰ In the 1990s, the PRC concentrated on re-establishing diplomatic ties with African countries by enhancing their economic development; this was in particular expressed by yet another symbolic visit to Africa. In 1996 it was Jiang Zemin who toured the continent, during which he managed to emphasize economic collaboration and "[...] secure a large number of bilateral trade agreements [...]".¹¹¹ This period of re-approaching Africa is frequently denoted as a golden era of China-Africa relations,¹¹² indicated by even more high-level visits during the last few decades and the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. As previously mentioned, this forum operates as a platform for dialogue between China and its African partners, concentrating on:

*"[...]support for big infrastructural projects in particular African countries, a rapid increase in bilateral trade, promotion of Chinese private enterprise in Africa as partners in development and investment. Further opening of markets, cancellation of debts, pledges to increase the amount of monetary assistance and human development zones in Africa along the lines of China's Special Economic Zones, and vast increases in China's commitment to train African professionals."*¹¹³

To maintain a regular exchange, FOCAC meetings take place every three years either on the African continent or in China in order to discuss new cooperation models, agreements, and political collaboration as well as to agree action plans

¹¹⁰ (Strauss, 2009, p. 790)

¹¹¹ (Strauss, 2009, p. 790)

¹¹² (Bodomo, 2009, p. 170)

¹¹³ (FOCAC, 2006)

for the next operational period.¹¹⁴ In 2006, more than 40 African heads of state attended the FOCAC meeting in Beijing, which made it to one of the biggest assemblies of African leaders outside of UN gatherings.¹¹⁵ Another much referenced milestone was the publication by the Chinese government of the official African Policy Paper in 2006, which outlined the government's intentions to promote trade, investment, financial services, agriculture, infrastructure, resources development, and tourism as well as cultural exchange and education related support to Africa.¹¹⁶ Yet another indicator of the strength of China-Africa relations is the immense increase in trade volume over the last decade. China had become the leading trading partner of many of the African states by 2009, and trade volume in general has tripled since 2000.¹¹⁷ Although it is notable that by 2016 general trade between China and Africa slightly decreased. However, as visible in the trade data presented by the China-Africa Research Initiative, trade is still worth several billions — South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria being the biggest importers from China.¹¹⁸

Most of these events and the frameworks on which the contemporary China-African relationship is grounded are portrayed as having symbolic and rhetorical value behind them. By emphasizing the good-will intentions¹¹⁹ of their involvement in Africa to counter the critiques of Western nations, China is clearly trying to improve its national image. These Western critiques are mostly based on neo-colonial and neo-imperial arguments, as well as the narrative of China as a ruthless exploiter of Africa's natural resources. However, China's engagement in African countries is more and more appreciated. As polls such as the *Pew Global Research Project* of 2013 and 2014 show, in a global comparison China is best liked among African and Latin American countries, while America's image remains more favorable among the rest of the world.¹²⁰ As apparent in a report published by the

¹¹⁴ (Strauss, 2009, p. 791)

¹¹⁵ (Bodomo, 2009, p. 170)

¹¹⁶ (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Ghana, 2006)

¹¹⁷ (Bodomo, 2009, p. 170)

¹¹⁸ (China-Africa Research Initiative, 2017)

¹¹⁹ (Liu, 2008)

¹²⁰ (Pew Global Research Project, 2013, 2014; Sautman & Yan, 2009)

‘Afrobarometer’ in 2016, China’s image in Africa is perceived relatively positive by an average of 63% per African country. Only America is still seen as more favorable.¹²¹

Despite a prevailing focus in scholarly debate on China’s political and economic exploitation of the African continent, there are few examples of works that set out to investigate the existing debate. Only very few scholars made it their central intention to focus on local perceptions of China’s involvement in Africa. Simon Shen and Ian Taylor are two of these few. They presented a mixed methods study, which was conducted in Uganda in 2009.¹²² With the target population being Ugandan Youth and with particular focus on Kampala’s youth, this study managed to present an interesting result. According to this study, young Ugandans “seem to feel quite favorably toward China.”¹²³ They are, however, concerned about China’s economic presence and cheap Chinese manufactured goods flooding their own market. Shen and Taylor further argue, based on their findings that discontent might evolve into anti-Chinese sentiment through already existing domestic ethnical tensions and civil unions. The authors also concede that China does not play a major role in Uganda as such. Among the youth in particular, it becomes obvious that there does not exist any comprehensive knowledge of China whatsoever. Moreover, Shen and Taylor formulated foreign policy advice for China based on the findings of high-level interviews, which revolves around setting up alliances with African countries and actively providing benefits to the local countries and their societies through its economic presence. With regards to soft power, they argue that there is potential available but the necessary infrastructure has not been established (as based on their results from 2009), hence there was no particular emphasis on providing a better image of China. Although this study may not reflect the most recent developments in relations between China and Uganda, they certainly shine a light upon local perceptions, a practice, which is still not common within the debate yet.

¹²¹ (Afrobarometer, 2016)

¹²² (Shen & Taylor, 2012)

¹²³ (Shen & Taylor, 2012)

Several researchers have argued that Africa in particular provides, in geopolitical terms, considerable benefits for China, just as Africa benefits from China's economic aid and investments.¹²⁴ Some of these benefits for China are the oft referred to resources that it can obtain from the African continent. As Taylor has noted, "China is actively seeking resources of every kind; copper, bauxite, uranium, aluminium, manganese, iron ore etc., are all objectives for acquisition for Beijing."¹²⁵ In-depth discussions on the geopolitical and economical aspects of the debate can be found in the works of pioneers in the China-Africa debate such as Chris Alden and Ian Taylor.¹²⁶

Further benefits for China are the immense population and the attendant potential for economic growth across the African continent as portrayed in many studies in this field. Economic growth is certainly another important factor, which African countries appreciate and hence envisage a promising future in engaging in business with China. This is why many employees or students might attach great importance to learning the Chinese language.¹²⁷ However, authors like Liu (2008) further emphasize Chinese cultural diplomacy and the people-to-people contact China is trying to implement on the African continent (see section 2.1.1).¹²⁸ This is also where the Confucius Institutes on the African continent come in to play. Not only are they considered as gateway for people to engage with the promising Chinese economy, they also embody China's public diplomacy intentions. These institutions are often further portrayed as sole possibility to engage with Chinese language and culture on the African continent¹²⁹ but often provoke defiance because of their immediate connection to the Chinese government (for more details see section 2.5.). Yet again, as this research will exemplify further below, this is not always the case, especially since it is necessary to keep in mind that the unofficial presence of Taiwan is still traceable in many countries on the African continent. Especially in South Africa, possibilities to engage

¹²⁴ (Bodomo, 2009, p. 171)

¹²⁵ (Taylor, 2007)

¹²⁶ (Alden, 2007; Rotberg, 2008; Taylor, 2004)

¹²⁷ (Wheeler, 2014, p. 2)

¹²⁸ (Liu, 2008, p. 21)

¹²⁹ (see Cissé, 2012; Hartig, 2014)

with the Chinese language are detectable, many obviously teaching Chinese with Taiwanese characteristics, using traditional characters.

Nevertheless, only a comparatively small amount of research has been undertaken within the field of China-Africa relations with regards to the establishment of CIs in Africa. The predominant focus of such studies revolves around 'China's Rise' and its global soft power venture, in which CIs often only occupy a marginal position.

Nonetheless, CIs are accompanied by an undeniable social component, a fact that most existing research has refrained from acknowledging so far. This component appears through the people and their interactions with one another, within the institutes but likewise outside. Informational exchange concerning China or Chinese takes place in various ways and is often based on pre-existing experiences. This is why research needs to acknowledge the people who engage with the CIs within their social life worlds in order to observe the actual bottom-up effect of CIs. Observing this will likely uncover questionable features about how soft power is widely used and expected to wield its effects.

The following section aims to provide a sufficient overview of the existing state of the art concerning the debate on CIs in South Africa by integrating it into the larger debate of the China-Africa relations, CIs on the African continent and general academic concepts that has been constructed regarding CIs.

As previously mentioned, the highest concentration of CIs on the African continent is currently found in South Africa. The next section will thus highlight the relation between South Africa and China in depth, followed by a detailed overview on the debate of CIs in general and the debate of those in South Africa in particular. But it will also provide a historical overview of South Africa's diplomatic change from the ROC towards the PRC because it provides essential context for the following data chapters in terms of

understanding the experiences my participants portray in regards to both China and Taiwan.

2.3. China's and Taiwan's relationships with South Africa

The premise of this research is to create a comparative view between the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School in Cape Town in order to question the effects of China's soft power venture. Therefore, this next section sets out to provide — for the purpose of completion — a brief background concerning the historical ties between South Africa and both state entities in question, China and Taiwan.

South Africa is a special case in representing bilateral relations between China/Taiwan and the African countries. This statement is valid, not only for the official ties maintained with Taiwan from 1931-1998¹³⁰ but also for the current, on-going relationship with China. While most of the other African countries experience tangible Chinese migration as a recent phenomenon, South Africa deviates from this trend, with a historically long-standing diverse population of Chinese descent, who had arrived in South Africa many years before modern Chinese migration officially started. Although just barely represented in historical and academic literature, Yap and Leong did an impressive study based on more than 200 interviews, work in archives and museums which reconstructs the history of South African Chinese in a compelling manner. So does Yoon Jung Park with her account on what it means to be Chinese in South Africa.¹³¹ According to them, accounts describe earliest encounters of Chinese between the 17th century and the 18th century in South Africa.¹³² In the mid-17th century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) set up refreshment settlements around the Cape of Good Hope. “[U]nwanted criminals, political exiles and other undesirables from East Indies” initially inhabited these areas.¹³³ A decade later, the British, after several clashes with the Dutch, managed to stabilize their colonial occupation of the Cape, facilitating growth of white settlements

¹³⁰ (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012, p. 344)

¹³¹ (Park, 2008)

¹³² (Harris, 2007, p. 139; Park, 2008; Yap & Man, 1996)

¹³³ (Yap & Man, 1996, p. 6)

tremendously. Labor shortage within the colony raised the need for cheap workers, which were consequently satisfied with the import of Chinese.¹³⁴ Enforced through an internal emigration ban in the 17th century and submission to the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty made the Chinese willing to form oppositions and secretly flee the country on international ships — among those were ships from Formosa (now Taiwan) and Japan. Further internal uprisings in the upcoming years led more and more Chinese people — especially from the Guangdong area — to emigrate elsewhere during the mid-19th century. South East Asia was the immediate choice for most of them. However soon stories about gold and opportunities for a better life opened up the horizons for many to consider the Americas, Oceania and South Africa.¹³⁵

During the following decades more and more Chinese came to South Africa, settling in the entirety of South Africa's — back then — divided territories, but like many other immigrants, they soon encountered defiance. Often seen as the “yellow peril”,¹³⁶ Cape Town decided, as one of the first colonies, to introduce immigration measures against Chinese. In 1904 the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented Chinese to live in the Cape area and introduced subsequently strong registration processes, which can be seen as trigger for the formation of the first Chinese Association in 1904.¹³⁷ Chinese Associations have existed in South Africa ever since Chinese racial segregation grew increasingly stronger, especially after the commencement of apartheid. Not only Chinese mainlanders but also migrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong were exposed to similar racial discriminating behavior like black South Africans and coloured immigrants from other countries.¹³⁸ How this could have affected modern perceptions towards Chinese in Cape Town will be explained in-depth in chapter 5.

While this portrays furthermore the extent of life Chinese immigrants had in South Africa before and during the apartheid, this next section will focus on the official political relations Taiwan and China established with South Africa.

¹³⁴ (Yap & Man, Yap & Man, 1996, p. 10)

¹³⁵ (Yap & Man, 1996, pp. 28-31)

¹³⁶ (Yap & Man, 1996, p. 62)

¹³⁷ (Yap & Man, 1996, pp. 62-67)

¹³⁸ (Canavas, 2008; Harris, 2007; King, 2010, p. 74; Kuo, 2017; Yap & Man, 1996, p. 315 ff.)

Currently South Africa can look back upon 20 years official diplomatic relations with the PRC.¹³⁹ However, before those ties were established, South Africa had established diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) in 1931, which ruled from 1912-1949 the territories that are today's Mainland China, Mongolia and Taiwan. Upon the establishment of the PRC in 1949 the ROC had retreated to Taiwan to continue its rule there, as previously mentioned. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949 the minority government of South Africa strategically held onto its ties to the ROC to oppose the communist nature of the PRC at that time.¹⁴⁰ Mirroring the global divide between capitalism and communism, South Africa's internal political development determined somewhat its choice of allies. Aligning with the non-communist ROC from 1931 until 1998 signified the rejection of communism by the ANC in South Africa, which by then was remodeled and led by Nelson Mandela. Upon the change of direction within the ruling party in 1998, the focus of diplomatic relations shifted towards China, which now played a bigger role in the international picture, especially after having become a permanent member of the UN Security Council in 1971.¹⁴¹ Behind the scenes, the PRC played a role in supporting South African liberation groups to overcome the minority white rule.¹⁴² Partly because of the ROC's support of the apartheid regime, official diplomatic relations between South Africa and China shifted to the PRC in 1998.¹⁴³ As stated above, for 20 years South Africa and China have forged strong ties, with China being South Africa's largest trading partner. It further became part of the BRICS in 2011 and the country is host to more than 300 Chinese companies on the ground.¹⁴⁴

Although South Africa decided to change its official recognition from Taiwan to China, Taiwan has ever since remained visible in South Africa based on its long-lasting historical relationship with the country and its Chinese-speaking inhabitants of Taiwanese descent. Unofficial ties are perceivable through the

¹³⁹ (Lefifi, 2015)

¹⁴⁰ (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012, p. 343)

¹⁴¹ (Brautigam, 2008, p. 203)

¹⁴² (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012, pp. 344-345)

¹⁴³ (King, 2010, p. 75)

¹⁴⁴ (Kuo, 2017)

fully operative Taiwanese Liaison Offices across the country¹⁴⁵ as well as through several Chinese Associations that cooperate with Chinese schools that offer — as in Taiwan custom — Chinese language-based education using traditional characters.¹⁴⁶ One of these schools is the Chinese School in Cape Town, which I will describe in more detail in the following chapters. On a more tangible level, Taiwan is still very present in individual experiences of my participants, as I will show in chapter 5 and 6. This — even though unofficial presence — of Taiwanese culture and customs already plays an important factor when considering the soft power effect that is supposedly wielded by the Chinese government through the Confucius Institute. This fact alone makes it indeed questionable if China’s soft power is effective in this context at all.

Modern developments of migration further confirm this trend. South Africa has reported some of the largest numbers of newly arrived Chinese migrants during the last few years — current numbers estimate between 200,000-400,000 people of Chinese origin currently living in South Africa.¹⁴⁷ And although the relationship has developed steadily and South Africa has become one the strongest economies on the African continent,¹⁴⁸ unsatisfying political performances within SA led to problems in recent economic performances as well as uncontrolled corruption which increasingly discourages the local people.¹⁴⁹ The worsening of the situation not only affects the local people, but also some Chinese, who now intend to leave the country again.¹⁵⁰

Since 2015, South Africa has seen reoccurring protests and sometimes-violent outrage regarding free, fair and “decolonized”¹⁵¹ education for all ethnic backgrounds, after the government’s promises for affordable higher education were once again not kept. Moreover, SA faced frequent xenophobic attacks,

¹⁴⁵ (Taipei Liason Office in the RSA, 2011)

¹⁴⁶ (These are two examples of Chinese Schools connected to Taiwanese customs: Pretoria Chinese School, 2016; Western Province Chinese Association, 2015c)

¹⁴⁷ (Canavas, 2008; Park, 2009, p. 3; Spooner, 2015)

¹⁴⁸ (Bodomo, 2009, p. 174)

¹⁴⁹ (Pew Global Research Project — Gobal Attitudes and Trends, 2016)

¹⁵⁰ (Kuo, 2017)

¹⁵¹ (Lyster, 2016)

mainly towards foreign fellow Africans who supposedly steal local employment opportunities — all on the basis of discontent with the political leadership of the country.¹⁵²

The official relationship between the PRC and South Africa is further used as a potent symbol by the Chinese government, emphasizing the concept of win-win cooperation or as an example for symmetrical economic exchange between equals when it comes to Sino-African bilateral trade relationships. South Africa is further a key trade partner for the PRC.¹⁵³ In the late 1990s, bilateral trade amounted to US\$1.5 billion; by 2012 it had increased to US\$60 billion.¹⁵⁴ As of 2016, China is still the biggest export and import partner of South Africa.¹⁵⁵ The asymmetric nature of relations between China and its African partners — often emphasized by the West — is difficult to apply to the relationship between the PRC and South Africa. For example, South African firms have succeeded in penetrating Chinese markets more than Chinese firms have been able to establish themselves within the South African market.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, South Africa has already established its own development aid programs for the African continent and hence does not require intensive development aid from China as many other African countries do.¹⁵⁷ It is therefore visible that the relationship between South Africa and China, although not flawless, comprises an example of a two-way exchange within the broader debate of China-Africa relations, instead of China taking advantage of South Africa.

What makes South Africa even more of a special case within the group of African partners is the establishment of the first African Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS) in Stellenbosch in 2005. Between 2005 and 2009 the center “acted as an incubator for the Confucius Institute at Stellenbosch University”.¹⁵⁸ In 2009, it was renamed the Centre for Chinese Studies and

¹⁵² (Misago, 2017; Vilakazi, 2016). Note: This refers to the Zuma presidency 2009-2017.

¹⁵³ (Edinger, 2010)

¹⁵⁴ (Donnelly, 2013)

¹⁵⁵ (The World Bank, 2016)

¹⁵⁶ (Bodomo, 2009, p. 175)

¹⁵⁷ (Bodomo, 2009, p. 176)

¹⁵⁸ (Centre for Chinese Studies, 2005-2018)

since then has been concerned with extensive research on China-Sub-Saharan relations, further facilitating the exchange of knowledge and ideas between the PRC and its African allies. As the Chinese presence on the African continent grows visibly, a foundation for on-going analytical work and research regarding those interactions is considered to be a necessity.¹⁵⁹ Although unique in its intentions it must be kept in mind that this is not the first institutionalized effort to instruct Chinese language and discuss culture, there have been different, as aforementioned, Chinese Associations, some established by Taiwanese, as we will see in the process of this research.

Contextualizing further, Harris portrays the unfolding of the historical events and relations between South Africans and Chinese as essential for understanding embedded perceptions towards Chinese that are common until today. Keeping this in mind this research will therefore provide more details of this nature in chapter 5 by — focusing especially on the ‘othering’ as used appropriately by Harris.¹⁶⁰ I relate to this in order to create a bridge that allows me to re-construct a prevailing social image on Chinese in peoples’ minds that is important to understand the encountered perceptions gathered in the field as well as the different influences that people are exposed to.

However, in addition to this center, there are currently five Confucius Institutes listed as operative in South Africa, more than in any other African country, which are already noticeable as a source of not only media but also scholarly accounts. Unfortunately, many accounts refrain from considering the aforementioned facts. Nevertheless, understanding the local historical integration processes of Chinese, informal and official relations between China, Taiwan and South Africa as laid out above, is necessary to contextualize the existing presence of Confucius Institutes in South Africa especially in relation to soft power.

¹⁵⁹ (Centre for Chinese Studies, 2005-2018)

¹⁶⁰ (Harris, 2017) working paper as presented during the workshop “Migration and Agency in a Globalizing World: Afro-Asian Encounters: Workshop of Authors”, that took place 27-29 May 2016 organized by ‘The Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study in South Africa’.

The following section will provide an extensive insight into general information about the Confucius Institutes. It will further focus on giving an overview of general critiques circulating within the debate about Confucius Institutes with a subsequent emphasis on the debate on Confucius Institutes in South Africa.

2.4. Confucius Institutes — background and debate

As stated by the Hanban, Confucius Institutes are non-profit-making cultural and language promotional associations, which are primarily portrayed with the aim of meeting the increasing demand for Chinese language learning on an international level due to the immense growth of China's involvement in the global market and international relations arena. Admittedly inspired by the experience and organizational structure of other cultural and language promotional associations like the German Goethe Institute, the British Council or the Alliance Française, among others, the PRC established its first institute in 2004.¹⁶¹ A unique feature of the Confucius Institutes is the fact that they are established as cooperation between a Chinese university (or secondary school in case of the Confucius Classrooms) and a foreign partner university or other academic institution.¹⁶² There are several operational models provided for the establishment of these institutes: either a) the institute is completely operated by the CI Headquarters in Beijing; or b) the institute is set up as a joint venture with local associates; or c) the institute is licensed by CI headquarter, but in practice is completely locally run.¹⁶³ A feature of diversity which leads some — like Liu Haifang — to argue that “[t]he Confucius Institute appears to be the most open-minded institution China has ever had due this cooperative model as its distinctive characteristic.”¹⁶⁴

According to the Hanban online guidelines, universities and other educational institutions can apply for the establishment of a CI if they can provide legal evidence about their organizational background (teaching possibilities,

¹⁶¹ (Hanban, 2014c)

¹⁶² (Paradise, 2009, p. 651)

¹⁶³ (Starr, 2009, p. 70)

¹⁶⁴ (Liu, 2008, p. 31)

provision of educational and cultural exchange as well as public service facilities). The applicants must further state that a demand for the services of a CI is needed, for example Chinese language, and that facilities and personnel, as well as an initially constant source of funding, are available. Once an application is approved an agreement will be signed and upon the establishment of the institute, Hanban will fund an institute's start-up process for the first three to five years with about 100,000 USD. Following up, annual monetary support for the foreign host will be facilitated. Some sources further state that the initial funding sum will be paid past the primary agreement — as addressed in the previous sentence — between Hanban and the foreign host institutions.¹⁶⁵

However, normally after the initial funding, the CIs can partly rely on further project funding but are expected to raise money themselves in order to sustain the institute. Moreover, a general set of services that can be provided by each Confucius Institute, as stated by the Hanban, includes the teaching of Chinese, training for Chinese language teachers, as well as the provision of teaching materials, the holding of HSK tests and tests for Chinese language teachers — all of which are essential for CIs. Consulting services about Chinese culture and education are provided as well as the facilitating of language and cultural exchange.¹⁶⁶ Confucius Institutes are promoted through conferences and the inclusion of teaching and learning materials at book fairs around the world.¹⁶⁷ While this general range of services is available in theory, not every institute provides the full array of services and tasks. For example, some of these institutes do not provide training for Chinese language teachers (which I can corroborate from my own personal experience).

Through official Hanban reports it is possible to trace the rapid acceleration in the rate of new Confucius Institutes established around the world. By the end

¹⁶⁵ (Hanban, 2014c; Hartig, 2012; Liu, 2008, p. 31; Lo, 2016, p. 516; Shambaugh, 2015; Starr, 2009, p. 71)

¹⁶⁶ (Starr, 2009)

¹⁶⁷ (Hanban, 2014d)

of 2010, more than 320 Confucius Institutes had been set up in 96 countries,¹⁶⁸ 360,000 students had been registered and more than 10,000 cultural activities had been carried out.¹⁶⁹ According to the Hanban annual report 2017, this number increased to more than 520 institutes in 146 countries with about 1.7 million registered students.¹⁷⁰ Besides spreading the Chinese language, the Hanban also states that the CIs have become vital hubs for cultural exchanges and are “[...] a bridge reinforcing friendship and cooperation between China and the rest of the world and are very much welcomed across the globe.”¹⁷¹

Building on the aforementioned general information – which is mostly provided by the Hanban – the next sections will present both the academic debate surrounding Confucius Institutes by highlighting several pioneering scholars, as well as samples of media covered content related to the debate, which will open up the research gap that guided me towards my research intention.

An intense debate has been created, that is notably divided in its sentiment towards the CIs. Sometimes positive but largely critical accounts can be detected within the broader research that is available on this topic. What these accounts have in common, however, is agreeing on the fact, that CIs are connected to a tangible political agenda that is forced upon the local society in which they are established.

At the outset of the increasing establishment of these institutes scholars intensely tried to prove this political agenda. Falk Hartig, for example, conducted a case study of Confucius Institutes in Germany in 2010. His paper embraced the novelty of Confucius Institutes and the confusion accompanying their establishment. Focusing on the soft power and cultural diplomacy discussions as connected to the Confucius Institute debate, he utilized the German Confucius Institutes and their set up as a case study example. The

¹⁶⁸ (Hanban, 2014a)

¹⁶⁹ (Hanban, 2010, p. 6)

¹⁷⁰ (Hanban, 2017, p. 5)

¹⁷¹ (Hanban, 2014a)

stated aim of his paper is to facilitate “[...] a better understanding of whether Confucius Institutes are telling lies and manipul[at]ing cognition and therefore fit into the approach of propaganda; or whether they are an attempt to manage the international environment by making China’s cultural resources and achievements known overseas and thus fit into the cultural diplomacy approach.”¹⁷² Through several interviews he conducted within the time span of three months he concluded that the CIs in Germany do provide “[...] some evidence to describe Confucius Institutes as a tool of cultural diplomacy”.¹⁷³ He concludes that this form of cultural diplomacy cannot be denoted as propaganda since his empirical research guides him towards the result that CIs “don’t do active propaganda but they also don’t practice comprehensive and pure cultural diplomacy”¹⁷⁴ which is why he arrives at the rather general conclusion that the original definition of cultural diplomacy as provided by Cull, “[c]ultural diplomacy [...] is “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad”¹⁷⁵ is not entirely applicable to the CIs, and thus their approach should rather be referred to as “cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.”¹⁷⁶ Although this is a slightly different approach, Hartig still exclusively considers the CIs within his paper as physical extensions of China’s political mission. Besides his qualitative approach towards this matter his interviews only reflect high-level opinions, mostly from the directors of various CIs in Germany. Since cultural diplomacy as such refers to a ‘cultural transmission’ there is clearly an act of interaction involved and hence a certain audience, which he unfortunately refrained from addressing, which in my opinion is, absolutely necessary in order to understand the actual effect of these institutes.

More critical accounts can be found from Barr and Sahlins. Building on this pre-conceived image of Confucius Institutes, there are other arguments worth mentioning which guide research into a similar direction. In 2012 Michael Barr

¹⁷² (Hartig, 2010, p. 6)

¹⁷³ (Hartig, 2010, p. 11)

¹⁷⁴ (Hartig, 2010, p. 11)

¹⁷⁵ (Cull, 2008, p. 33 as quoted in Hartig, 2010, p. 5)

¹⁷⁶ (Hartig, 2010, p. 11)

published an article that focuses on China's attempt at "nation branding."¹⁷⁷ Although revolving around a much broader discussion of China's image building, this article conceives of CIs as "a type of impression management"¹⁷⁸ that reflects the strategic use of an inherently Chinese symbol, Confucius. He further argues that not only the name 'Confucius Institutes' but further the 'brand-symbol', a white dove, is paralleled with a smart strategy to "[...] develop peacefully and to persuade the world to welcome China's growing influence in it."¹⁷⁹ Yet again, this account is solely focused on a top-down approach, as often detectable in research conducted within the scope international relations. Addressing the impression management through strategic use of peaceful symbols by the Chinese government is clever and obviously related to the political agenda of these institutes, but it fails to consider the individuals who are supposedly influenced by these symbols, namely the individuals who are targeted by these institutes. By not considering the agency engaging with these institutes he portrays the influence of the CIs again like a 'one-way street', similar to the existing soft power claims.

Another layer within the contemporary debate surrounding CIs is complicated relationship between China and the United States as they are usually portrayed as competitive global powers.¹⁸⁰ This is reflected particularly strongly when observing the CI debate within the context of the United States. An article written by well-known anthropologist Marshall Sahlins in 2013 offers a very detailed list of critiques, especially regarding the lack of transparency in CI policy, which is particularly negatively perceived in North America and to some extent in Australia. Sahlins presents potentially the most pessimistic accounts on CIs within academia. In great detail, Sahlins solely presents the negative side of these language and culture promotional associations. For one, he tears apart the obvious restrictions within the CIs with regards to what the employees can discuss and which topics are typically ignored on purpose. Such 'prohibited' topics are often related to China's apparent political trajectory,

¹⁷⁷ (Barr, 2012)

¹⁷⁸ (Barr, 2012, p. 89)

¹⁷⁹ (Barr, 2012, p. 89)

¹⁸⁰ (Hubbert, 2014a; Sahlins, 2013)

namely the ‘One-China-Policy’, Tibet or Falun Gong just to mention a few. He further harshly condemns their threat to academic freedom.¹⁸¹ He cannot comprehend why not more CIs are being shut down, because “by hosting a Confucius Institute, they have become engaged in the political and propaganda efforts of a foreign government in a way that contradicts the values of free inquiry and human welfare to which they are otherwise committed.”¹⁸² Reflecting a general growth of suspicion and hostility towards CIs, especially as it seems in the West, more and more CIs seem to face the termination of agreements — the CI at the University of Chicago was ultimately closed down, as well as the institute at the Pennsylvania State University. The University of Stockholm also expressed distrust in the CI system and shut down their institute.¹⁸³ But within these apparent situational circumstances further information on actual occurrences on the ground are rarely given, never mind opinions of the audiences who engaged with these institutions. Scholars like Sahlins, who are well known for their anthropological work, should critically engage with both sides of the medal. Instead of just pointing out the obvious, mostly superficial critiques that circulate in academia, he should focus his skills and knowledge on questioning if there are any harmful effects traceable, not only for academia but also for the local audience. In this account, he simply reciprocates the superficial mistrust that is so often tangible within this debate, without actually providing anthropological data that would benefit this research body. Once again, this shows how CIs are presented as political tools that function as a ‘one-way street.’ Above all, it is incomprehensible for me how an anthropologist conveniently generalizes an entire group of people — here the employees of the CIs — as if they were ‘robots’ that without question fulfill the wishes of the Hanban.

In reviewing these arguments, a consolidated set of distinct critiques in the general debate seems to be apparent. Don Starr succinctly summarizes practical issues related to “[...] finance, academic viability, legal issues [and] Chinese

¹⁸¹ (Sahlins, 2013)

¹⁸² (Sahlins, 2013)

¹⁸³ (Redden, 2015)

partner universities.”¹⁸⁴ As stated in the legal framework of the CIs, the Chinese government will provide the first five years of expenses upon inauguration of the institutes.¹⁸⁵ The question that arises is what happens afterwards? CIs are set up as non-profit organizations and hence their income sources are varied and often unstable. In the case that no further funding can be raised from either of the governments or other donors, a possible withdrawal of the institute would be the result as well as the loss of jobs and long-term projects.¹⁸⁶

Additional critiques within the debate concern the quality of teaching. Most of the Chinese language teachers are dispatched from China. Although they are paid by their sending institutions, by teaching abroad, they forfeit the bonus pay common for teachers in China, which makes the service abroad, in combination with leaving families behind for one or more years increasingly unpopular. Therefore mostly young and inexperienced teachers remain candidates for teaching abroad, which lowers the quality of outcomes.¹⁸⁷ Yet another critique addressed by Starr based on the practicalities of these institutes alludes to the big gap between theory and practice when it comes to legal frameworks.¹⁸⁸ Even though constitutions and guidelines are provided by the Hanban, the reality often looks quite different, especially as their exponential expansion to more than 500¹⁸⁹ institutes in just the last 14 years raises the obvious question of to what extent these institutes are actually guided and supervised.¹⁹⁰

Connecting to Sahlin’s criticism, the political and ideological dimensions of the supposed influence of the Chinese government through the CIs is one of the main concerns in regards to academic freedom in hosting institutions.

¹⁸⁴ (Starr, 2009, p. 78)

¹⁸⁵ (Liu, 2008, p. 31; Starr, 2009, p. 71)

¹⁸⁶ (Starr, 2009, p. 71)

¹⁸⁷ (Starr, 2009, p. 71)

¹⁸⁸ (see Paradise, 2009; Starr, 2009, p. 78 ff.)

¹⁸⁹ (Hanban, 2015, 2017)

¹⁹⁰ (Hartig, 2010, p. 9)

Critics that do not have any connection to the CIs — in particular — express concerns about the impact of Chinese government intervention on local cultures or political decision-making that could be channeled through these institutes, as demonstrated in Sahlin’s article referred to above but further discussed in much detail in his book “Confucius Institutes — Academic Malware.”¹⁹¹ On the contrary, those who are involved with CIs — mainly Hanban officials — often claim that the institutes have a primarily educational purpose not connected to political goals.¹⁹² As the Hanban and therefore the government is, at least theoretically, somewhat involved in the decision-making process and the promotion of their ideologies in the greater framework of these educational bodies some critiques have been expressed that this implies an improper influence, harming the academic freedoms¹⁹³ through teachings, research and resources provided by the Hanban. However there are also statements from those involved in the CIs who argue that the books provided by the Hanban headquarters use propaganda that is “so transparent [...] that they were no threat to student minds.”¹⁹⁴ I agree with the latter statement, because from personal experience I can concur that Chinese textbooks provided by the Hanban are by no means influential, individuals are self-reflexive enough to not take any portrayal in these books for granted, as I will further show in chapter 5 and 6.

By accusing CIs of attempting to leverage political influence, addressing of the ‘One-China-Policy’ is unavoidable, since the language taught in CIs is Mandarin or Putonghua. Other varieties of Chinese language are dismissed, especially the traditional writing system, which is the official writing system of Taiwan and Hong Kong.¹⁹⁵ Some conclude that CIs therefore serve to follow a plan of unification or at least a supporting mechanism of the ‘One-China-Policy’¹⁹⁶, which would be especially helpful among the African allies of

¹⁹¹ (Sahlins, 2015)

¹⁹² (Paradise, 2009, p. 657)

¹⁹³ (Starr, 2009, p. 79)

¹⁹⁴ (Starr, 2009, p. 79)

¹⁹⁵ (Sahlins, 2013)

¹⁹⁶ (Paradise, 2009, p. 660)

China, if one considers the historical competition between Taiwan and China for allies on the African continent.

Another speculation is that the spread of standard Chinese by such bodies as CIs is believed to control the Chinese communities overseas. This is considered as especially troubling in North America as the community there mainly speaks Cantonese. Standardizing the Chinese language on a global level would make it easier to reach, control or regulate those communities abroad.¹⁹⁷ This would also be applicable to Africa, since more and more Chinese emigrate to work there, or in the case of South Africa a local Chinese community is already integrated into the local population.¹⁹⁸ This again will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5/6. Particularly in the global information age, it might become increasingly important for the Chinese government to maintain cultural values and identity since cultural exchange and influence spreads easily through the digitalized world. Not only is culture affected, but also language, as more and more foreign words are finding their way into the Chinese language and since some Chinese scholars stated that language is seen as the very symbol of state sovereignty.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, Chinese communities abroad have, in comparison to those living in China, mostly free access to the entire content of the internet and hence have the opportunity to express their opinions about the Chinese government freely without being exposed to harsh internet restrictions in China.²⁰⁰ This, and the fear that those communities living abroad could lose their traditional culture, means that CIs could be seen as a mechanism to oppose these threats through maintaining a standard Chinese language and traditional values — not only for those interested in it, but also for the Chinese communities living abroad. A suitable example for this would be the Chinese community in South Africa, who migrated to South Africa decades ago and are now properly integrated with a mixed-cultural background,²⁰¹ probably putting less emphasis on their original Chinese values. This could be a reason for the fast expansion of Confucius Institutes especially

¹⁹⁷ (Ding, 2008, p. 126)

¹⁹⁸ (King, 2010, p. 71)

¹⁹⁹ (Ding, 2008, p. 123)

²⁰⁰ (Ding, 2008, p. 127)

²⁰¹ (King, 2010, p. 74)

in South Africa. However, according to Ding, this hybridization of cultures might also bring a positive upswing for China's soft power initiative, because it could "[...] be amplified and consequently find the necessary strength to fully-integrate China within the globalization [...]".²⁰² However, keeping in mind that there are other Chinese speaking/ teaching facilities available that are not connected to the PRC government, the influence of the CIs over the Chinese community seems questionable at best.

With soft power remaining the core theoretical framework for research on CIs, Zaharna provides a more positive account. She explains the success of the CIs through network theory and argues that the actual 'root of soft power' lies within the network structure and capacity of the CIs.²⁰³ While pointing increasingly towards the micro level of the debate, she argues from a somewhat different angle that CIs may have extraordinary functionality because of their established and interconnected network, which allows them to create team spirit and bonding processes through cultural activities, whilst teaching can also offer a chance to bond within the Institute.²⁰⁴ Besides highlighting the internal synergetic processes that can "proceed [...] to the cultivation of shared interests,"²⁰⁵ she addresses the capacity Hanban provides to create external networks such as the CIs affiliation between local (Chinese) and international universities, which in turn facilitates a rise in "resources, impact, and legitimacy"²⁰⁶ and also through the CI online portal and annual conferences in Beijing.²⁰⁷ She therefore argues that the "CI initiative may be an example of a relational perspective on soft power".²⁰⁸ The foundation for this article lies within the argument that "CI's appeal and power emerge through the network communication approach that generates a relational structure and relational dynamic."²⁰⁹ Behind this approach she concludes that CIs provide a powerful

²⁰² (Ding, 2008, p. 127)

²⁰³ (Zaharna, 2014, pp. 16-17)

²⁰⁴ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 19)

²⁰⁵ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 18)

²⁰⁶ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 20)

²⁰⁷ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 21)

²⁰⁸ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 25)

²⁰⁹ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 25)

insight into China's understanding of cultural diplomacy.²¹⁰ Her main point circulates around creating a shared identity and 'social narratives' among the 'stakeholders' of the Institutes. She also refers to the previously mentioned social component within the discourse, which touches upon a rather marginalized part within the whole debate, but she again generalizes this conclusion towards an overarching influence on the world and therefore assumes this influence to be omnipotent, unconsciously expecting that every individual experiences the same. While this sounds reasonable in theory, from personal experience I can tell that many CIs simply do not work together. Especially during my research, and as I will portray further in chapter 4, it became obvious that the Confucius Institutes in Cape Town does not cooperate with other CIs in South Africa.

This last paragraph will introduce an author who concerns herself with the questions that will be fundamental to this very research and hence comprises a somewhat inspirational component.

Jennifer Hubbert connects the question of how soft power resources are perceived through an anthropological approach towards CIs. In her paper 'Authenticating the Nation: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power' she intends to unveil the "specific projects in which [public diplomacy and soft power] intentions are embedded and enacted".²¹¹ Through a combination of the theoretical soft power approach and empirical anthropological investigation she examines "how policy is "peopled"²¹²".²¹³

This paper in particular opens the discourse up to a new dimension but only in the context of the United States. Hubbert chose her involvement in the 'China Bridge Summer Camp' to deliver an insightful and student-oriented anthropology, which set out to analyze students' perception of China while having an orchestrated journey to China. In combination with her field

²¹⁰ (Zaharna, 2014, pp. 25-26)

²¹¹ (Hubbert, 2014b, p. 33)

²¹² (Nielsen, 2011 as quoted in Hubbert, 2014b, p. 33)

²¹³ (Hubbert, 2014b)

experience and those of the children she delivers a conclusion that portrays a trip that was, according to her, far from being authentic. She explains that in the course of this summer camp “[...] students are asked to experience soft power through hands on involvement, performing traditional culture in a variety of ways that include stage presentations and practicing classic art forms.”²¹⁴ Presenting this journey as thoroughly planned, Hubbert elaborates and voices the students’ will to experience China themselves, aside from the scheduled activities, which seemed to them somewhat staged representations of positive aspects of Chinese culture and society.²¹⁵ She further describes how the students attached value to the trip by experiencing the unfamiliar, whereas the hosts intended to embrace them in familiarity by providing them Western food.²¹⁶ Based on this experience she concludes “the frames of reference through which the different actors (students and hosts) attempted to create value remained mutually illegible.”²¹⁷ She refers to the students’ disappointment in the lack of new experiences, as the trip was tailored towards this kind of activities CIs carry out all over the world.²¹⁸ Finally, she voices the failing of soft power because the CI-funded trip simply did not meet the expectations of the students — they had a tailored program which showed a very polished form of China, while the students expected the confusing moment of experiencing a different culture for the first time, a miscalculation which ultimately led to the opposite of the intended effect of creating affection through soft power interventions.²¹⁹ One of her research outcomes concludes further that the urge of presenting China as a land of extreme development — not as a developing country with unusual foods — may rest upon a nation-wide identity crisis.²²⁰ While this article sets on anthropological data leading away from the macro layer embedded in the debate, it delivers experiences and perceptions of people involved in a very biased mindset. While she criticizes the missing authenticity of China, one simply has to question what people

²¹⁴ (Hubbert, 2014b, p. 34)

²¹⁵ (Hubbert, 2014b, pp. 27-28)

²¹⁶ (Hubbert, 2014b, pp. 38, 40)

²¹⁷ (Hubbert, 2014b, pp. 38, 40)

²¹⁸ (Hubbert, 2014b, p. 39)

²¹⁹ (Hubbert, 2014b, p. 40)

²²⁰ (Hubbert, 2014b, p. 41)

expect when they are going to China. The way she portrays it calls for a China that needs to be poor and rather exotic; the opposite of the developed world. She fails to acknowledge that China is on a journey to becoming a developed country at high speed. Her argument is therefore extremely US-centric in its presentation. Besides, I highly doubt that a simply ‘polished’ representation of a country during a trip like that is equitable to facilitating propaganda.

Yet another article published by Jennifer Hubbert will provide a potential angle for a comparison with the proposed research of this study.

This second article presents a different ethnographic approach. It examines the epistemology and its constitution of the Chinese state through the Confucius Classrooms by using ethnographic methods like participant observation and focus group interviews. Although aligning with the research methods this project intends to employ, the focus of Hubbert’s study and the field setting in the United States of America distinguishes the two approaches.

In her paper, Hubbert highlights the different notions about the Chinese state and its ruling system obtained from the students and their parents engaging in the CI classes. As well as interviewing the participants she further provides insights into how parents and teachers view this topic, as well as insights into textbook materials used. The voices of interviewees appear to reveal a common ambiguous attitude towards China, in particular towards its policies. Additionally a general suspicion towards Chinese teachers who do not discuss these topics becomes apparent,²²¹ while she discovered that teachers who engage with their students by presenting a more personal history are generally perceived positively.²²² Merging these different layers of understanding “allow[s] to problematize the perceptions and representations of the Chinese state as a monolithic entity that feature prominently in global representations of Chinese difference and exception”²²³ on the basis of actual practices in the classroom. Referring to the teachers, she further concludes that “the more the

²²¹ (Hubbert, 2014a, p. 335)

²²² (Hubbert, 2014a, p. 342)

²²³ (Hubbert, 2014a, p. 344)

agents of the state appeared unified with state intentions, the less CIs soft power policies had their intended effect, suggesting that the power of the states to enact policy has much to do with how policy targets experience and thus imagine the state as it has to do with policy intention or implementation itself.”²²⁴ These papers provide fruitful insights, inspiration and show the necessity of including the voices of the general public that engage within the institutes. As these studies, especially the second one, are located in the USA, where China is often perceived with heightened suspicion²²⁵ and embedded in ethno-centric biases, it may be hypothesized that the outcomes of the current research will be distinguishable due from Hubbert’s due to the less politicized nature of the debate in South Africa.

After covering the critiques towards CIs, it is clear that a predominantly unfavorable image of the CIs has been expressed and is circulating in academia and media — an image that is strongly dependent on soft power debates and that excludes the micro-level opinions almost entirely.

Although this research does not seek to object to any of these critiques immediately, especially since they refer to the greater flaws and possible wielding of negative influence of the CIs on the macro-level, it is important to highlight what is currently missing from this debate. What becomes further obvious is the fact that no matter if positive or negative critiques are formulated towards the CIs, they share the common sentiment of seeing the CIs as nothing but a political tool to wield influence according to the agenda of the Chinese government. These numerous conspiracies with regards to their political agenda seem to rule out the possibility that the people that are actually operating CIs have their own practices, experiences and feelings, and may not pursue a certain political agenda. As Hubbert explains, she was “interested in providing an anthropological perspective on a subject that had to date been largely considered through the framework of international relations.”²²⁶ Agreeing on this matter, I believe there is another layer beyond the political debate that needs to be illuminated — namely the layer that considers the

²²⁴ (Hubbert, 2014a, p. 344)

²²⁵ (Hubbert, 2014a; Sahlins, 2013)

²²⁶ (Hubbert, 2014a, p. 338)

perceptions as well as the social life world, opinions and experiences of individuals and members of the general public who engage with CIs. What I consider further as missing is the will of researchers to genuinely engage with the practices of the CIs by going through similar experiences, as the targeted audiences would do, instead of portraying it from an ‘authoritarian’ outsider perspective, as many academics and journalists tend to do. By failing to consider this micro-layer these accounts ignore the essential component soft power is supposed to target — the recipients. The effect of soft power is accepted unconditionally but by doing so, they omit the agency of the individuals who engage with the CIs and the fact that they are able to self-reflexively make decisions and digest information. Lastly, not only the social layer within the debate is neglected so are the particularities of the setting in which CIs are established. Most publications further fail to consider that CIs may not be the only ‘Chinese’ influence when it comes to culture and language. Facilities associated or loyal to other governments than the PRC might be active in said settings as well and ultimately compete with the effect of the CIs. Why the recognition of these factors is essential to question the effect of the CIs in regards to wielding soft power will be the focus of chapter 4-6.

Providing additionally necessary context, the next subchapter will present the existing debate on Confucius Institutes in Africa with particular focus on South Africa, the focus country of this research project.

2.5. Confucius Institutes in Africa

Two years after the Confucius Institute Project in 2004 was initiated the first Institute was brought to the African continent. In 2006 the first CI opened affiliated to the University of Nairobi followed soon by a second CI at the Kenyatta University in 2009. According to the most recent Hanban Annual Report from 2017 a total of 54 Confucius Institutes are operating in 39 African countries.²²⁷ All CIs on the African continent are either affiliated to a host

²²⁷ (Hanban, 2017, p. 65)

university or to a host educational institute, like the Kigali Institute of Education in Rwanda.²²⁸

Although still comprising a small fraction within the China-Africa debate interest in Confucius Institutes on the African continent is growing. In 2014, Anita Wheeler published one of the first articles in regards to this. Her paper ‘Cultural Diplomacy, Language Planning with Case study of the Confucius Institute in Nairobi’²²⁹ addresses the impact of Confucius Institutes on higher education in Africa, with focus on Kenya. She presents a detailed study on the basis of the first Confucius Institute, which was affiliated to the University of Nairobi in 2005. Her focus lies on the perception of African and Chinese policymakers to evaluate the influence of the institutes behind the background of language planning and cultural diplomacy. Wheeler further focuses on a possible strategic aspect of China’s cultural diplomacy executed through the Confucius Institutes and as with most literature dealing with this topic, her work is framed within the soft power theory discourse. Wheelers’ work offers a detailed overview about Confucius Institutes in Africa based on an extensive empirical study of data she drew from semi-structured interviews at the University of Nairobi. Her study provides an interesting theoretical and practical framework that this thesis can draw from.²³⁰

There are as well ambiguous contentions denotable within the growing body of literature concerning this topic. Africa seems to be a somewhat special concern within this topic so that some of the scholars — Western as well as local scholars — point out that “the lack of either tradition or infrastructure to engage with China on an academic level in Africa suggests that Confucius Institutes could play a more prominent role on the African continent, and could be more influential there than in other parts of the world.”²³¹ Or as Cissé puts it “[...] on the African continent, in almost all cases, you’ll only have an

²²⁸ (Hanban, 2014b)

²²⁹ (Wheeler, 2014)

²³⁰ (Wheeler, 2014)

²³¹ (Hartig, 2014, p. 54)

opportunity to learn Mandarin through Confucius Institutes.”²³² These statements might be correct for some sub-Saharan states but as this research will later discuss in detail, it is not the case for South Africa. In the context of South Africa this is further a questionable statement because other facilities that are not related to the Chinese government have been set up much earlier than the Confucius Institutes — like the Chinese School in Cape Town, which will provide a fruitful possibility for a comparison with the CI in Cape Town.

Nevertheless, there still is a common consensus that “[...] from the media, and sometimes even from researchers, a lot of ink and controversial/negative opinions are developed towards Sino-African relations.”²³³ Within this context an African online magazine addressed Confucius Institutes on the African continent and their debate. Although the author, Shishuwa, harshly criticizes the establishment of these language and cultural promotional institutions he further criticizes the formation of the debate as being taken from the West, which is particularly visible in the following quote:

*“However, not much noise is made about them. This silence comes against the unmasked aim of the Confucius Institute being a tool of Chinese cultural exportation, and the fact that it will be ten years in December 2015 since the University of Nairobi in Kenya became Africa’s first official recipient of this “gift”. That this important subject has been neglected is perhaps unsurprising given that criticism of China’s role in Africa has largely been driven by France, Britain and the United States of America, countries that have their own vested interests and equivalent institutions of cultural indoctrination in nearly all African nations.”*²³⁴

Joining the accusation of neo-colonialism the author denotes a vehement impact on the African culture through CIs, which, according to him, represent just another tool of China’s quest towards “global dominance.”²³⁵ Shishuwa

²³² (Cissé, 2012, p. 2)

²³³ (Cissé, 2012, p. 2)

²³⁴ (Shishuwa, 2015)

²³⁵ (Shishuwa, 2015)

radically argues that not only China's presence on the continent but further the work of CIs would strongly affect the local society and its culture so that they would become "defenders of the new imposed order themselves."²³⁶ Shishuwa further argues that culture can be perceived as a fluid concept, which changes through time and is therefore vulnerable to external impact. In his opinion, it is easier for dominant cultures, to resist or at least to manage these external influences. He believes that neo-colonialism in combination with soft power would imply "[f]or African cultures, [which are] already beleaguered by centuries of Western domination and operating within the imperial supremacist economic and social structures [that it would] make Africa [a] fertile ground for neo-colonialism, the rise of Chinese Confucius schools [thus] poses several threats."²³⁷ Showing his negative sentiment towards language and cultural promotional associations by stating that they do not provide any assistance for Africa, he concludes that:

"[w]hat Africa needs and lacks are its own ideological schools to build capacity in the many areas where it has a deficit. What Africa needs is a serious discourse initiated and led by Africans themselves. A discourse that explains the continent's current position on the global stage, one that seeks to internally develop and define its own priorities and how to engage with the rest of the world."²³⁸

Although I understand Shishuwa's fear of neo-colonial intentions in this context, I cannot quite understand why the author negates so obviously the agency of the local people. Once again it becomes clear that the general discontent about the CIs is over-shadowing the need to actually engage with the micro-layer. Individuals who engage with the CIs do not necessary support the ideological component just by learning a new language. Additionally, Shishuwa fails to mention other Chinese language facilities that are available in countries like South Africa, which are operated by other state-related entities like the aforementioned Chinese School in Cape Town. This superficial

²³⁶ (Shishuwa, 2015)

²³⁷ (Shishuwa, 2015)

²³⁸ (Shishuwa, 2015, also see Bodomo, 2009)

knowledge denotes the CIs once again to simply being a governmental tool by ignoring the agency on the ground.

Kragelund offers a different insight, which, in my opinion, relates most to the intention of this thesis. He investigated the Confucius Institute affiliated to the University of Zambia. By posing the question “how the South-South cooperation in higher education differs from the ‘traditional’ partnerships,”²³⁹ he focuses on what role the CI plays to influence the University structures through its soft power mechanisms. He teases apart China’s role in Zambia’s higher education sector by highlighting the services the CI offers, referring to teaching capacity and creating infrastructure within the university among the obvious cultural exchange facilitation.²⁴⁰ He concludes that, “[...] the CI resembles soft power more than it resembles South-South (development) collaboration. The CI is the hotbed for training of future Zambian political and economic leaders. Thereby it serves as a breeding ground for the development of opinion formers that may be able to communicate Chinese values to the Zambian public.”²⁴¹ A point that he further makes within his paper should be treated, especially in regards to the proposed research, with greater attention. He acknowledges that the majority of arguments within this debate denote CIs as a soft power tool, but he further states that these arguments:

“[...] neither assist us in measuring soft power or help us determining whether we should approach the concept from the sender or the recipient, i.e. is a certain tool soft if it is perceived as soft from the sender but not from the recipient? Whether or not an activity can indeed be classified as soft power has as much to do with the recipient as with the provider of a particular ‘tool’. Hence, if only the recipient finds e.g. that Chinese culture or language is attractive it may function as soft power – thereby making the recipient nation do what China wants it to do. Finally, the concept of soft power does not take

²³⁹ (Kragelund, 2014, p. 4)

²⁴⁰ (Kragelund, 2014, p. 15)

²⁴¹ (Kragelund, 2014, p. 17)

actors into consideration: It is not the recipient state that is attracted by a certain tool but certain actors inside or outside the state."²⁴²

Literature on this specific topic within the China-Africa debate is still rare, but, nevertheless, as seen above it becomes clear that the positions towards CIs on the African continent represent ambiguous sentiments, which predominantly revolve around soft power and neo-colonialism. However, as mentioned by Kragelund, the discussions detectable in this context tend to join the soft power debate without question while unconsciously ignoring the real thoughts of the people within the institutes as well as the impact on everyday interactions of these people. Finally, what is most striking in this context is that external influences, like other schools that are connected or loyal to other state entities or people teaching Chinese, are entirely disconnected from the CIs or are simply not portrayed at all. The next paragraph will turn towards the dimension of this debate that will comprise the setting of this research.

2.5.1. Confucius Institutes in South Africa

South Africa is a special case in the debate surrounding CIs in Africa. Not only does South Africa have a very particular relationship with China as discussed earlier in this thesis, it has established the most Confucius Institutes continent-wide so far. Since the initiation on the continent South Africa registered five active Confucius Institutes.²⁴³ These CIs are located in Stellenbosch University, Rhodes University, the University of Cape Town, Durban University of Technology and University of Johannesburg.

Concerning the arguments about Confucius Institutes in South Africa there is an obvious limitation to the existing literature body. Hartig presented an interesting study about CIs in South Africa in which he analyses the CIs in South Africa behind the soft power and cultural diplomacy context but he further takes foreign aid into consideration. Based on several interviews, his study was carried out in 2013. Through these interviews he obtained

²⁴² (Kragelund, 2014, p. 6)

²⁴³ (Hanban, 2014e)

information that seemed to be familiar within the greater discourse as for instance the topics, like the Falun Gong, that are generally not discussed within the CIs.²⁴⁴ He concludes with several practical issues he encountered. Having not enough skilled Chinese language teachers who are willing to come to Africa seems to be one of the issue of concern, heightened by the fact that Africa is not recognized as a favorable living place among Chinese people in general. He further refers to similar issues as mentioned in the overall debate like the teaching materials being not suitable.²⁴⁵ Finalizing his thoughts, he acknowledges that the “accusations brought forth towards Confucius Institutes are apparently the same elsewhere in the world”²⁴⁶ but that the main constraint differs, namely in the different set up of the CIs in Africa since there is no tradition in studying China related subjects or the Chinese language. His main argument therefore is that CIs in Africa have greater influence and opportunities to engage than in the rest of the world.²⁴⁷

Although Hartig presents an interesting argument, his research is again only grounded on high-level individuals, mostly scholars and the leading figures of the institutes he visited. While his point of argumentation is quite innovative there are no voices from the people who engage in the institutes and neither is there evidences of him observing the practices within the institutes. By saying that CIs in Africa could potentially be more influential than elsewhere²⁴⁸ he is neglecting once again the agency of the individuals involved. And although he undertook seemingly extensive research, he failed to consider the particularities of the locations of the CIs and does not even mention possibilities to engage with Chinese that are not connected to the Chinese government. Having an insight into practices, experiences and perceptions of individuals engaging but further incorporating a social layer to this debate would add new dynamics and flavor that so often only revolves around the elite opinions.

²⁴⁴ (Hartig, 2014, p. 56)

²⁴⁵ (Hartig, 2014, p. 57)

²⁴⁶ (Hartig, 2014, p. 59)

²⁴⁷ (Hartig, 2014, p. 59)

²⁴⁸ (Hartig, 2014, p. 59)

Procopio also concerned herself with the question whether the CIs in South Africa are “*effective* tools of China’s soft power.”²⁴⁹ She connects the CIs with China’s historical promotion of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, which then, consequently became part of its foreign policy intentions. Within this study she draws on quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies and arrives at the result that: “Confucius Institutes are only partially effective as a tool providing support for China’s rise. While they are well able to attract institutions and students to respectively set up CIs and enroll, the types of behavior involved vis-à-vis both the executive and the students can, at times, undermine the efforts.”²⁵⁰ This finding as such is comprehensible, especially as I will illustrate in the following chapters. However, it is yet again only based on high-level opinions. By providing qualitative accounts deriving only from managers, directors and other high-level individuals, she as well fails to provide insights of people who attend these institutions, e.g. Chinese language students.

Besides this academic contestation there are some engagements with this topic detectable in the media, interestingly not only from African sources but further for instance from American online news websites. The Voice of America pointed towards the economic importance between China and South Africa that has been expressed through the Ministry of Basic Education spokesman: “It is very exciting because it takes the relationship between South Africa and China beyond just trade relations, and into the mutual development for both of our developing countries,” said Martens, “[s]o it is very exciting and both countries have indicated that for them education is a high priority, and that is why education is high on the agenda of collaboration between the two countries.”²⁵¹ They also explicitly highlight a peer review that has been carried out in 2013 to highlight the image about China and America in the world, “[a] Pew study last year found South Africans have mixed feelings about China. The survey showed 46 per cent of South Africans did not like the spread of Chinese ideas and customs in their country, and 60 per cent dislike Chinese music, movies

²⁴⁹ (Procopio, 2015, p. 100)

²⁵⁰ (Procopio, 2015, p. 120)

²⁵¹ (both quotes from: Powell, 2014)

and television,”²⁵² a common sentiment I encountered during the field research of this study as well. This will be highlighted further in chapters 4 and 5 below. This feeling further seems too ubiquitous in this context pointing towards South Africa’s problematic past. South African schools suffer from the legacy of apartheid, which three decades ago intentionally gave inferior education to the majority of the population.²⁵³ This sentiment is accompanied by the fear that South Africa is a multi-ethnic state of over 50 million inhabitants, with a strong racial history. On this basis, it is criticized that China could take advantage of this situation which could be an even better reason for China to establish large-scale language and cultural promotional programs and institutes like CIs, in order to counter those racial prejudices and help integrate the new arriving Chinese community. The statement, “[t]he Confucius Institutes shall abide by the laws and regulations of the countries in which they are located, respect local cultural and educational traditions and social customs, and they shall not contravene concerning the laws and regulations of China”²⁵⁴, lead to the assumption that conflicts with local communities can easily occur, because not all stated concepts can be applied equally. Maybe even because of South Africa’s multi-ethnic environment, that is a feature of many African countries, the ‘one size fits all model’ of CIs has been labeled as ill-advised by Prof. Vermaak²⁵⁵ from the Rhodes University. Tensions between schools and CIs have already occurred, as was stated during the Second Confucius Institute Africa Regional conference in 2009.

Nevertheless, these tensions have been seemingly addressed quickly and acknowledged by the Hanban and a more flexible “[l]et a thousand flowers bloom”, which at least on paper guarantees individuality for each CI in Africa, has been promised by CI Chair, Liu Yandong.²⁵⁶ Interestingly enough, a very similar statement was used as “‘let a hundred flowers blossom’ (baihua

²⁵² (Powell, 2014)

²⁵³ (Powell, 2014)

²⁵⁴ (Hanban, 2014c)

²⁵⁵ Prof. Marius Vermaak was Dean at the International Office of Rhodes University during the period 2004-2011 and therefore involved in the establishment of the Confucius Institute in 2008 and since then is part time director of the CIRU; (Makoni, 2010)

²⁵⁶ (Vermaak, 2010, p. 8)

qifeng)”²⁵⁷ by Mao Zedong in 1951 in order to introduce China’s newly implemented national cultural policy intentions.²⁵⁸ This fact indeed shows the subtle implementation of traditional political statements of the Chinese government, when it comes to the CIs. However, in the light of emphasizing their individuality the Confucius Institutes seem to be keen on offering — superficially or not, is difficult to tell — a solution to regional problems.

Not only Confucius Institutes but also the integration of Chinese language learning opportunities into the local education system is often portrayed in the media as threatening to the local education system. For example, from 2016 onwards, there have been extensive cooperation efforts to introduce Chinese into basic schools following a 10 year plan “Circular S10 of 2015: incremental implementation of Mandarin as a non-official language from 2016-2018”²⁵⁹ signed between former president Jacob Zuma and the Chinese Ministry of Education.²⁶⁰ However, following the sentiment of Shishuwa aforementioned, there have been official criticisms expressed towards this development. For instance, the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (SADTU), South Africa’s largest trade union for teachers which stands for unified and quality teaching practices to enhance South Africa’s education,²⁶¹ disapproved the plan to integrate Chinese among their foreign language choices because, as quoted from Mugwena Maluleke, SADTU’s general secretary, it “would be tantamount to a new form of colonization”²⁶² going further to state that “we see it as the worst form of imperialism that is going to happen in Africa.”²⁶³ Once again a statement that in my opinion, does not do justice to the individual practices of the people on the ground.

Several different opinions have been addressed within the debate surrounding the CIs. It is however undeniable that the existing research has so far refrained

²⁵⁷ (Liu, 2008, p. 13)

²⁵⁸ (Liu, 2008, p. 13)

²⁵⁹ (Nkosi, 2015)

²⁶⁰ (Xinhua, 2015)

²⁶¹ (South African Democratic Teacher Union, 2016)

²⁶² (Nkosi, 2015)

²⁶³ (Nkosi, 2015)

from addressing it through an anthropological or sociological lens. While this debate has remained very political in nature there has not been space for individual perceptions and processes that remain strictly humane. Many representations get lost in generalizing through impersonalizations along the way — impersonalizations in a sense, in which scholars ignore the reflexive ability in personal practices and perceptions of individuals on the ground (see chapter 3). However, there is the utmost need to include the voices that are marginalized within this discourse to add another layer of information to this debate. This research aims to uncover these missing factors and provide an attempt to fill a part of this gap by facilitating a theoretical and methodological approach that is tailored towards unraveling these voices and focus on their experiences that led towards engaging with a CI and the perceptions formed after taking part in their services. Lastly, apart from neglecting the ability of self-reflexive agency of the people who engage with these institutions, all of the above-mentioned scholars and journalists failed to consider the local particularities of the settings in which the CIs are established. None of them considered the role of the local Chinese Schools that are often supported extensively by the Taiwanese community and therefore loyal to the Taiwanese government. Soft power efforts become redundant when ignoring the fact that other state-entities are somewhat involved in Chinese teaching and cultural exchange.²⁶⁴

2.6. Summary

“[...] The concept of soft power does not take actors into consideration: It is not the recipient state that is attracted by a certain tool but certain actors inside or outside the state.”²⁶⁵

Perusing the previous sections including the existing research body presented, it is apparent that the prominent debate around the CIs — especially in the Western hemisphere — forms a common, often negative and condescending image of Confucius Institutes. Following a strong escalation of suspicion

²⁶⁴ (Taipei Liason Office in the RSA, 2011)

²⁶⁵ (Kragelund, 2014, p. 6)

caused by numerous generalizations with regards to their political agenda, most of these arguments seem to rule out the possibility that the people who actually operate CIs have their own practices, experiences and feelings, and may not pursue a certain political agenda, especially when examined through a soft power conceptualization. This is the result of a lop-sided use of interdisciplinary research methodology and research design. And as Hubbert explains, she was “interested in providing an anthropological perspective on a subject that had to-date been largely considered through the framework of international relations.”²⁶⁶ Agreeing on this matter, I believe there is another layer beyond the political and institutionalized debate that needs to be illuminated — namely the layer that considers the perceptions and experiences of individuals and members of the general public who engage with CIs, and even further their practices, experiences and motivations in engaging with them. This aligns with Kragelund’s argument that soft power neglects the agency of actors on the micro-level. However, Confucius Institutes offer classes and courses that can foster personal interests and opportunities. Revealing those voices in this context, especially with regards to China-Africa relations could therefore provide potent insights. Addressing Kragelund’s question with regards to the often-used soft power concept within this debate and the obvious lack in literature “[...] whether we should approach the concept from the sender or the recipient [...]?”²⁶⁷ I argue that the recipient should be acknowledged in a discourse that predominantly highlights the ‘sender’ although stating that soft power is to a large extent dependent on the “receiving audience.”²⁶⁸ While some argue that soft power “is the power over opinions [...]”²⁶⁹ I argue that Confucius Institutes, although co-established through a Chinese government body, are perceived differently by different kinds of people. Each and every one make use of their own ways of understandings and intentions, and each and everyone has their own capacity to create meaning of what they are introduced to within these institutes based on their own previously gained experiences. I further argue that the people, who

²⁶⁶ (Hubbert, 2014a, p. 335)

²⁶⁷ (Cerulo, 1997, p. 398)

²⁶⁸ (Kragelund, 2014, p. 6)

²⁶⁹ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. 99)

engage with the CIs and those who are defined as the target audience, are not mere recipients of the political actions like the soft power strategy. They are able to act and receive on their own terms, establishing their own opinions and meanings that are inevitably connected to their past experiences. The partiality of the soft power debate becomes especially significant when other facilities that are loyal to a different state-entity are available for Chinese language learning, which will be the case for this specific research project. The particular setting of the CI in Cape Town will be discussed in chapter 4 by utilizing the local Chinese School as a medium of comparison, followed by the data presentation in chapter 5 and 6.

Providing the necessary context, the next chapter will dwell on the theoretical and methodological framework that is tailored towards presenting a highly personalized presentation of individual experiences and perceptions.

3. Individual voices unraveled — theoretical and methodological framework

As mentioned above, the essence of this research is to highlight the micro-dynamics concerning unstructured Chinese language learners, with particular focus on the CI and the Chinese School in Cape Town, South Africa. It lacks the representation of the micro-cosmos that is created on the ground, taking place within and around those institutes, concerning the life worlds of the people, their social environment and individual experiences. For this particular angle the following paragraphs will provide a discussion for the theoretical and methodological aspects of this thesis that will shine a personal spotlight on the individual actors that operate on this level.

3.1. Theoretical framework focusing on experiences and perceptions

While I was engaging deeply with the debate there was no avoiding the fact that a substantial gap in the representation of the social layer is only very thinly portrayed, or entirely missing. But how would it be possible to unravel this different layer, when the debate is generally carried out from a functionalistic and/or structuralist position? To answer this question, this chapter will address the need to create a theoretical framework that favors the individuals who engage with the institutions in question. As we have seen the debate unfold within the aforementioned sections there is a clear tendency to elevate the underlying structures that compose the network of the CIs and hence points towards a deterministic all-encompassing impact on the macro-level that is determined by political inspired aspirations.

To oppose this existing frame, I propose a theoretical underpinning that investigates individual practices, perceptions and experiences, including my own. Initially I was heavily leaning towards a theoretical underpinning that emphasizes the interactions of the individuals, utilizing Interactionism. This theory investigates individuals within society and the changes they can facilitate without looking through institutionalized structures. What the

individual perceives in society or a certain setting through the interaction with others could be the focus here. It became however redundant after I spoke to and interacted with my participants in-depth.

Since this research is, as mentioned above, deductive as well as inductive in nature it is undeniable that I entered the field with pre-established extensive theoretical assumptions, true to deductive research. These assumptions were nevertheless challenged when entering the field, showing me what the nature of this research was really about uncovering the importance of adding an inductive layer. Theoretical underpinnings of the interactionist philosophy coined by Mead, for example, revolve around the assumption that the human is a self-reflexive creature that can practice internal communication with him- or herself creating a two-fold personality. This personality is represented as 'I' and 'Me'. While the 'I' is the originator of the action and the container of the impulsive behavior, the 'Me' is the projector of an action and the "socialization of the socialized internalization of social mores."²⁷⁰ Mead's conceptualization of a triangular relation between the self, the projection of the self that is able to comprehend the social dimension of the interaction from an outsider stance to stimulate the opposite and the society is the main contribution towards the interactionist tradition.²⁷¹

While this appears appealing in theory for the purpose of this study, it would ultimately limit its outcome because the theoretical implications would restrict the focus to external symbols only. Additionally, it implies that the 'self' of the participants stays hidden at all times, which ultimately indicates that I as the researcher would not be able to interact with the 'real' self of the participant. Even if I would intend so, observing and researching their interactions could produce at best an assumption about their internal feelings and motivations based on external observations and statements somewhat relying on every individual's common sense. Nonetheless, being in the field, indicated a different spectrum of self-reflexive internally established perceptions, which

²⁷⁰ (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. 7)

²⁷¹ (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. 7)

were often based on their experiences. This clarified the need for a theoretical underpinning that guides the attention towards my participants' experiences and their own internal processes of creating meaning based on these experiences.

Valid for this undertaking, I propose therefore a combination of two theoretical aspects, for one, phenomenology and in combination, dialogism.

3.1.1. Phenomenology

“Not unlike the poet, the phenomenologist directs the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations — and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect.”²⁷²

Edmund Husserl is referred to as the one who introduced phenomenology at the beginning of the 20th century in order to create a new more radical philosophy to engage with the human consciousness and its epistemological comprehensions.²⁷³ The desperate need of finding new ways to improve research on human society arose especially after the destructive outcomes of World War One. Furthermore, social scientists turned away from the assumptions that research methods and theories based on the natural sciences were adequate enough to study human behavior.²⁷⁴ Therefore, to break from historically bound traditions²⁷⁵ and leaning towards “[...] rejecting the domination of enquiry by externally imposed methods”²⁷⁶ phenomenology found its way into being. It cannot be completely seen as a theory but it is further comprised of a multitude of comprehensions that have been added throughout the decades. It is, thus, often envisioned as a philosophy or practice.²⁷⁷ What these dogmas have in common is agreeing on the fact that

²⁷² (Van Manen, 2007, p. 12)

²⁷³ (Dermot, 2000, p. 1)

²⁷⁴ (see Bryman, 2012)

²⁷⁵ (Dermot, 2000, p. 5)

²⁷⁶ (Dermot, 2000, p. 5)

²⁷⁷ (Dermot, 2000, p. 4)

phenomenology provides a spectrum of different notions and implications that focus on the inner processes of individuals; on the “lived experience of human existence”²⁷⁸ that focuses on the “phenomena”²⁷⁹ which translates to the human experience per se. This notion argues that these experiences are permeated with meaning through internal self-reflexive processes and only on the basis of this process do facts or events gain meaning. Husserl, hence, argued on these grounds that the human consciousness is able to make sense of the outside world and is therefore reliable.²⁸⁰ To focus on the way they interpret what is happening around them ultimately facilitates the understanding of the inner life world of people and enables the researcher to reconstruct motivations and perceptions. Phenomenology is simply the study of an individual’s lived experiences and the meanings they create on the basis of these experiences.²⁸¹ It is therefore considered more than appropriate to present personal experience and perceptions within the context of this research.

Nevertheless, it is important to state that phenomenology stresses the embedded meanings of situations and events on a strictly individual level. It ensues that the individual’s consciousness creates meaning inside the individual by echoing the outside world.²⁸² In arguing this, there is no inclusion of the interactions and dialogues with other individuals and their possible transfer of meanings and ideas, which is an essential part for doing field research. In order to overcome this limitation I facilitate a second theoretical approach within this study — dialogism.

²⁷⁸ (Van Manen, 2007, p. 12)

²⁷⁹ (Dermot, 2000, p. 4)

²⁸⁰ (Groenewald, 2004, p. 4; Lavarty, 2003)

²⁸¹ (Creswell, 2007; Smith, 2005)

²⁸² (Lavarty, 2003, p. 20 ff.)

3.1.2. Dialogism

*“Therefore his orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social “languages” come to interact with one another.”*²⁸³

While phenomenology is exclusively concerned with the experienced live world of the individual, I would like to connect this theoretical approach with the concept of dialogism. Dialogism refers to the acknowledgement of dialogue between people, here with special focus on the participants and the researcher, and the subsequent co-creation of understanding through engaging each other’s conceptual horizons.²⁸⁴ It thus inevitably points towards an inclusion of other individuals in the process of creating understanding and meaning. In order to understand their opinions, beliefs and reasoning processes that might be connoted differently than what I understand from the information I gather, I need to facilitate a circle of feedback because only “[...] constant feedback from those around us and our feedback towards them enables us to function within our surroundings.”²⁸⁵ This circle of feedback therefore enables me, as the researcher, to tap into a co-created understanding of my surroundings, which is especially necessary when entering a field that is not native to me.

This further enables me to overcome the limit as a researcher to bias my participants, because as the researcher presents different insights to the individuals he or she interacts with, so do these people provide their very own viewpoint in turn. This interplay provides the meaning as expressed by Bakhtin in the quote above. This dialogic interplay between parties is detectable in everyday life — everyone faces situations and opinions that have not been incorporated within previously established practices. Understanding derives therefore as result of responses: “[...] all real and integral understanding is

²⁸³ (Holquist, 1981, p. 282)

²⁸⁴ (C. Emerson, & Holquist, M., 1986; Herold, 2000)

²⁸⁵ (Herold, 2000, p. 1)

actively responsive, and constitutes nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in whatever form it may be actualized).”²⁸⁶

This conceptualization then, ultimately, provides me with the adequate framework to champion the personal lived experience in a natural setting. In order to collect the appropriate data for this I further had to create an extremely self-reflexive methodological framework in form of an evocative ethnography as well as auto-ethnographic writings, which I will present in the next section. Because only by giving voice to my participants, by including their experience and perceptions, and additionally signing off those experiences through my own experience — which I gained by attending the same Chinese classes — am I able to provide an personalized account of experiences and perceptions in regards to the CI and the Chinese School in Cape Town.

3.2. Methodologies

*“Ethnographies are portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenous world. They display the intricate ways individuals and groups understand, accommodate, and resist a presumably shared order.”*²⁸⁷

As aforementioned the portrayal of Confucius Institutes is overall primarily reduced to political notions. The peoples’ experiences inside these institutions are generally ignored just because the CIs are, some might say: “Very much political institutions”.²⁸⁸ In order to overcome this monolithic research focus, this dissertation concentrates on a distinct focus on voices, opinions and experiences of the audiences who engage through the CI and the Chinese School with the Chinese language. To do this justice the methodological path had to be an inherently qualitative one featuring ethnography, auto-ethnography as well as unstructured in-depth interviews with participants in order to understand their experiences and how they negotiate their engagements with the Chinese language institutions in order to create a sphere of learning environment that suits their individual purposes.

²⁸⁶ (C. Emerson, & Holquist, M., 1986, p. 69 as quoted in Herold, 2000, p. 2)

²⁸⁷ (Sun, 2014, p. 218)

²⁸⁸ Statement of a scholar attending the ICAS 10 in Chiang Mai, July 20-23, 2017.

This chapter will therefore offer an extensive introduction to the adopted methodology and the inherent ontology of this research intention. It will further present and outline of the field including a brief description of the participant selection process and the data accumulation processes as well as an explanation of the ethnographic practices on the basis of a few descriptive examples. In order to create an authentic and valid auto-ethnographic as well as ethnographic account in the following data chapters, I decided to include some of the sections that are normally specific to the methodology chapter, in chapter 4 — ‘Understanding the field - an auto-ethnographic experience’. These sections will connect with the methodological intentions by infusing the auto-ethnographic writings with the considerations for the participant selection I had to face, my position in the field, and ultimately the validity of this research.

3.2.1. Evocative ethnography

*“We cannot continue to regard the ‘writing up’ of ethnographic work as innocent. On the contrary, a thorough recognition of the essential reflexivity of ethnographic work intends to the work of reading and writing as well. We must take responsibility for how we choose to represent ourselves and others in the texts we write.”*²⁸⁹

As portrayed in the literature review above it is indeed obvious that research on Confucius Institutes so far almost entirely excludes, especially within the soft power debate surrounding the China-Africa debate, individual perceptions, thoughts and motives of the people who actually take part in their classes or projects. Not only does the literature surrounding this topic reveal this gap but also personal conversations with academics and researchers devoting their time to the study of this topic acknowledge the marginal role anthropological research plays. To overcome this obvious shortcoming I propose and inherently qualitative approach in the form of an ethnography. These next sections will aim to present my personal comprehension of what ethnography is in order to

²⁸⁹ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2006, p. 258)

lead towards creating an opportunity for the reader to emphasize with me the researcher, the way I structured and unfolded this research intention, and the participants role and perceptions in regards to it.

Ethnography is an important method used to unveil information about certain societies, groups, minorities or individuals. It is set out to research “[...] what people know, feel, and do in a way that situates the phenomena at specific points in time in the history of individual lives, including pertinent global events and processes.”²⁹⁰ Summed up appropriately by Van Maanen, “ethnography is a set of interactions that build the process of the understanding of the knowledge. (1) The assumed relationship between culture and behavior (the observed); (2) the experiences of the fieldworker (the observer); (3) the representational style selected to join the observer and observed (the tale); and (4) the role of the reader engaged in the active reconstruction of the tale (the audience).”²⁹¹ As aforementioned, most accounts on CIs only represent small pieces from interviews a researcher conducted over an extremely small period of time; the researchers viewpoints as well as the participant’s long-term experiences with the institutes are rarely represented. Ethnography for me, therefore, builds a bridge to overcome this lack within the existing research by providing insights not only from the perspectives of the participants but also through an auto-ethnographic field experience.

Even though, as written by Jennifer Hubbert, a small number of ethnographies covering Confucius Institutes exist, they are normally entirely framed by the soft power discourse and based on the American context, which is very different from the African one. They furthermore usually have a very different entrance point, often with the focus on the researcher as being a separate entity. Within this study, however, I, the researcher, took part in the same activities as the language students through taking classes together in the CIs and the Chinese School.

²⁹⁰ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2006, p. 258, as quoted in O'Hare, 2007, p. 6)

²⁹¹ (Handwerker, 2001)

It is hence further notable that — apart from the above-mentioned exemptions — there simply are not many accounts from which to draw theoretical and methodological background information from. The following section will therefore present a short excursion into ethnographic contextualization as coined by some of the academic pioneers in this field leading towards a quintessential, epistemological silver lining that will construct the backbone of this research.

As in any other discipline, ethnography incorporates approaches from multiple disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, communication studies or media studies. The crucial feature in which they are united is the conducting of fieldwork. Especially within anthropology and social sciences a decades-long culture of distinct approaches for the best possible way to conduct ethnography is notable. In regards to this, Tedlock provides a detailed account on the evolution of ethnography in this field. Academics from various disciplines have long discussed the perfect approach to exercising ethnography correctly, with significant emphasis placed on the position of the researcher in the field. While some emphasize the importance of a constant switching between academic and participant in the field in order to obtain objective data, others assert the significance of including ‘the self’ within the whole process of doing ethnography.²⁹² Apparently, there is no such thing as a perfect approach to the field — although some researchers may acknowledge a personal preference in regards to this, it is often based on previous experiences in the field. This being my first experience in the field, I feel the urge to express my understanding of ethnography as derived from literature accounts and personal intercultural experiences. Some of these accounts will be portrayed in the following section to provide my epistemological and hermeneutic understanding of this methodology.

“I wish to suggest that a person's consciousness of self and of social membership are not merely reconcilable, or complementary, but that the second may be built on the first (rather than vice versa). Further, it seems to

²⁹² (Van Maanen, 2011, p. xv)

me that this relationship cannot be appreciated without the explicit introjection and use of the anthropologist's self - and that, far from this being a weakness of a particular argument or style of anthropology, it is both the limitation and the strength of anthropology as such."²⁹³

While there is a strong dispute within ethnographic research around the researcher being involved in the process of ethnography and the researcher trying to objectify his or her personal-self within the process of the research in order to objectively understand the people he engages with, I tend to lean more towards the option that involves the researcher. Similarly to Cohen, I believe that the perception of a certain situation, interaction or a practice derives from the understanding of the self that a person has previously cultivated through experiences of interactions with other persons; hence ethnography cannot function without the researcher taking part in it.

"[P]eople's self-knowledge is not easily available to the ethnographer, anthropology cannot continue to be written as if it does not exist, or is immaterial, or, even, is less important than 'social' knowledge. People's knowledge of themselves is of critical importance to us for without it we misunderstand them. Its availability does certainly present us with profound methodological difficulties, for which we may have only the very imperfect device of our own experience — and here I hasten to distance myself from any suggestion that anthropology should be 'about the anthropologist's self': rather, it must be informed by it."²⁹⁴

On the base of this interplay between researcher and those who interact with him or her, the question arises as to whether anthropology can "[...] replicat[e] the process of ordinary interaction, of our lay assumptions that we have understood each other, that we have achieved 'intersubjectivity'".²⁹⁵ This ultimately results in a more humane form of ethnographic research, because this is the essence in which everyday interactions are facilitated. This further is

²⁹³ (Tedlock, 1991)

²⁹⁴ (Cohen, 2007, p. 115)

²⁹⁵ (Cohen, 2007, p. 114)

related to the concern regarding the process of ethnography is the idea of creating an unnatural setting through the intervention of a researcher. In the case of this study, ordinary interactions as such shall not pose a problem, since the interactions within an extracurricular language classroom are subject to various interactions that may not occur outside the classroom. As I will portray later in this thesis, the students of the observed Chinese classes come from very different backgrounds and would probably not meet outside the institutional walls either. The appearance of a researcher as such is therefore not considered as a problem distorting 'ordinary' interactions.

Often addressed within qualitative research is the nature of questions asked by the researcher. The questions asked about certain topics might influence the natural course of peoples' interactions or thought processes and hence distort the 'data' obtained in the field. In order to counter this concern, a dialogic approach will be utilized as mentioned above in section 3.1.2. This refers to the acknowledgement of the creation of a dialogue between the participants and the researcher. In order to understand their opinions, beliefs and reasoning processes that might be connoted differently than I understand from the information I gather. As the researcher presents different insights to the individuals he or she interacts with, so do these people provide their very own viewpoint in turn. This interplay provides the meaning. Bakhtin expresses this dialogue, as previously mentioned, as follows:

*"Therefore [the researchers] orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another."*²⁹⁶

This dialogic interplay between different parties is detectable in everyday life — everyone faces situations and opinions that have not been incorporated

²⁹⁶ (Holquist, 1981, p. 282)

within previously established practices. Based on these combined features this methodological background deemed to create the most suitable pathway to extract opinions and manners of interactions in a research that is centered on mutual learning processes between the researcher and the participants. A research that aims to refrain from objectifying neither myself, the one who obtains the research, nor the people I engaged with during my field research.

“I argue that there is something more important than the discipline of anthropology, and that is the ability of anthropologists to study the world through ethnography and transmit that understanding back to global populations as education.”²⁹⁷

Additionally, I consider it important to adopt a similar underlying understanding as Millar does when it comes to anthropology and the facilitation of ethnography. Like him I support the notion that anthropology should be met with humility and the awareness of humiliation during the process of ethnographic field research. While the actual time in the field is often hyped through the extraordinary situation the researcher is putting him or herself and the informants through, “[...] ethnography has to have the same integrity as everyday life [...]”²⁹⁸ in order to completely understand the people we want to interact with. The goal of this way of interpreting ethnography is to “keep us open to the world”²⁹⁹ and provide educational perspectives that enrich the research, which focuses on Confucius Institutes and the Chinese School.

Lastly, but arguing further along the same lines I perceive it essential to highlight the individual throughout this research. By highlighting the individuality, which by no means is connected to individualism, it becomes possible to overcome the structuralistic tendencies in which the debate surrounding the CI project is located. The upcoming ethnography will therefore concur with Rappaport’s emphasis on literary and liberal anthropology.³⁰⁰ This

²⁹⁷ (Miller, 2017, p. 27)

²⁹⁸ (Miller, 2017, p. 28)

²⁹⁹ (Miller, 2017, p. 30)

³⁰⁰ (see Rappaport, 1997)

research sets out to be part of what Rapport calls a “‘liberal’ social science which feels free to champion the individual and feels constrained to criticize that happenstance and circumstance where individuality is threatened or denied.”³⁰¹

He prescribes an evocative element to what he understands as missing within the collectivistic and impersonal approaches of social scientists throughout the last century. Based on this is the ontological element that focuses on the individuality of the participants will be central to this research intention. By following Rapport’s idea of opposing “anti-humanistically impersonalizations”,³⁰² that have infiltrated many social theories and methodologies this research sets out to step aside from institutionalizations, generalizations and collectivisms. In order to achieve this I, as suggested by Rapport, will “[...] take my own self as the measure, the precedent, the paradigm case of an individual subject—and argue that any social scientist must do the same. Biographical commentary is only made subtle, made sensitive, through an autobiographical consciousness [...]”³⁰³ which I will achieve by contrasting my auto-ethnographic experience against my participants individual experiences and the meanings they decipher from these experiences accordingly. In doing so I acknowledge the agency of individuals while returning to a “social-scientific appreciation of the individual who makes himself or herself *ex nihilo* and in an ordinary fashion—who comes to be, who achieves a consciousness, outwith and beyond the socio-cultural environment in which he or she was born and has been socialised/enculturated.”³⁰⁴ To guide this back to the thought of literary anthropology, I would like to contribute to an anthropological body that sets out to recognize that instead of presenting the constructed collectivistic features of society by focusing on “[...] the countless individual acts and doings of such individuals taken together which give rise to the ‘stuff’ of social science”.³⁰⁵ Although operating on the lines of theoretical

³⁰¹ (Rapport, 1997, p. 2)

³⁰² (Rapport, 1997, p. 8)

³⁰³ (Rapport, 1997, p. 7)

³⁰⁴ (Rapport, 1997, p. 1)

³⁰⁵ (Rapport, 1997, p. 26)

approaches I do not wish to portray impersonal or generalized images of my participants during the writing up of my ethnography, but instead, by facilitating a ‘literary anthropology’ I will be able to evoke “[...] the particularities of individual lived experience [that] are not eclipsed by generalization, or otherwise abstracted, reduced, typified by totalisation.”³⁰⁶ A literary anthropology as Rapport argues, is facilitated by presenting “the social world”³⁰⁷ through “literariness”³⁰⁸, especially because it is able to capture the ‘human character’ instead of what social scientists tend to do namely, “restrict himself [or herself] to what could be known of its existence from scouring ‘the exterior surface’ of social life and to what could approximately be deduced from people’s actions, words and gestures.”³⁰⁹

It is the fact that in “[this] social-scientific writing, the world is made personal [...]”³¹⁰ and keeps “[...] recognizing the individuality of others, and hence the need for mutual respect, for maintaining a civil, humane conversation between others and oneself”,³¹¹ that gives me ground to argue the way I intend in this research.

In applied terms, this research was facilitated in a Chinese learning environment focusing on individual experiences and perceptions by joining classes at a Confucius Institute as well as in a Chinese School, both located in Cape Town. The following sections will depict in-depth how the research was carried out and which additional supporting methods I utilized.

³⁰⁶ (Rapport, 1997, p. 29)

³⁰⁷ (Rapport, 1997, p. 27)

³⁰⁸ (Rapport, 1997, p. 27)

³⁰⁹ (Rapport, 1997, pp. 27-28)

³¹⁰ (Rapport, 1997, p. 29)

³¹¹ (Rapport, 1997, p. 4)

3.2.2. The field

“[M]uch that occurs during ethnographic work is unpredictable [...] meaning that there are always experiences in the field unforeseen to theoretical preparation.”³¹²

Ethnographers rely on fieldwork; they 'break out' of academia to live in an individual constructed field, in which they aim to answer their research questions by observing, interacting and interviewing the local people.³¹³ In order to facilitate this, there is the need to define one's field site. The field can be virtually anything, from a physical location to an online presence, therefore “[i]n a way, the field is everywhere and nowhere at the same time”³¹⁴ but it can never be perceived as a “monolithic place of research.”³¹⁵ The field research can be comprised of various dimensions across physical settings but also across different perspectives. This research was undertaken as a multi-sited ethnography since it does not aim to provide a holistic approach, but rather focused on the interactions on the ground.³¹⁶

What has been of further importance is the awareness of the flexibility of the research design, before entering the field. While it is essential to abide by academic guidelines in order to obtain a valid and ethical research outcome, it is equally important to state that the intended research design can always be subject to multiple rearrangements and changes. The processes, encounters and even the researcher's own sentiments are challenged tremendously during the stay in the field. Therefore it is important to take notice of the “highly particular and hauntingly personal”³¹⁷ nature that ethnographic research comprises. This does not imply the futility of creating such a design — it simply needs to be kept in mind that there is a certain unpredictability to expect during the process of the ethnographic research, which is why open-mindedness during the planning state of the research as well as the stay in the

³¹² (Van der Waal, 2009, p. 25, partly quoting Van Maanen, 2001, p. 253.)

³¹³ (Van Maanen, 2011, p. xviii)

³¹⁴ (Sullivan, 2001, p. 32)

³¹⁵ (Sullivan, 2001, p. 32)

³¹⁶ (Murchison, 2010, p. 14)

³¹⁷ (Marcus, 1998, p. 7)

field is necessary,³¹⁸ especially when being bound to a limited timeframe during the actual field research.

Before I arrived in Cape Town I had a specific idea on how to approach participants for my research. Initially, I intended to include various groups from inside and outside of the CI to be my informants, facilitated through snowball sampling in order to generate an overview on how far the impact of the CI is branching out into society. During this phase I further was not aware of the existence of the Chinese School as I refer to in chapter 1. Both of these initial issues — integrating the Chinese School into my research as well as accepting that the initial approach was unfeasible — I will describe in more detail in the next chapter. The recruitment of my participants had to be further narrowed down to only unstructured Chinese learners attending public Chinese language classes at the CI and the Chinese School in Cape Town, since the Institute as well as the Chinese School refrained from offering regular cultural classes during the semester I spent there. Since the CI as well as the Chinese School are public institutions I did not have to go through gatekeepers as such. I simply enrolled in a Chinese class appropriate to my pre-existing level at both of these institutes. Being enrolled into the ‘level 2 class’ at the CI and a ‘advanced communication class’ at the Chinese School I automatically found my group of participants. In doing so I intended to go through the same process any Chinese learner would need to go through in order to enroll, which I deemed to be of utmost importance because of my ethnographic data collection process. I therefore avoided entering my field site as an outsider or disturbance to the existing group of Chinese learners since I only managed to enter the group one or two lessons after semester start. However, in order to conduct my research ethically I opened up about my research intention relatively soon after I entered the respective groups, which at the CI was comprised of four and at the Chinese School five individuals.

The group of participants was therefore naturally limited since the group of Chinese learners on an intermediate level was relatively small in both cases.

³¹⁸ (Van Maanen, 2011, p. xiii)

Although I was told during an informal conversation with one of the employees of the CI that more than 30 people enrolled into beginners classes each semester, usually only 10% or so go on after that first level of Chinese or those who take learning Chinese seriously. The advanced group is often even smaller. Furthermore, since the times of the classes coincided it proved difficult to interact with students from the other levels because getting to know ‘my class’ proved time intensive to begin with. This was the same case with the Chinese language class at the Chinese School. For the purpose of reference an overview of participants is provided. I will, however, address these participants, the way I approached them and worked with them more in-depth in chapter 4 and 5.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	School	Contact to China
Richard	50	Male	CI	Lived a year in Taiwan after completing university
Luca	34	Male	CI/ Chinese School	Travelled to China with previous girlfriend and likes South East Asian life style
Mthembi	32	Female	CI	Attended a Taiwanese primary school in SA
Marlize	59	Female	Chinese School	Son is married to a Taiwanese wife and lives in Taiwan
Daniela	33	Female	Chinese School	Lived and worked in China and India before
Karen	28	Female	Chinese School / UCT Chinese credit bearing classes	Loves languages; speaks six different languages already
Julia	20	Female	Chinese School / UCT Chinese credit bearing classes	Grew up in several different countries and continents; academic interest in political/ economic relations; acquainted with TCM doctor in Cape Town
Sunny	24	Female	CI	Volunteer teacher at the CI
Yang Laoshi	50	Female	Chinese School	Teacher at the Chinese School

3.2.3. Data accumulation

The methods used for this research consist of a combination of participant observation and unstructured, in-depth face-to-face interviews as well as informal participant interactions and conversations. While participant observation is seen as an undertaking “[...] in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture”,³¹⁹ formal and informal, unstructured but thematized interviews and conversations can provide deeper insights into what the participants perceive and think about for the relevant research topics. Participant observation is an especially useful method when incorporating regular events into the data collection. Apart from structuring this research in terms of data collection it further facilitates the bonding process with potential participants.³²⁰ For this field research it was particularly useful, since I participated in regular language classes — offered by the CI and the Chinese School — together with my participants. Since this is an inherently qualitative research project, the sample size is of less concern and therefore does not need to be specified. It was however dependent on the availability of potential participants and the researcher’s perception of having obtained enough valid insights. And although I facilitated in-depth unstructured interviews, which furthered my understanding of the participant’s perceptions and experiences tremendously, I further put emphasis on informal interactions and dialogic conversations in accordance with Bakhtinian dialogism in order to avoid failing my participants’ trusts. This gave me the chance to re-address my perception or lack of knowledge about issues they opened up about instead of dwelling in incorrect assumptions.³²¹

It is further necessary to state the ethical nature of this research. Throughout the researching and writing process of this dissertation, I sought informed consent from all the participants and their anonymity was and will be ensured at all times. Furthermore, their participation in this study was entirely voluntary

³¹⁹ (Holquist, 1981, p. 282)

³²⁰ (DaWalt & DaWalt, 2010, p. 1)

³²¹ (see Herold, 2000)

and their personal information will be protected from any harm that could be done to their privacy. Complete confidentiality is given, no names used in any form nor will any details of the participants be passed on to any third party. The researcher will keep records of the interviews in a secure location and no one will be able to access their details. In order to maintain my participants' anonymity throughout this thesis I decided to create pseudonyms for each of them. Some of the data have been further obtained through informal interactions and conversations aside the formally scheduled interviews, which my participants were aware of.³²² This helped me to keep their confidentiality without revealing information that can identify my participants even though I am presenting personal experiences within this thesis. This is further reinforced by my intention to use a literary anthropology approach. I will therefore add fictional characteristics to each participant that will neither distort the data I accumulated, nor compromise the academic integrity of this thesis. These fictional characteristics refer to depicting outer appearances and occupational information that are not based on real features. I undertook these measures in order to keep my participants' privacy but still appeal to the reader's ability to connect with the participants.

This will additionally underpin and extract the reality of each participant and therefore help to answer my research objectives in an ethical but personal way.

Before I proceeded with interviewing my participants I further explained my research intentions and in which context I intend to use their information. Afterwards I provided a hard copy in the form of an information sheet and acquired a signed form of consent. Lastly, I emphasized the possibility to pull out from this study or the interview at any moment if they felt uncomfortable.

³²² (Compare for methods to maintain confidentiality: Cockain, 2011, pp. 102-103)

3.2.4. Ethnographic practices explained

“Although autoethnography as a research method was an unknown and difficult tool for me to use, understanding my own experience was a state of the research process that later allowed me to interpret my participants experiences and represent through writing.”³²³

Since the theoretical frameworks as well as the specific methodologies utilized in this research have been previously discussed, this section will clarify the application of aforementioned methods used in the field.

I spent six months in Cape Town collecting data for this research project. As presented in the previous sections, I was able to conduct ten in-depth, unstructured interviews.³²⁴ It must be pointed out in this connection that ethnography itself is not measurable by quantitative or statistical representation of the data and is usually based on small groups and fewer individuals in order to facilitate detailed understanding of these individuals.³²⁵ According to O’Reilly, ethnographic validity is nevertheless achieved through in-depth “[...] collaborative, flexible, iterative, and inductive [...]”³²⁶ engagement with individuals or groups. I adopted, according to Hammersley and Atkinson, a wide range of ethnographic data collection methods in the field and focused on “[p]eople’s actions and accounts [that] are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher – such as in experimental setups or in highly structured interview situations.”³²⁷ The data that I collected originated “[...] from a range of sources, [...] participant observation and/or relatively informal conversations [which] are usually the main ones.”³²⁸

Given that the objective revolved around understanding my participants and how they negotiated their experiences and motivations, I not only applied an

³²³ (Méndez, 2013, p. 280)

³²⁴ One of my participants was interviewed twice, before and after joining the summer school organized by the Confucius Institute.

³²⁵ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3)

³²⁶ (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 227)

³²⁷ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3)

³²⁸ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3)

ethnographic framework that focuses on my participants narratives, I decided to provide a counter balance by applying auto-ethnography simultaneously. Wall has summarized the approach of auto-ethnography particularly well by referring to Ellis & Bochner, as well as Richardson: “Autoethnography is a form of writing that should allow readers to feel the dilemmas, think with a story rather than about it, join actively with the author’s decision points (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and become co-participants who engage with the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Richardson, 1994).”³²⁹ Keeping this in mind supported me in creating a very self-reflexive and evocative ethnographic practice in the field that helped me collect and subsequently present my results in a way that would step away from objectivities (chapter 3.2.1.). This ultimately not only allowed me to embrace and question individual practices — including my own — it also helped me to appeal to the reader’s ability to immerse him/herself into the unfolding processes of my data collection. In short, I tried to discover paths away from what academia normally seems to be confident with, namely “[...] passive voice, absent narrator, long, inelegant, repetitive authorial statements and quotations; 'cleaned up' quotations, each sounding like the author; hoards of references; sonorous prose rhythms, dead or dying metaphors; lack of concreteness or overly detailed accounts; tone deafness”³³⁰ by incorporating auto-ethnographic methods, which incorporate the subjectivity of research in order to engage an active reader and encourage him/her to create understanding for him or herself by appealing directly to the readers emotions.³³¹ This ultimately connected theory and methodology to a balanced and valid representation of a polyphonic — or multi-voiced narrative.

This field research was based on exactly this premise during six intensive months. An extensive process of self-reflexive understanding of — not only my participants but also myself — was not achieved by endless interviews but by using several additional methods. The ten previously mentioned interviews were tape-recorded and meticulously transcribed verbatim in order not to

³²⁹ (Wall, 2008, p. 44)

³³⁰ (Richardson, 1992, p. 131, as quoted in Campbell, 2017, paragraph 7)

³³¹ (Campbell, 2017)

deviate from the participant's own language and usage of words.³³² These interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were conducted in an unstructured/unstandardized manner. According to Berg during "[...] an unstandardized interview, interviewers must develop, adapt, and generate questions and follow-up probes appropriate to the given situation and the central purpose of the investigation."³³³ Not only does the interviewer need to adapt during the course of the interview, he/she is also able to adapt the interview themes because of previously made observations, etc.³³⁴ These further refer to informal conversations I had with my participants, even before conducting 'official' interviews. Many of the themes I approached during the individual interviews appeared during informal interactions and conversations I would, for example, have after the Chinese classes we shared or during other interactions outside the classes like dinners.

Since the two different Chinese classes were scheduled Mondays and Saturdays, initially there were not enough fixed appointments, during which I was able to interact with my official participants. This caused me immense discomfort since my expectations to attend several language and cultural classes offered by the CI were not met (chapter 4). I nevertheless tried to pursue additional contact with my participants. This commenced soon after the first Chinese class that I attended at the Confucius Institute. Richard was the first of my classmates who showed interest in what I was doing and engaged in extensive conversations outside the official interview we later conducted. This first evening after the class I explained my project to him and we ended up talking about how we thought the CI would offer more cultural activities. Since the CI office did not close until after all the Chinese classes were wrapped up for the evening, we decided to go together to the office and ask for these activities. Richard, who was quite unhappy about the current textbook used in class (chapter 6), wanted to ask about other books with which he could study Chinese at home as well. Unfortunately, after we asked the secretary about our concerns she soon told us, that cultural activities were not as well perceived

³³² (see Belgrave & Smith, 1995, p. 70)

³³³ (Berg, 2001, p. 111)

³³⁴ (Berg, 2001, p. 111)

and therefore could not take place that semester. Additionally she showed Richard some books, which he would need to purchase, borrowing was not an option. He then decided to look for other possibilities before purchasing one of the books from the CI.

The second week, just to mention a second anecdote, Luca showed some interest in talking to me after class and again I was explaining my project, the thoughts about how my field research was unfolding as well as other travel related experiences I had before. We then started to talk in-depth about his love for traveling and his deep interest in other cultures, calligraphy and chess, which ultimately brought him to China for the first time. Since it already was quite dark outside, he quickly offered me a ride home, as is very common in Cape Town. Retrospectively, getting into a car with someone I just started to get to know did additionally raise some doubts next to the extreme pressure to form a pool of participants, which was already naturally quite limited (more details about this in chapter 4). The ride home took about ten minutes, which admittedly felt much longer due to his swift and dramatic driving style. This experience did however encourage me in my decision to approach individuals in this manner, because it offered remarkable insights, which I would have never been able to address with just opting for formal interviews. Not only did these informal conversations open up extremely important themes I could probe further during the upcoming interviews, they gave me a chance to bond with my participants and dialogically exchange ideas, thoughts and dreams, which ultimately created a trustworthy, friendly environment.

Although these are only two of the informal experiences I had with my official participants, I believe the notion of informal conversations as well as the tremendous gains a researcher can receive by following this path are clear.

Furthermore after each of these experiences, I sat down and took notes about the impressions I gained from these informal conversations in order to self-reflexively create appropriate and adaptable interview-themes that would help me generate the data I needed. Because I was able to talk with my participants

about certain themes in an unofficial manner, my participants later felt more comfortable during the interviews, which subsequently helped me to probe these topics more in-depth while being able to tape-record the outcome. Lastly, I facilitated Whatsapp as well as email conversations to clarify follow-up questions or topics that surfaced outside the interviews. The collection of their information was informed and the recording was realized only after all my participants have given their consent, as I previously stated in chapter 3.2.3.

The reason for relying on these additional methods instead of meeting for follow-up interviews was simply due to the fact that many of my participants were women who engaged in full-time employment. Meeting up in the evenings therefore, as I will explain in more detail in the following chapter, was not always feasible as a consequence of general safety concerns. Especially Marlize struggled to engage in spontaneous meetings since she was not only working, but she further tutored a little Chinese girl (chapter 5/6) almost full-time. Marlize was very concerned about safety, she simply would refrain from driving alone after dark and she generally just felt safer in her own surroundings. Involving her in email or Whatsapp conversations was simply easier for her. This admittedly was easier for me as well, since she was living a 45-minute drive away from where I was staying. Nevertheless, since Marlize thoroughly enjoyed sharing her stories in any kind of manner, her emails ended up being extremely detailed and insightful.

Apart from these informal conversations with my participants I additionally initiated numerous informal conversations with a variety of different people living in Cape Town. Housemates, friends, people that involved me in random conversations on the streets — all contributed to the process of creating my self-reflexive understanding in regards to my position, feelings and perceptions in the field as well as the position, preferences and motivations of my participants. For instance, during the initial phase of my field research, I often spent evenings with my housemates. They would invite me for dinner with their friends at home or in restaurants close by the house. During these dinners I often shared the reasons for my stay in Cape Town and sometimes, before

explaining everything in detail, I would ask these people if they knew what Confucius Institutes are, or what they think about China and/or learning Chinese. Most of them had simply never heard about Confucius Institutes and received their knowledge about China from news-channels. It was therefore no surprise that many were vocal about the involvement of the Chinese in local industries or even the governments' relations with China, as they were portrayed in media. The impressions they had about Chinese people living in Cape Town were generally similar. Most people who did not engage in Chinese learning were either uninterested in the existence of CIs or they expressed somewhat negative impressions or stereotypes towards Chinese people, as I will further point out in more detail in chapters 4-6.

During this initial phase of getting to know my field, these informal conversations helped me tremendously to not only understand my surroundings and what I really needed to focus on for my research project, but they also fostered my understanding and self-reflexivity towards the information my participants shared with me. This is why I decided to make this an integral part of my field research. I therefore did not have a very strict schedule apart from the Chinese classes I attended and the interviews I conducted including the impressions and fieldnotes I transferred into my online library. Hence, I often took day trips around the city and the surroundings of Cape Town and, for example, sat in cafes and observed people while taking fieldnotes. One experience influenced me particularly. One of these days, I decided to visit the Waterfront, a shopping area close to the coast and also the gateway to Robben Island. It is simply a location with many restaurants which my housemates and friends would recommend or where people (mostly from the middle class) would meet. I decided to spend my day there and walk around, always on the look out for new observations or conversations. It was a nice but slightly windy day and I decided to sit next to 'Nobel Square' on a little bench. It was then that I saw a group of elderly white women very obviously reaching for their bags to pull them close to themselves, when a couple of black workers in blue overalls specked with white paint just walked passed them. Although it seemed a rather small observation and irrelevant for the topic of my research it

somewhat opened my eyes and demonstrated once again that I needed to invest time to better understand the city and the local social situation if I wanted to adequately represent my participants (chapter 4).

I further engaged in ‘touristy’ activities since this not only broadened my understanding about the historical features of the city but these trips also gave me the chance to scope out the layout of the city and talk to city or tour guides. I was interested in how many Chinese tourists came to the city. This was admittedly not directly related to my topic, but nevertheless a helpful piece of information to keep in mind. One of my tour guides told me that he once had a Chinese couple on his trip to Cape Point asking him if South Africans would eat Penguins. He laughed and told me that this was the only experience he ever had with a Chinese tourist.

This whole process was extraordinarily time intensive and could not have been achieved by just collecting a few interviews within a month, especially because of the self-reflexive manner in which I collected the data. Campbell states that “[...] autoethnographic research requires robust patience, deep introspection, and the ability to regularly (re)visit and (re)view your own epistemological and ontological position.”³³⁵ This is associated with the practice of constantly and dialogically sharing the thoughts about my research and my fieldwork with not only my formal participants, but also with every informal participant — which enabled me to constantly adapt my ways of thinking and flexibility to deductively as well as inductively adjust my research while being in the field (see also in chapter 1.3.).

Of utmost importance for creating this specific understanding was the interaction with people mainly outside the official debate. This meant that the interactions with scholars, directors or any other high-level individuals that normally contribute to research or media representation on this debate were consciously avoided for the purpose of understanding the debate through the micro-level perspective; specifically through the eyes of my participants.

³³⁵ (Campbell, 2017, paragraph 48)

Stepping aside from the expected main participants helped me additionally in creating my own understanding in terms of what people perceive and experience — specifically in Cape Town.

Finally, as previously mentioned, during my attendance at Chinese classes at the two different Chinese teaching facilities I was concerned with extensively, but not exclusively capturing my impressions in the form of fieldnotes. Every other day I intentionally refrained from scheduling anything and transferred my notes into my ‘online fieldnote library’ ‘Evernote’. This involved an intensive amount of reflecting on my observations, the way I captured these observations — including my own biases and standpoints — and particularly my feelings about it. The epistemological value behind capturing fieldnotes will be discussed in more detail in the auto-ethnographic reproduction of the data collected for this research in the following chapter.

In summary it can be said, therefore, that this specific time intensive research design helped me to engage with different kinds of people in this context. This approach was sensitive and called for humility and trustworthiness that builds on sharing — dialogically — one’s own experiences with people on the ground. Stepping away from the official stakeholders of the debate and towards the people who are engaging with the Confucius Institute and/or the Chinese School, as well as those who simply live in Cape Town, supported the slow creation of ethnographic understanding of the context in which the individuals in question live.

4. Understanding the field — an auto-ethnographic experience

*“It is as if writing — the epitome of consciousness — obliterates reality, pushing it further and further out of reach. But then what I have in mind here is a special kind of writing, not poetic or literary — heavens forbid! — but the direct transmission of experience onto the page, usually hurried, abbreviated, and urgent.”*³³⁶

In this chapter I will approach the experiences I had in the field from an auto-ethnographic angle. This research does not aim to focus on a certain culture as traditional ethnography often has been utilized for³³⁷, but on a group of unstructured Chinese learners in a certain setting – being the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School in Cape Town. Throughout the research I considered my position in the field as both an insider, by taking part in the same classes and activities as my participants, and additionally as an outsider, for researching a certain group of individuals in order to understand their motivations and perceptions. This therefore goes along the lines of Bakhtin’s perfect role of the researcher, who needs to be able to engage in a dialogic ethnographic data accumulation and to understand:

“There exists a very strong, but onesided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture [...]. Of course, a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture [...] is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect, it would be merely duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching. Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. After all, a person cannot actually see or make sense of even his own exterior appearance as a whole, no mirrors or photographs will help him, only others can see and understand his authentic exterior, thanks to their spatial outsideness and thanks to the fact that they are

³³⁶ (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 161; as quoted in O’Hare, 2007, p. 7)

³³⁷ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 3 ff.)

others [...]. In the realm of culture, outsidership is the most powerful lever of understanding.’”³³⁸

I therefore consider myself as an outsider, as well as an insider since the institutions in which my participants were learning Chinese are open to the public. I was therefore able to go through a similar process of getting introduced to a Chinese class the same way as my participants experienced it. This similar process and the situation in Cape Town, albeit not immediately related to the actual research I carried out, let me increasingly consider an auto-ethnographic approach to introduce the field and to attend to the multiple self-reflexive thoughts and challenges I encountered myself while entering this town and the research site. On the other hand, it provided me with a valuable tool to measure my experience against the experience of my participants and thus create a base of empathy for their experiences and viewpoints. Reed-Danahay refers to a “[...] notion of autoethnography [that] foregrounds the multiple nature of selfhood and opens new ways of writing about social life.”³³⁹ This notion, although not recent, somewhat appeals to me, especially after the experiences I had in the field and in the ‘Capetonian’ society. This particular experience required me to constantly reconsider my own identity. Auto-ethnography in this research therefore signifies an increased utilization of self-reflexivity.³⁴⁰ As this research focuses on a small group of Chinese learners in Cape Town, especially in the Confucius Institute and the later discovered Chinese School it was of importance to me to understand their social demographic context so as to comprehend their perceptions and experiences. Moreover, the situation in Cape Town threw me somewhat into a situation in which self-reflexivity was essential to understand the societal conditions of my participants, especially for someone who did not experience the same socio-historic context. I deemed this essential to avoid dichotomist definitions which rendered it imperative for me to engage in a constant dialogic process not only with my direct participants, but also with unofficial informants along the way, in order to tackle essential questions like, who am I to speak about the

³³⁸ (see Dwyer, 1977; Emerson & Holquist, 1986, as quoted in Herold, 2000, p. 4)

³³⁹ (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3)

³⁴⁰ (Reed-Danahay, 1997, see pp. 1 ff.)

participants in the field? Is my representation valid if I refrain from the experience they have?

By using auto-ethnographic considerations along side ethnographic methods for my participants urged me to constantly reflect on what I heard, saw and felt in order to make sense of the “multiple [and] shifting identities”³⁴¹ I experienced in the field. And lastly, on the grounds of my theoretical and somewhat philosophical considerations of phenomenology as well as dialogism that highlight the importance of lived experience and its influence on present actions I concur with Denzin, who states that “[...] autobiographic ethnography — in which anthropologists interject personal experience into ethnographic writing”³⁴² is indispensable in this context in particular because I brought my own experience — of previously interning in a Confucius Institute — into the field, the same way as each and everyone of my participants brought their experiences with them.

4.1. Narrating the field through fieldnotes

“One method that throws the researcher directly into the life-worlds under investigation and requires the careful recording (through fieldnotes) of the problematic and routine features of that world.”³⁴³

As essential extension to my auto-ethnographic and ethnographic methodologies I recorded fieldnotes while being in the field. Taking fieldnotes may vary from the utilization of old-fashioned notebooks, to electronic note taking or recording. It seems to be apparent however that the actual fieldnotes and the defining process of what these notes are and include is left to be decided by each researcher individually.

“It is evident that how people feel about fieldnotes is crucially linked to how they define them, and one must always determine just what this definition is in order to understand what a person is saying.”³⁴⁴

³⁴¹ (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2)

³⁴² (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2)

³⁴³ (Murchison, 2010, p. 46)

An inherent part of taking fieldnotes is associated with not only recording the daily experiences but also a process of self-reflexivity regarding the experiences can take place.³⁴⁵ To understand the outcome and the setting of this research I aim to create a dialogue to foster the readers' understanding towards me, the researcher. In order to do so, I will focus on describing the note taking process in more detail.

I decided to utilize fieldnotes in order to comprehend the environment I found myself in, to capture my experiences and the meanings I attached to those experiences while being in the field (refer to chapter 3.2.4. for more details). This further relates to Taussig's "imaginative logic of discovery"³⁴⁶, because through writing these notes I started reasoning with the initial data I collected on the way. These notes therefore functioned as a medium for self-reflexivity to facilitate the understanding of my own positioning in the field by recording my auto-ethnographic experiences.

Cape Town poses some undeniable safety problems, which is why I decided to carry as few electronics as possible with me. According to Murchison "[s]ome environments are much more suitable for immediate note taking. Note taking in private, intimate settings may seem particularly intrusive or distracting."³⁴⁷ I therefore adjusted the ways and frequency of my note taking from an intended daily logbook to several different note taking methods and frequencies.

For the immediate fieldnotes on class interactions and observations, which I will address in more detail below, I used one notebook for the classes of the CI and a different one for the Chinese classes at the Chinese School respectively. While I attempted to understand gender, race and socio-economic dynamics of Cape Town's society I utilized whatever I could find to write notes and observations down. Menus, receipts, business cards etc., therefore became a regular part of the note taking process.

³⁴⁴ (Denzin, 1981, as quoted in; Van Maanen, 2011, p. 117)

³⁴⁵ (Sanjek, 1990, p. 6)

³⁴⁶ (Taussig, 2011, p. xi)

³⁴⁷ (Murchison, 2010, p. 48 ff.)



Figure 1

To begin with, my notes appeared to be random and they often solely contained observations of the environment in Cape Town I found myself in outside of the classes. These notes however, facilitated a self-reflexive understanding of personal feelings and furthermore the understandings about my positioning and pre-existing biases towards Cape Town. This and countless dialogic conversations about thoughts and experiences in the field with informal and formal participants helped me tremendously to comprehend better in what social environment my participants were situated and what implications this would have for them and their connection to the Confucius Institute or the Chinese School. To trace this self-reflexivity back to the methodological structure of this research, I was painfully aware of the very partial picture I was drawing throughout the research, as Clifford and Marcus addressed:

“Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted—and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification.”³⁴⁸

In order to unite the scattered notes I usually spent the evenings at home and sat down to transfer these notes, observations and pieces of my everyday experiences to the Evernote software onto my computer.

This however did not happen on a regular basis since the note taking process was sometimes affected by the safety situation itself. As aforementioned, regular events like the language classes I attended, only took place twice per

³⁴⁸ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 7)

week, Monday evenings at the CI and Saturday midday at the Chinese School. Therefore I had breaks in between and not always a scheduled event, like an interview to attend. When I refrained from getting to know Cape Town I often waited patiently at home for the next event to come up. Something I observed and reflected about with a lot of my formal and informal participants is the reason for this. If there are no scheduled plans in Cape Town you normally refrain from leaving the house, especially on your own. This sentiment is heightened in regards to women. It is a little different with a group of people or if you have a car, none of which I had available most of the time. But wandering around, especially during certain times of the day is considered, depending on the neighborhood, not very safe unless you do so in the tourist areas.

4.2. How I became an ethnographer — a confessional tale

“A potential problem with ethnographic studies is seeing data everywhere and nowhere, gathering everything and nothing. The studied world seems so interesting (and probably is) that an ethnographer tries to master knowing it all. Mountains of unconnected data grow but they don’t say much... Ethnographers who leave data undigested seldom produce fresh insights and, sometimes, may not even complete their projects, despite years of toil.”³⁴⁹

January 25, 2016 — I was sitting on a plane from the UK to Cape Town wondering what to expect. Of course I read about the place and talked to various people beforehand, especially at the conference from which I was traveling, but I purposely tried to keep it at bay. I did not want to read too excessively about the current situation in Cape Town and neither about the geographical and urban settings. I wanted to get into the field as unbiased as possible to be educated by my experience and the people in the field.

However, being a city with great historical momentum I considered it to be the perfect place for my field research. Especially because of previously established contacts and the knowledge that English would lead me where I

³⁴⁹ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 7)

needed to be. Cape Town also comprises a multi-cultural setting and one of the most liberal universities on the continent. I was quite positive about the ‘adventure’ that lay ahead of me. Nevertheless, I was soon woken from this somewhat dreamy state of mind.

When I arrived to Cape Town International Airport I met my first hurdle. As soon as I approached the immigration counter I was taken aside, because I could not provide proof of my intention to leave the country within 90 days time according to the visa requirements. I simply had refrained from booking a return ticket, because many people, especially those whom I met at the conference and who had done research in Cape Town before assured me it would be unproblematic to cross the frontier to a bordering country, like Botswana or Namibia. Unnecessary to say that I did online research on this issue to reassure myself as well, since the time for conducting my field research was limited. I was however quite mistaken, things are and function differently and at times, from one moment to the next; things like this change rather quickly in this country. Retrospectively, this was a promising introduction to the things lying ahead of me.

The head of immigration did not show the slightest amusement at my mistake and I was then led away from the immigration counter by three fierce looking guards. After that, I was subsequently given the option to purchase a flight ticket to my home country at once, so I could utilize the tourist visa or they threatened to put me on the next flight back to the UK that same day. After a brief period of panicking and increasing determination to do my field research as I planned, I booked a flight back to Germany in 90 days. Subsequently, they let me pass border control with nothing but a stern look. Looking back at this episode, I am quite aware that my appearance — white-female and waving a German passport at them — most likely helped me with this minor incident. A little later I saw other people being dragged out of the line much more harshly. ‘Welcome to Cape Town’, they said after they stamped and returned my passport.

After this first experience I made my way to the downtown hostel I had booked beforehand. Since I already knew that the CI, initially my primarily field site, was situated on the campus of Cape Town University (UCT), I tried to somewhat estimate a close location to it. The district in which I found my hostel — Gardens — seemed at least on a map relatively easy to reach (Figure 2). Nevertheless, I soon found out that the public transportation system in Cape Town is limited to the main tourist routes and the university as such was not one of these routes, which yet again confronted me with a slight change of plans. Given that I expected the entry to the field to cause change in my research intend, I gathered myself relatively quickly and tried to overcome those obstacles. I had to, after all.

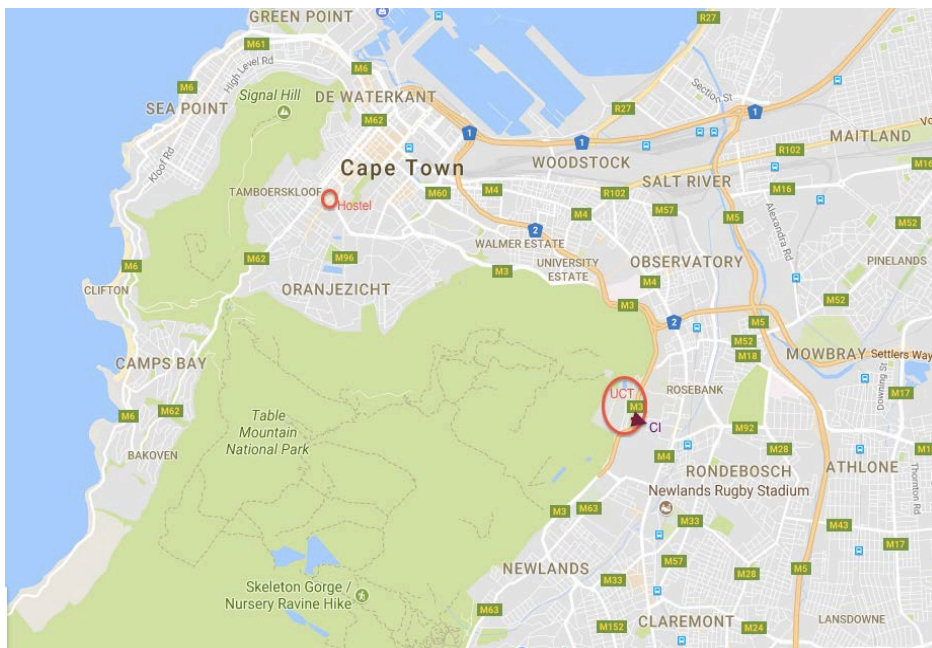


Figure 2

Something else I did not take into account was the fact that my arrival fell more or less into the start of the new semester, which made it extremely difficult to find a proper accommodation quickly. I therefore stayed in the hostel for about three weeks. The hostel itself was very lively, full of young adults, seeking adventures after graduating their high school, but also people who made traveling for business, for modeling or travel writers. I soon realized that this place was the ‘IN-place’ to be, not only among young tourists but also local ‘fashionistas’ and hip socializers as the hostel café turned into a bar every night.

I used these first weeks to get to know the city, its geography and socio-demographic circumstances. I tried to meet up as soon as possible with some of my pre-established contacts to help me to understand ‘life’ in Cape Town. While we were having a coffee in a small café close to the hostel, sitting outside on a bench next to the busy road, every now and then a beggar walked by approaching people for food or money — a common picture in Cape Town. I learned basic locations in Cape Town first. The districts located to the left of Table Mountain (Figure 2), being Camps Bay, Sea Point and Green Point with their beautiful promenades and beaches along the ocean, were mainly, but not exclusively, populated with white upper-class population especially those living along the sea side. The area around Cape Town center, the Waterkant and everything up to Tamboerskloof and Oranjezicht was equally populated with mainly the upper-middle class and the many tourists that visit Cape Town every year. This area is considered relatively safe as the police heavily guard it during the day. A friend later told me that the whole area is like a ‘maximum security unit’ until about 7 pm, when the guards leave their posts for the night and more and more beggars show up on the sidewalks. Towards the right of central Cape Town are the districts of Woodstock, Salt River and Observatory. These areas are mostly populated with black, coloured³⁵⁰ and people of South Asian descent for example from India and known for being historically the main locations in which racial segregation was carried out. Many students also live in these districts, as accommodation is cheaper. My friend, who lived at this point in Woodstock, told me that parts of these districts are considered relatively safe while others are notoriously known for being dangerous, especially at night. The districts following Observatory are Mowbray, a mainly black area, Rondebosch and Claremont. Many students reside in these areas because they are most conveniently located to the university. While these districts are considered safe during the day, no matter their ethnic background, people will keep warning you not to go out on your own in the evening. In fact they do this for the whole Cape Town. There are also several townships on the outskirts of Cape Town. The most prominent being Khayelitsha, meaning

³⁵⁰ I am using this term because it is — even after the termination apartheid — still a commonly used term in Cape Town.

‘New Home’³⁵¹ in Xhosa, which is the biggest largest informal settlement in Cape Town — some might say one of the biggest and oldest in South Africa. About one million people of the approximately four million people living in the entire metropolitan area of Cape Town are living here.³⁵² Flying into the airport this massive township is one of the first things you will see overlooking Cape Town and one of the last impressions you will take with you when you leave. Poverty, safety issues and racial discrimination, although the latter was officially abandoned with the abolition of apartheid, are still very present, I saw this with every step I took and heard it even more in everyday conversation I had. It was not uncommon for someone to start a conversation with a crime related topic: “How was your week, did something happen?” — “Actually, last Tuesday I saw someone’s car being hijacked at a garage [gas station] at gunpoint!”³⁵³ While this surprised me at first, I soon realized its part of everyday life, and something I had to get used to.

Along with this there is always the heightened awareness of danger through sexual assault and violent robbery, especially among the female population, although safety is a prominent issue that concerns everyone. Women are warned to not go out alone in the evening in particular, especially on foot. While I was starting my research and getting acquainted with the university and the location of the CI, several rapes were reported on campus among university students.³⁵⁴ This is an everyday reality and an even more frequent occurrence in gang-owned neighborhoods and townships. I will come back to these issues below since they affected my participants and I on a daily basis. And although these facts and impressions are not directly related to my research project per se, it is part of the process of getting acquainted with the location and its people. Not becoming aware of this, would have limited the understanding I acquired towards my informants tremendously as well as my awareness and the bias I brought to the field.

³⁵¹ (South Africa History Online, 2013)

³⁵² (Western Cape Government, 2016)

³⁵³ This short section is a part of an informal conversation between housemates and friends.

³⁵⁴ (Etheridge, 2016)

Additionally, using this somewhat confessional description of my surroundings and my emotions during the field work may provide the reader with a sense of understanding not only about my stance as a researcher but also about my participants' life worlds and the meanings they attach to experiences they have along the way. Van Maanen characterizes this as a 'confessional tale' among the ethnographies, according to him "[i]n some instances, the confessional tale stems from the notorious sensitivity of many fieldworkers to aspersions cast on the scientific status of their undertakings."³⁵⁵ He further inserts that "much confessional work is done to convince the audience of the human qualities of the fieldworker. Often the ethnographer mentions personal biases, character flaws, or bad habits as a way of building an ironic self-portrait with which the readers can identify (See, I'm just like you, full of human foibles)."³⁵⁶ In using a confessional tale, I aim to provide the reader with a valid understanding of the research experience I obtained while overcoming obstacles in the field, which the audience can then take part in.

While I was using these first couple of weeks to getting to know this city's dynamics (see chapter 3.2.4), I further started to become acquainted with what people know about the CI in Cape Town. Since I initially planned to involve participant groups who are not taking part in the activities of the CIs to examine the influence of the institute within the broader public, I started relatively soon a 'trial and error' process within the broader public after I arrived. I approached people from various backgrounds and attempted to discover during casual conversations what their knowledge about the CI or China was. It did not take long for me to realize that the 'average' person was unaware of the mere existence of the CIs. Some of these informal conversations, in particular with one of them who was active in an academic field herself, was however distantly aware of Confucius and his connection to Chinese culture and tried to connect these two concepts.

³⁵⁵ (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 73)

³⁵⁶ (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 75)

Racial stereotyping and its usage among the local population also became obvious rather quickly and I gained first insights on how Chinese people are often perceived negatively, as a friend told me casually, while sitting in his garden: “Oh they are all miserable, they sit in front of their shops and look absolutely miserable!”³⁵⁷ A statement I would later encounter frequently always heavily drenched in a notion of common sense — for many that is just how Chinese people appear to them. While this is again not directly related to the focus of this research at first sight, it seemingly comprises a common thread drawn through the perceptions in regards to Chinese people from individuals I encountered in Cape Town, especially among people who grew up in South Africa. One underlying notion about Chinese people that has been strongly influenced by the historical momentum, which South Africa is still carrying with it today, is apartheid. While being in the field for a couple of months already at that time, I attended a workshop on a book publication about Afro-Asian encounters during which Professor Karen Harris presented her work on the construction of Chinese “otherness”.³⁵⁸ Her argument is based on historical migration and immigration of Chinese people to South Africa. In her publication she highlights further that the Chinese community is affected being historically ‘othered’ even today. Most of this was reinforced through apartheid and its racial segregation policies, which not only affected the black communities but also some Asian nationalities, among them Chinese and Indians. Kuo summarizes this further: “Under the apartheid system, the Chinese — made up of waves of migrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as mainland trading cities like Shanghai and Wenzhou between the 1960s and 1990s — were lumped together with the country’s Indian population and then with those of mixed race ancestry, in a category called “coloured.” They were barred from living in certain areas and traveling without approval.”³⁵⁹ Yap and Man further portray the arrival of Chinese in a complex historical account on Chinese communities in South Africa as: “The Chinese sojourner lived in a nether world — suspended between a social system that is physically inaccessible and the present society which he is either unable or unwilling to

³⁵⁷ A sentiment addressed by one of my informal participants.

³⁵⁸ (Harris, 2017)

³⁵⁹ (Kuo, 2017)

fully participate in.”³⁶⁰ This statement pictorially demonstrates the different perceivable layers of ‘otherness’ of Chinese in the South African society.

Kuo inserts this historical creation of ‘otherness’ into the contemporary context of South Africa’s socio-demographic and economical situation. She writes that: “[n]ow, a relentlessly bad economy, a rising tide of xenophobia, and competition from new malls as well as African traders who have forged their own connections in China, are forcing Chinese traders and business people to consider leaving. The threat of a downgrade of South Africa’s debt, now a reality, and heavy regulations have also dissuaded Chinese businesses and investors from coming in the first place.”³⁶¹

These accounts of migration and immigration of Chinese people to South Africa, which I only came across a couple of months after entering the field, put my experiences with what people often thought about Chinese into perspective. Again, although not directly related to this research topic it opened up yet another layer that I had to understand and keep in mind while interacting and listening to the experiences of my formal and informal participants. Especially because this seemed to be another thin thread woven through the perceptions of numerous people I encountered. Many people I talked to genuinely did not see the need to interact with the Chinese community unless they were somewhat integrated already. I will come back to this point in chapter 5.

This gave me critical insights about the local Chinese community and the outsider perception of it. This perception formed especially during apartheid has stuck in the minds of the people until today; something my participants themselves often experienced during their interaction with other people, as I will point out more in the next chapters.

³⁶⁰ (Yap & Man, 1996, p. 36)

³⁶¹ (Kuo, 2017)

Experiencing these conversations continuously made me recognize that my initial plan was bound to fail. This rendered me slightly anxious at that time as parts of my possible research intention had to be overthrown. Even though I was aware of this being a possibility, seeing it actually happening over and over again, so very early in the field, can cause feelings of humiliation. Especially while not being able to find proper accommodation within these first weeks. Reading Miller's statement: "[...] ethnography with integrity—is always the humiliation of the anthropologist"³⁶² reminded me tremendously of this initial time in the field and assuaged some doubts I had while conducting my ethnography. Alongside this sense of humiliation came the awareness of prejudices or simply, bias I brought with me. It was everything but easy to accept the racial profiling and safety issues being primarily connected to the black population. Since the beginning, I have been told over and over again that I need to get rid of that 'European or Western mindset'. This city's dynamics were and are different from what I was used to, so I did invest time in understanding those dynamics (see chapter 3.2.4). I embraced my mistakes and learnt what was natural to do and what wasn't. This way I tried to become a part of the society rather than remaining a complete outsider. I was eager to learn about the different layers of society throughout my stay. Part of this was to somehow accept that my outer appearance especially my skin color would mean privilege to parts of Cape Town's society. Learning these things was essential to understanding the mindsets and internal processes of both the people I encountered along the way and my participants. On the basis of this, I was able to structure my field research intention around my dialogical experience as well as around my ability to emphasize with my participants' internal processes regarding their journey towards learning Chinese and engaging with the CI and the Chinese School, which ultimately helped me to start over with more confidence.

³⁶² (Miller, 2017, p. 28)

4.3. The Confucius Institute Cape Town — general information

Before delving deeper into my auto-ethnographic experience in enrolling with this institute I will, for the purpose of completion, also provide a brief section with general facts about the Confucius Institute at the University of Cape Town. However, because this thesis aims to go beyond those institutional facts that are normally used to back up this structuralist debate, I will only provide facts that are available to the general public to mirror the understanding of my participants, which will then be complimented with the data provided in chapter 5 and 6.

The Confucius Institute at the Cape Town University was officially established in early 2010.³⁶³ However, the official partnership agreement was signed in 2007 during the second Confucius Institute Conference in Beijing. Apparently, there had been some internal doubts about officially establishing this CI because of the influence Beijing might bring and additionally if a ‘one size fits all’ concept would be suitable in a multi-ethnic society as addressed earlier in section 2.5. This however seemed to be resolved by Liu Yandong, who is the “Vice Premier of the State Council and Chairwoman of the Council of the Confucius Institute Headquarters”.³⁶⁴ She suggested a ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’ approach implying “[...] that CIs should be diverse and should function in a manner that is responsive and sensitive to local conditions.”³⁶⁵

The partner universities in this case are the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, China.³⁶⁶ At the time of the conduction of this research³⁶⁷ the directorship of the CI consisted of the local professor, Evance Kalula and the Chinese director, professor Qin Shengyong.³⁶⁸ The directorship of the institute is subject to regular change as is the staff. In fact, the most recent Chinese director is now Liu Wenwu, whose welcome celebration was officially combined with this years (2018) dragon

³⁶³ (Hanban, 2018)

³⁶⁴ (Xinhua News Agency, 2016)

³⁶⁵ (King, 2013; 2017 quoting Vermaak, 2010)

³⁶⁶ (Van der Waal, 2009, p. 26 referring to Burawoy, 1998; Murchison, 2010, pp. 26, 33)

³⁶⁷ Note: This research was carried out Jan. 25 - Jul. 26, 2016.

³⁶⁸ (CIUCT, 2017d)

boat celebrations.³⁶⁹ It is expectable that the position of the local director experienced some changes as well; these seem, however, not officially announced yet. The CI also reports to the Board of Advisors and is eager to promote academic exchanges between UCT and Sun Yat-Sen University, as well as other higher education institutions in China.

The institute is located on Middle Campus at the Cape Town University. The facility itself is located on the ground floor of the Masingene Building, which is also the location for the IAPO (International Academic Programmes Office), whose main aim is to “empower [...] internationalisation at UCT”,³⁷⁰ and facilitate global exchange within the “higher education community.”³⁷¹ This is not only seen through the establishing of the Confucius Institute but also visible through the partnership with Erasmus Mundus Programs, the London School of Economics and the University of Cologne Network Partnership, just to mention a few.³⁷² The CI neighbors the IAPO and is rather small in space. Upon entering you will find the secretary sitting on the left and a small library section on the right side. In the back you will find two offices and an additional room that resembles a multi-purpose room. As aforementioned, the CI is situated right next to the IAPO. This provides a close proximity between the IAPO and the CI, which points again towards the CI being part of the on-going internationalization agenda that the UCT is currently establishing.

The CI runs a website with information on their language offering as well as cultural activities, photos and other programs they offer. Scarcely updated information about activities carried out by the CI can be found in the archive sections as well.³⁷³

As listed on the website, the general aim of this CI is to promote the Chinese language and culture, in order to enhance mutual understanding and to create an informed community in the region of Cape Town and throughout South

³⁶⁹ (CIUCT, 2018)

³⁷⁰ (International Academic Programmes Offices at the University of Cape Town, 2015)

³⁷¹ (International Academic Programmes Offices at the University of Cape Town, 2015)

³⁷² (International Academic Programmes Offices at the University of Cape Town, n.a.)

³⁷³ (CIUCT, 2017a)

Africa. Special focus seems to be upon attracting UCT students and faculties to enhance academic exchange between the two partner universities. The website also heavily promotes credit-bearing Chinese classes.³⁷⁴ Abiding to the worldwide CI project they provide scholarships upon successful application and annual summer and winter camps, which takes Chinese language students to China.³⁷⁵ The CI also offers the possibility to take the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) that accredits the level of Chinese language proficiency for UCT students and public Chinese learners alike. Lastly, emphasis is placed on the importance of the Chinese language within business and trade relations that are set up between South Africa and China as integral part of enhancing “friendly cooperation”³⁷⁶ through language promotion.

Apart from an official website, the CI is linked to an unofficial Facebook web page (Figure 3),³⁷⁷ which is unclear whether the CI itself is involved in creating this page or not. This page is not particularly comprehensive and so far only one individual has posted on the page. It is therefore not very helpful in terms of information about the institute itself.

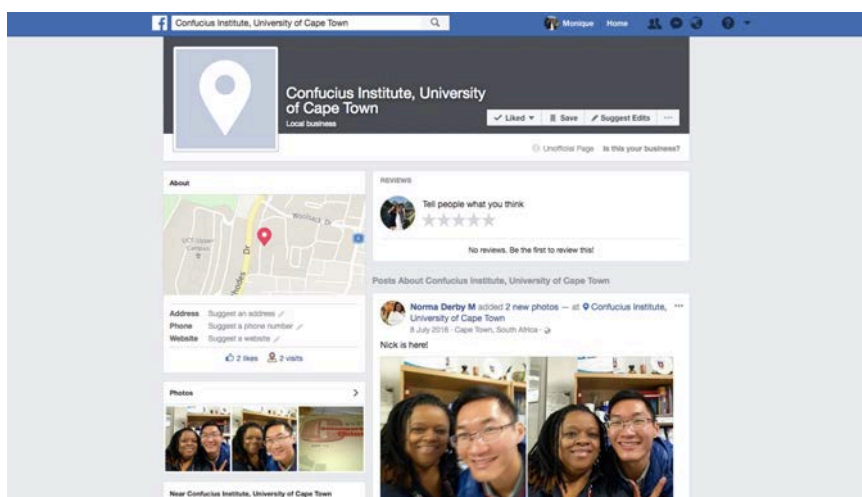


Figure 3

The credit-bearing Chinese classes are offered at the university under the Department of Chinese. It is however not very transparent how strongly the CI is involved in the process of establishing these credit-bearing Chinese classes.

³⁷⁴ (CIUCT, 2017b)

³⁷⁵ (CIUCT, 2017g)

³⁷⁶ (CIUCT, 2017c)

³⁷⁷ (CIUCT, n.a.)

From a talk with one of the volunteers at the CI it seems that the CI volunteers and lecturers offer the teaching capacity for these university classes.

The CI itself offers non-credit bearing, publicly available Chinese classes, cultural activities and Chinese classes at local primary and high schools. However, since there were only three volunteers and two lecturers³⁷⁸ at the institute during the time I was in Cape Town, there cannot be very far reaching impact among the local distribution of Chinese classes either. This especially appeared to me when I visited the institute to get some information from the administrator and saw a calendar that looked like a teaching schedule for local schools. On it, there were no more than five to six different appointments for local schools marked per week.³⁷⁹ I therefore cannot agree with the hype about the expansion of Chinese teaching throughout South Africa. It was not very visible in Cape Town. Even though there were measures taken to offer Chinese classes in local schools, there were equal measures taken to implement most European languages like German, Spanish, Serbian but also Arabic or even Latin. All of these languages can be chosen as selective languages especially in public high schools.³⁸⁰ I further encountered websites that function as guides for parents that emphasize the importance of learning languages in general in order for their child to perform well in the future.³⁸¹ Chinese or Mandarin is no exception in the list of 16 elective, non-local languages that are mentioned in this context. It becomes therefore obvious that these negative representations of the expansion of Chinese are too often lacking substance or empirical research. An article published by Teagle and Chui in a well-received local online news outlet ‘The Daily Maverick’ had me questioning how much effort journalists and scholars put into actual data collection on this topic since all that apparently counts is to connect Chinese to a threat as they openly state:

³⁷⁸ Information obtained from the interview with Sunny, June 13, 2016.

³⁷⁹ Note: This is not the main focus of this research since these classes are not available to the general public. It is mainly an observation any participant could have made him- or herself as well.

³⁸⁰ (Independent Examinations Board, 2015)

³⁸¹ (Bevan, 2017)

“Perhaps the government could enlist the help of existing Chinese Schools to bolster capacity. But this introduces new controversies. For example, the Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes, which partner with universities around the world to teach Chinese, have been criticised for political influence and inhibiting academic freedom, and in some parts of the US were closed last year for this reason. Because of China’s central economic position in South Africa, any perceived attempts to project “soft power” are likely to be received particularly badly, as the strongly-worded response of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) demonstrates.”³⁸²

The article further states that having just volunteers teach Chinese could potentially be harmful. What so many articles fail is to realize however, is that these volunteers have at least a bachelor’s degree in ‘Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language’ and those I spoke with during my stay applied for volunteering at a CI during their master’s degree in Chinese as a Foreign Language. This could be seen as a ‘practical year’, which is a common practice in many European countries, even the reputable Goethe Institute facilitates its teaching through the help of volunteers and interns in Cape Town.³⁸³ This seems to be unheard in most of the articles published. To guide the topic back to the general information of this CI, it is necessary to point these facts out as I did not get the impression that this CI represented a threat to the local community, nor to the academic structures of the university as it can be seen as part of their undertaking to internationalize. Similarly to local primary and high schools, the university also offers a broad range of credit-bearing language classes in addition to Chinese as one of my participants told me much later and which I will address in chapter 5.

Without doubt, the Confucius Institute project is growing rapidly and Chinese, as well as many other vernacular languages as globalization increasingly unfolds. Although this could be feeding into more negative critiques of China ‘conquering’ the world, we have to step back from framing our critiques unbalanced and especially without consideration for the actual agency of the

³⁸² (Teagle & Chui, 2016)

³⁸³ (Goethe Institute Zentrum Cape Town, 2017)

people that is intertwined with establishing these institutes. Not only is there a need for more detailed case studies on the operation of Confucius Institutes³⁸⁴ but there also is the need to include the sociological component — a need to listen to and understand people’s motivations to engage.

4.4. Entering the first field site — the Confucius Institute

After the initial setbacks from my trial and error processes of structuring my research undertaking, I decided relatively quickly to contact the CI directly and focus on what happens inside the walls of the institute when it comes to people engaging with it. I therefore started by scanning their website for activities and classes in which I could participate, while asking people in those classes if they would participate in my research.

Again, this was not as easy as it sounds. The institute’s website was not as maintained as I hoped for. At the time I accessed it, it had not been updated for months, which made it difficult to discover how active they were, just from trying to enroll myself. After navigating the website for a while I found the section where they offered activities, which appeared current. I encountered several sections, one being ‘Chinese Culture and Arts’ comprising four short lessons on activities like ‘Tai Chi’ or ‘Calligraphy’. Under a different section I encountered Chinese languages classes, which were divided by ‘Chinese short classes and credit-bearing Mandarin classes’.³⁸⁵ Since, I initially intended to ‘recruit’ as many participants as possible, I felt rather optimistic about the outlook. I therefore quickly proceeded to email the administration of this CI. However, it was not entirely apparent who to contact among the names listed on the website. I had some questions for them as the information on the website was unclear. For example, I was not able to find opening or class times. As the website was not up-to-date, I intended to address my questions directly to the CI staff. I therefore sent an email:

³⁸⁴ (King, 2017)

³⁸⁵ (CIUCT, 2017e)

[To whom it may concern]³⁸⁶,

I would like to [attend] a Chinese class at your Confucius Institute. [...] I had Chinese classes before and I would say I am not a beginner anymore but it has been a while that I actively studied Chinese.

Could you tell me what options I have and what the [opening times of the CI are]? So I could come by and we talk about it in person?

I would also be interested in other cultural courses. What is your current program?

Thanks a lot in advance.

Best Monique Rimkus

I received a prompt reply with an overview of their courses. At the time the institute offered three levels of non-credit bearing Chinese courses, levels 1, 2 and 3. These courses took place every Monday 17:30-19:00 from 15th February. Enrollment was confirmed after paying a fee of R400 per term (corresponding to university terms) plus a one-off payment of R100 for a textbook. The book — published in 2006 — was considerably older than what I expected, based on my previous language learning experience. The administrator also told me I would be in Level 2 according to my previous study of Chinese. The email also confirmed the opening hours of 9:00-16:00. Before joining the class I was required to pay the outstanding fees through the university payment system. I finally seemed to have gained access to my intended research site. I already had a ‘top-down’ knowledge of how the institutes operate gained during an internship at an institute in Germany, so I expected a test of my Chinese abilities in order to be placed in the correct class. This did not happen and the process seemed somewhat chaotic and disorganized on their side. Considering they only offered three different levels of Chinese language instruction, beginners, intermediate and advanced, they thought it beneficial to enroll me in the intermediate class. In hindsight, this class was rather simple for my already acquired level of Chinese, but ultimately it was more important to identify that I went through the same process as that of my participants which gave me, as a researcher with the

³⁸⁶ Some of the content of the email, like names, have been revised in order to maintain anonymity.

intention to do participant-observation without disrupting the class or the natural setting, a favorable starting point to begin my research. Going through this experience further equipped me with the ability to empathize with the feelings and expectations my participants shared with me during the interviews, which I will focus on, in more detail, in the next chapters.

As mentioned earlier, I also intended to join cultural activities offered by the CI. I asked if I could join the ‘Tai Chi’ courses advertised online, but I was told that due to lack of interest in cultural activities that semester they were only running Chinese language classes. This, and the fact that during my initial visit to the UCT campus I saw the only advertisement for the CI, since I started my field research strengthened my initial thought that this institute itself does not actively promote itself ‘off-campus’, or that interest in general is marginal. In terms of first findings in regards to soft power this observation reminded me of Procopio’s statement “Confucius Institutes are only partially effective as a tool providing support for China’s rise. While they are well able to attract institutions and students to respectively set up CIs and enroll, the types of behaviour involved vis-à-vis both the executive and the students can, at times, undermine the efforts.”³⁸⁷ It further implied that a specific audience is targeted by only advertising on campus. In the previous chapter I highlighted the common sentiment towards Chinese I frequently encountered in Cape Town. This plays into the reasons why many people do not show interest in interacting with Chinese or learning the language and therefore would never think to contact institutions like the Confucius Institute. They must have a specific reason based on previous experience that may trigger the will to engage.

Through this experience I understood that only people with a very specific intention or motivation are willing to engage with the CI — unless, but this is not mutually exclusive, they are students and aware of the existence of the institute on campus. How the willingness of some students to learn Chinese

³⁸⁷ (Procopio, 2015, p. 120)

here at the UCT can be understood in this context will be explained in more detailed in my ethnography chapters 5 and 6 below.

Unfortunately, this outcome further limited my possible group of participants to the one Chinese class I was able to enroll in, which both strengthened and weakened my suspicion about only a very specific group of people engage with the CI in Cape Town in the first place. On the one hand, it also strengthened my expectation that the CI does not have a large impact on the Cape Townian society, and additionally, it intimidated me tremendously, because at that point — before encountering the Chinese School — in my research this class was the only chance of encountering participants.

After the first email exchange, I paid for the course and the textbook on campus. I traveled to the CI by Uber. There are cheaper ways to get to the university, but the safety issue was so prominent that people kept warning me about taking minibus taxis, which in my part of the city were building a monopoly and preventing public transportation networks from being created.³⁸⁸ “Don’t ever get in a minibus taxi when you are the only person, don’t take them at night, people have been abducted and robbed. You are a white woman you have to be particularly careful.”³⁸⁹ Many people told me the same thing about minibus taxis, which ultimately added another hurdle in my research. Conducting research as a single white female was problematic in some ways. Getting to the university was a challenge at first, before I decided to rely on Uber. I did not have the funds to rent a car for my field research and free transport to the university is only available to students at certain pick up points in the city. Uber remained a safe and fast, although slightly more expensive way to get around safely. Questions like: ‘is it really that dangerous? Are people just paranoid?’ were my constant companions during the first couple of weeks while trying to conduct an ethical, information rich research. Additionally, the ‘Rhodes-Must-Fall’³⁹⁰ protest was on-going at the time and

³⁸⁸ Information I obtained from countless informal conversations and interactions.

³⁸⁹ Common sentiments I encountered while enquiring about minibus taxis.

³⁹⁰ (Lyster, 2016)

on a large scale not only at the University of Cape Town but also throughout the country.

After all the safety warnings I had received, it would be a lie to write that I was not nervous the first time I went to the university — especially with the ‘Rhodes-Must-Fall’ protests unfolding. As is visible on the image below (Figure 4), which shows protests and burning vehicles on campus.

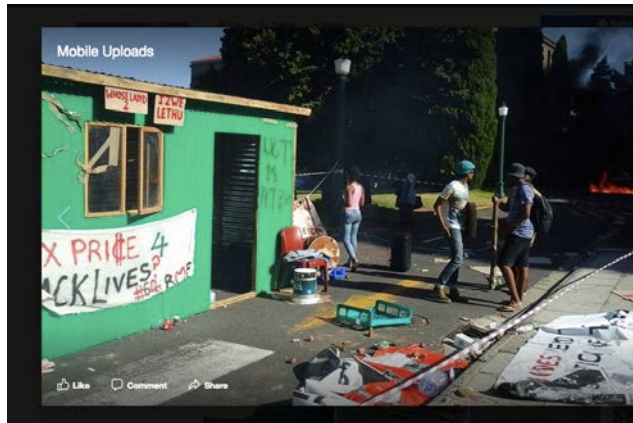


Figure 4³⁹¹

The CI was located on middle campus of the UCT (Figure 2). I collected an invoice and they sent me to a counter in the next building that dealt with payment transactions for the whole university. Although the Chinese course started the very day of the email exchange, I must admit that I could not find the strength to join the class immediately, simply because my priority was finding accommodation, which I fortunately did by the end of that week. However, at this point, Feb. 15, I was admittedly caught off-guard with the class starting so soon after I contacted the CI for the first time. Again, something that was not advertised on the website. I did not feel prepared enough to enter my primary field site that very day and encounter my possible group of participants ill-equipped, which is why I joined the class the following week.

³⁹¹ This picture can be found on the ‘Rhodes-Must-Fall’ Facebook presence (UCT: Rhodes-Must-Fall, 2016 ff.)

4.5. Recruiting participants — Confucius Institute

As I explained above, my pool of participants from the CI was naturally selected by going through the same enrollment process as my participants. It was therefore also limited, because not only did my class time collide with the other class levels but also my ineligibility to take credit-bearing classes at the UCT itself as they were not available to the general public. Additionally, non-credit bearing Chinese classes seem to lose numbers of students who are interested in progressing after beginners classes as Sunny, one of the volunteer teachers, told me:

From the beginning there are more than 30. Like me I also teach the level 1 last year and the beginning is more than 20 and then because many, many South African people think it is difficult. So maybe... four weeks or five weeks or six weeks later there will be just ten or eight, yeah maybe students will quit. And this year I knew from the beginning is more than 30 and at the end of the term there is maybe 15. Like half students will quit. Shame.

(Sunny 'interview' June 16, 2016)

I therefore had to carefully plan how to approach the people in my class. At that point I had no idea that my pool of participants would grow until I discovered another place to learn Chinese in Cape Town — the Chinese School of Cape Town.

When I started taking classes at the institute I was very concerned with the ethics of conducting research and not crossing a line by not revealing who I was. Additionally, from previous interactions with locals in regards to the safety issues, I was extremely aware of the fact that some people tended to be cautious around strangers. This further influenced my decision to restrict my research instead of two Confucius Institutes during my time in South Africa to just a single one, particularly because my intention to conduct an ethnography required as much time as possible with my participants. I had originally intended to conduct research at both, the CIs in Cape Town and Stellenbosch, but because of the aforementioned issues I decided on the Institute in Cape Town. I further decided to be as honest about my intentions as possible from the beginning.

Upon the commencement of the first class I met my four classmates.³⁹² I introduced myself as a PhD student from Hong Kong who was writing a dissertation on Confucius Institutes in South Africa. I reasoned that it was necessary to establish a trustworthy environment and therefore I kept a dialogic approach — true to the deductive part of my research — in mind. This allowed everyone an enriching environment both for myself and for my participants who showed tremendous interest in my thoughts as well. I learnt as early as then, that people engage with the institutes on their own terms, based on what they experienced in the past and based on the people's practices.

Moreover, this dialogic process also created an inclusive experience for me. My classmates already shared the experience of the level 1 class together which is why I was initially the only new face in class, but nevertheless, exchanging ideas and thoughts almost immediately took away that fact. Especially because the group was already somewhat mixed in background, ethnicities, gender and age, my entering as a foreigner did not disturb the group because I was not the only one who did not originally come from South Africa.

It was further striking that students from different class levels did not appear to interact with each other, although the three levels of Chinese classes were happening concurrently. This confirmed my intention to 'stick' to my own classmates for this research in order to not distort the actual work of the institute and normal experience Chinese learners would have at this institute.

Apart from sharing classes, I further engaged with my classmates in dinner events, face-to-face conversations, as well as through Whatsapp and emails before and after class letting them know of my interest in their motivations and experiences with Chinese, this institute etc. (section 3.2.4). It also helped establish a comfortable environment by letting them get to know me, sharing my experiences etc., In some instances, I could not help but notice that they considered me as a specialist. They inquired about simple language questions after class or I offered suggestions about how I used to learn characters or

³⁹² Note: There were only five people in total who enrolled in this class — including me.

vocabulary, especially when the HSK examinations were approaching. I will address this further below in section 4.10.1.

After a couple of classes together I felt confident enough that they trusted me, I approached each individually and asked for extended interviews to share more insights about their thoughts and experiences in regard to their motivations to engage with Chinese language and the CI but also, their thoughts about China (chapter 5) and their experiences with the institute itself (chapter 6). They willingly agreed and I was able to schedule interviews during the next couple of months.

This group of participants was further highly educated. From the beginning I had the feeling I did not implant new ideas into their heads by mentioning issues like the ‘One-China-Policy’, for example. One of my classmates was working in academia himself and visibly enjoyed critical discourse. CIs and their employees are portrayed as narrow-minded when it comes to these issues but our teacher did not prevent us from talking about these politically loaded topics during class break. Although she was not very opinionated about these topics, she engaged with them. She was, however, visibly aware of the problem.

It was at this stage — about three or four weeks into the semester (March, 2016) — during one of these conversations that I found out about the Taiwanese language school in Cape Town called, ‘The Chinese School of Cape Town’. After this information appeared, my classmates started talking about the difference in characters, mentioning that this school uses traditional characters in their classes commonly used in Taiwan or Hong Kong as opposed to the CI, which uses simplified characters associated with Mainland China. Some of my classmates expressed how difficult the traditional characters were for them. This is when another classmate stated that she was attending the other Chinese class on Saturdays. This guided me towards a prolonged conversation about the other school after our CI class and consequently prompted me to adjust my research yet again by including the ‘Chinese School

of Cape Town' and my experience there. My classmate provided me the contact details of the Chinese School and the following day (March 10, 2016) I emailed them:

Hey,
my name is Monique and I am interested in studying Chinese in your school Saturdays. I was talking to [Anneke]³⁹³, who told me about these classes and I would like to know if I can drop by this Saturday and if I could start taking classes although the semester started already. I have a good intermediate level I would say. I have been living in Shanghai and Taiwan before and I am currently doing my PhD in Hong Kong. I am here in Cape Town until the end of July to do some research.

I would be happy to hear back from you as soon as possible!

Thanks in advance,
Monique

One week later, one of the coordinators of the Chinese School responded to my email ensuring me that I could join the rest of the semester but would have to pay the full fee. The fee for this Chinese course was with 1500R, considerably more expensive than the CI fee. However, this Chinese class was set for 3 hours in duration each Saturday 12:00-15:00 instead of 1.5 hours each Monday 17:30-19:00 at the CI.

The discovery of this course increased my confidence towards my research claim tremendously. Especially since it weakened so many of the claims that have been made in regards to Confucius Institutes in South Africa, and in general. Not only does this dismiss the very core arguments surrounding the soft power claims. It also once again suggests that existing research failed to interact with the people on the ground. I doubt that only by interacting with high-level individuals and as an outsider to what actually happens within these institutes can a researcher substantially judge these institutions. It is imperative to turn towards the people who engage with the institutions and focus on their perceptions and experiences to draw a fuller picture of the actual situation on the ground. How these arguments are further validated will be demonstrated in the next section on the background information of the Chinese School of Cape Town.

³⁹³ This name has been changed in order to maintain the anonymity of my classmate.

4.6. The Chinese School — general information

After learning of the ‘Chinese School Cape Town (開普敦中華學校)’ and contacting them via email I proceeded to research some background information about this school. I was quickly able to find an official homepage³⁹⁴ which on first sight offered comparably more information — about them, their offering and when they were founded — than the website of the CI.



Figure 5

However, it also became clear that this Chinese School forms part of a broader organization called the ‘Western Province Chinese Association – 南非西省中華會館’. On the homepage it is stated that it can trace its origins back to 1902. It is also stated that the WPCA was established as a “[...] necessity during the apartheid years, the Association has continued to provide a platform for the continued support and development of the Chinese culture in Cape Town and the greater environment.”³⁹⁵ Accordingly, they aspired to encourage a platform for “discussion groups”³⁹⁶ for “indigent Chinese in the area.”³⁹⁷ This was especially important during the apartheid as a measurement to preserve the Chinese language by providing a school that focuses on exchange, venues and sports facilities for the local community. Lastly, they state, “[t]oday the Association continues to cater for these needs and more recently played a central role in correcting the position of the Chinese during the apartheid years.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015c)

³⁹⁵ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015b)

³⁹⁶ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015b)

³⁹⁷ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015b)

³⁹⁸ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015b)

Differing from the CI, this association was created in order to help the local Chinese community back in the days of apartheid and today still emphasizes the education of Chinese by providing a Chinese School for second and third generations. The school opens once a week, every Saturday from 12:00-18:00 to offer Chinese language classes and other subjects to the local community. In recent years, it additionally started offering conversational Chinese classes to people that do not have an ethnic Chinese background. Furthermore, they are proud to have the largest library of Chinese textbook and general literature in Cape Town.³⁹⁹ Apart from the Chinese School there are also several separate groups within this association that cater for cultural exchange and religious activities.⁴⁰⁰

In addition to the official website, the school runs a Facebook page similar to the CI (Figure 6). However, this page seems to have a much larger community following and several photos of group activities are posted.

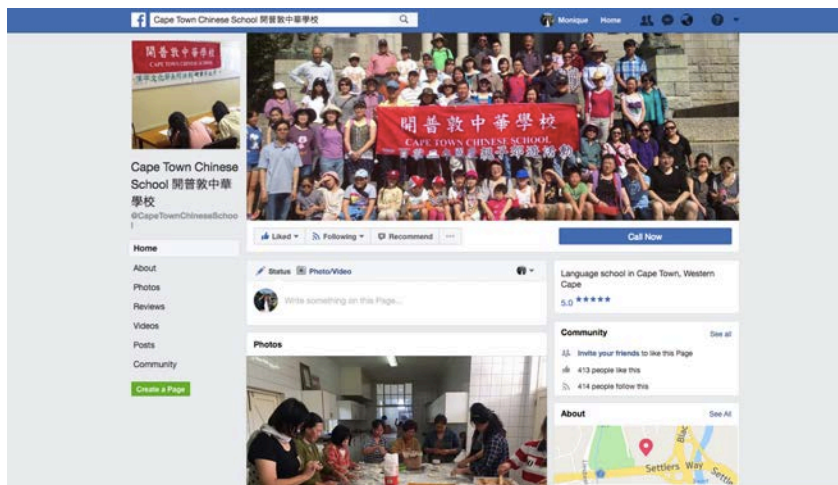


Figure 6

While not stated on the official homepage the Facebook page provides information about the founding year, 1994. As already apparent from the background information not only has the association existed for more than 100 years, the Chinese School has also been in business substantially longer than the Confucius Institute.

³⁹⁹ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015c)

⁴⁰⁰ (Western Province Chinese Association, 2015a)

To provide some more substantial information about the creation of the school itself, I further asked my Chinese teacher if she could help me provide some additional details. Yang Laoshi responded via Whatsapp and told me that the actual creation of the school began in 1993. As a result of the lack of possibilities for the Taiwanese children to engage with the Chinese language and culture, Ms. Lui (劉美秀) — the first and current director⁴⁰¹ of the school — asked the Taiwanese Office of Foreign Affairs through the local Taiwanese embassy for funds to set up a school. Together with seven other local Taiwanese she set up the necessities to open said school and started to recruit the first students the following year.

The creation of the school began in 1993.

The Taiwanese population residing in cape town felt that there is no way for their children to learn Mandarin and don't want to let their children sacrifice their mother language.

Due to this, Miss Luo⁴⁰² asked for a fund from the Taiwanese foreign affair department through the Taiwanese embassy in Cape Town. (Around 5000\$ for the funding to setting up the school.)

She gathered 7 fellow Taiwanese to set up the necessities and formed a committee in April 1994.

They started officially recruiting students in the July of 1994.

(Whatsapp conversation, Yang Laoshi, July 4, 2018)

Yang Laoshi further explained how many teachers and volunteers work within the school and the election of the principal. Moreover, the school functions on the base of volunteer support; the teachers are the only employees that receive a salary.

There was only 2 teachers and 20 students in the first term and they are all the children of the people that helped setting up the school.

There was no principal in the first year. 5 people ran it together. Only in the second year a principal was voted in. Which also the current principal, the baton has been passed many times and returned to her again.

School fees are as low as possible. Aside from teachers, everyone works as volunteers.

However, there is always a constant donation from helpful people.

For example, the salary of the teachers for the first year of the school was donated by an anonymous person. We get donation from local Taiwanese and from people living in Taiwan.

⁴⁰¹ (Taipei Liason Office in the RSA, 2018)

⁴⁰² Note: Ms. Lui and Luo are the same person; pinyin and bopomofo phonetics might result in a slight differentiation in the manner the name is written down.

Without these donations the school wouldn't be operational at all.

The school has been operational for 25 years now. Many of the students now are the next generation of the students from before. This is very heartwarming just by thinking about it.

(Whatsapp conversation, Yang Laoshi, July 4, 2018)

As exemplified by this Whatsapp conversation with Yang Laoshi this Chinese School was partially funded by a Taiwanese government body. However, nowadays this school functions on the base of donations, which mainly come from anonymous donations. But the school further is a beneficiary of the Hai Hu scholarship distributed by the ‘財團法人海華文教基金會 (Overseas Chinese Culture and Education Foundation)’, which seems to be receiving funds from the government as well.⁴⁰³

None of these information is listed on the website. However, although their website is not frequently updated, similar to the website of the Confucius Institute, it offers enough information about their activities, especially in combination with the Facebook page, which is frequently updated by adding videos and pictures about activities. When initiating a Google-search of ‘Chinese in Cape Town’ the Chinese School appears first, so it is potentially easier to find out about the Chinese School than the CI, albeit it is not as obvious that they offer Chinese courses outside the Chinese community.

What becomes especially challenged by this discovery is the up until now portrayed image of learning Chinese on the African continent:

*“[...] On the African continent, in almost all cases, you’ ll only have an opportunity to learn Mandarin through Confucius Institutes.”*⁴⁰⁴

Several scholars like Cissé or Hartig built their arguments on the grounds that CIs might have more influence on the African country because there is no ‘infrastructure’ to learn Chinese. While it is true that other countries or nations have long lasting academic exchange and implementation of subjects such as

⁴⁰³ (Court of Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee Republic of China, 2015)

⁴⁰⁴ (Cissé, 2012, p. 2)

‘China Studies’ at their local universities, it needs to be pointed out that Confucius Institutes are the only chance for many African countries to learn Chinese seems at best generalized. The realization about this fact struck me, when I discovered the existence of Taiwanese-run schools in South Africa, the ‘Chinese School in Cape Town’ in particular. This realization is especially significant, because named scholars have been traveling to or lived in South Africa. Nevertheless, they have failed to observe in-depth what is possible inside and outside these institutes, as well as how the local society is structured, functioning and historically formed.

Although this argument might be specific to South Africa since this country looks back onto an extensive relationship with Taiwan, it cannot be generalized since it is known that some African countries, had or some still have — especially informal — relations with Taiwan. It is likely that a lot more Taiwanese schools exist that offer Chinese classes as is visible with the Pretoria Chinese School⁴⁰⁵ to which I will refer in the next chapter. This represents both a possibility to guide critiques away from China being the sole provider of Chinese language classes and further it distorts the soft power claims in this context. It appears therefore rather difficult to measure what influence the CI offers to the local society, if there are other schools that offer Chinese language and cultural activities, which are additionally connected to other state-entities apart from the PRC. What is doable so far is, however, listening to the thoughts and feelings of the people who expose themselves to these schools. How this background information played into my perceptions as well as my participants’ perceptions and experiences I will therefore discuss in the following chapters.

⁴⁰⁵ (Pretoria Chinese School, 2016)

4.7. Entering the second field site — the Chinese School

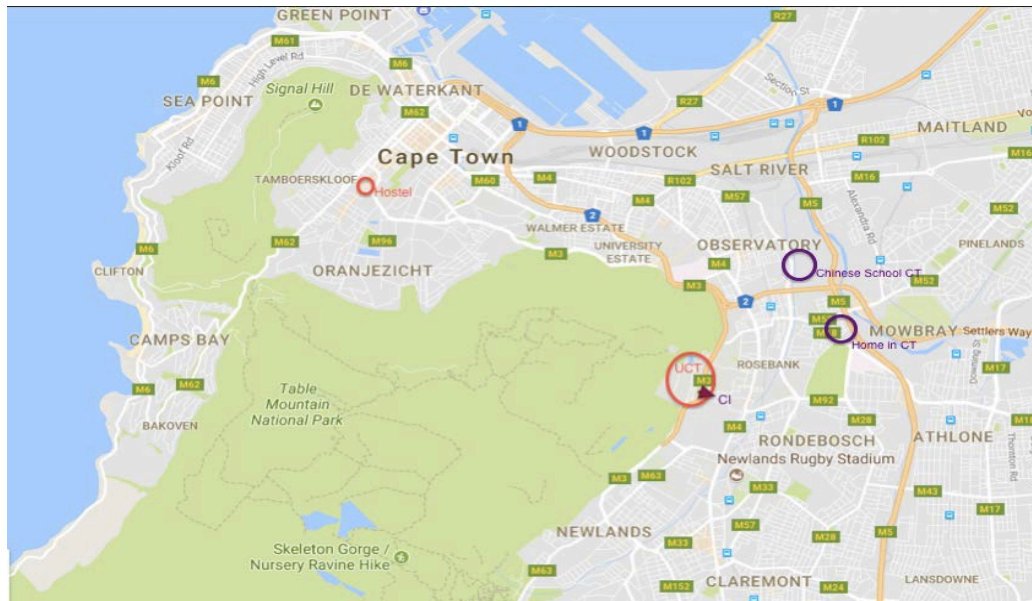


Figure 7

After I contacted the Chinese School and acquired the information about the location, I went to visit the school for a first introduction on a Saturday in the beginning of April. The school is located next to the Liesbeek River (Figure 7) and shares a building complex with another local institution, the School of Tourism. Although it appeared to be very close to where I was living and in close proximity to the campus as well, I couldn't reach it by walking due to a massive highway being in-between my location and the school's location. Yet again I was not able to find public transport and had to rely on Uber in order to get there, which ultimately made the access comparably easy in hindsight. Nevertheless, the navigation system and even Google maps could not spot the location easily which is why the first time I drove there with my Uber driver, we got lost. Calling an Uber to this place was similarly confusing. Many times I was walking and waiting in the middle of the road causing seemingly discomfort in some of my classmates and sometimes teachers who drove past me, so that they frequently offered me a lift home because they thought it was not safe enough to wait. I waited anyway.

That first time I went to the school, it took me some time to find my way. The reason for that being the lack of an obvious sign with the school's name on it — there were simply no indicators. There was a large parking area and several

beige colored houses that connected and led into a small backyard where some people were cooking typical Taiwanese/Chinese dishes like ‘danbing’. Here, they further sold fresh vegetables and homemade tofu. Only here, written on one of these beige colored buildings, I finally found the name of the school (Figure 8).

Entering this facility reminded me tremendously of my time in Taiwan, when I learnt Chinese in Kaohsiung for six weeks. It had a welcoming community feeling with many children and adults walking around. And differently to the Confucius Institute, this school was not located on the university campus and as it mainly focuses on providing a learning environment for local children and sometimes adults with connections to the Chinese/Taiwanese community. This institute had the undeniable atmosphere of a primary or even high school.

I went upstairs in what appeared to be the main building.



Figure 8

There I found a large office with several people gathering around a long table and a woman radiating authority who was sitting in the back at her own table. Immediately I noticed the great collection of Chinese books in the room.

I introduced myself and mentioned that I had been in contact with the office earlier. The woman in the back called me to sit with her. I told her I wanted to take Chinese lessons. Immediately, she proceeded to test my Chinese

proficiency by involving me in a conversation in Chinese. We were talking about where I learnt it, how long I have been studying it and what I am doing currently. She then decided that the advanced conversation class would be the right choice for me. This first experience was striking, as it was so different to the process of enrolling at the Confucius Institute. Immediately, It gave me an impression that a stronger focus was laid upon organization. It was therefore undeniable that this school was settled in its organizational structures; after all it was operating for more than 20 years in comparison to the CI, which opened only in 2010.

Subsequently I was asked to pay the school fees. I was not given any books because the teacher preferred using copies as all the textbooks were written in traditional characters, which for them, seemed to be too difficult for the students of this class. Similarly to my enrolling process at the CI, the class started that very day and I felt ill prepared and admittedly not brave enough to interrupt the on-going class with the possibility of spreading an uncomfortable feeling after revealing my research purpose.

Finding this school confronted me with a whole new flood of thoughts. Since this school was obviously run by a large Taiwanese community but also accommodating second and third generation of immigrants who had come from mainland China and Hong Kong among others, talking about a single Chinese community appeared to be very generalized. As aforementioned, South Africa had an extensive official relationship with Taiwan or the Republic of China, which only changed in 1998, when the official ties changed to the PRC. Many Taiwanese came to South Africa before and have lived there ever since, becoming locals. It is therefore striking that the commonly used narrative about the PRC greatly influencing South Africa and the spreading possibilities to learn Chinese omits this fact almost entirely. From the experience I had in Cape Town and from what I learnt from my participants, it does not matter whom they learn Chinese from. This yet again points to a direction that somewhat weakens the soft power narrative attached to the Confucius Institutes, in South Africa in particular. This is especially noticeable

since the CI project of the PRC and the Taiwanese-run Chinese School do not operate together but side by side, which undermines the ‘One-China’ narrative on the ground. Unfortunately, this opens up many more layers about Chinese identity etc., within this debate, that I was not able to uncover, due to time restraints. I would however like to propose this as a limitation of this research that could be surmounted in future research projects.

The next section will focus on how this discovery helped me to recruit an additional pool of participants for the study, who helped me understand what local people’s motivations are to learn Chinese and what experiences led them towards taking this decision.

4.8. Recruiting participants — Chinese School

When I attended the first class at this school I already knew that at least one of my classmates from the CI would be taking the same Chinese class. I discovered later during one of the class-breaks that another of my classmates was taking the less advanced conversation class in this school as well. There was therefore a considerable point of intersection between the two participant groups I recruited. The group of Chinese learners in this class was much bigger than the one I encountered in the intermediate class in the Confucius Institute. While the class at the CI was composed of five people — including myself — about twelve people attended the class at the Chinese School. The outlook of increasing my pool of participants for this research was a pleasant surprise. I did not expect that many people in this class. This increased number can be linked to several factors; time and location played a big role as several participants told me later.

Similarly to the class at the CI, I faced the task of introducing my intentions and myself to the class. Again I stated that I was a PhD student and that my research was concerned with the question why people decide to engage with Chinese language. My previous experience — entering the CI Chinese class — influenced my approach, which is why I also decided to tell the class that I have been learning Chinese for quite some time in places like Shanghai and

Taiwan. I added this information in order to make myself more approachable and facilitate dialogic exchange, which was especially important for me because I did not want to take a specialist position. I therefore happily engaged in informal conversations in order to let them get to know me as well as I was able to get to know my classmates.

Again this group of people was all highly educated. One previously graduated and one current UCT student were attending this class, both of them having experienced Chinese classes at credit bearing level before. Several middle aged local women, some of them second generation with parents coming from Hong Kong, Taiwan or China, as well as some teenagers and children also attended this class. Again, to refer to the context of 'local' I am using in this study, I emphasize that I understand local people as people who decided to live for a considerable amount of time in Cape Town no matter their ethnic background. I encountered other Europeans and Africans not from South Africa in this group who have been living at least one year in Cape Town and therefore made the choice to be a local, to this town themselves. In order to keep this study ethically considerate I refrained from approaching the children for interviews, although I was assured from other people that they would not have a problem with this. However, after spending weeks with them sitting in class and studying with them until I felt that most of them trusted me enough, I approached individuals for interviews. I was then able to recruit another five participants from this class, which left me with a balanced number from both groups and a considerable amount of people who were able to gain experience at several institutions. The five participants I approached were all old enough to make the decisions for themselves to participate in my research. I also selected these people because they were the most regular students of this class.

The whole process of recruiting participants left me with two people who only took classes at the CI, two people who took classes at both facilities, two people who only took classes at the Chinese School and two who were able to take credit-bearing classes at the UCT and the Chinese classes at the Chinese School. At the intersection of these ten people I also found out that two of them

participated in the summer camp organized by the CI. All of these people agreed to meet me for formal in-depth interviews in order to foster my understanding about their motivations to engage with Chinese and the respective institutions. Besides the interviews I engaged in-group activities organized by the classmates like going out for dinner or cooking Chinese food together. These activities happened after the end of the semester to wrap the class up nicely, and both teachers participated in their group respectively. During these meetings we were able to engage even more informally and talk openly about everything. This gave me confidence about being able to understand my participants because I was told several times that, if they did not know that I was from Germany, they would be confident that I was from Cape Town, since I expressed my thoughts similarly to theirs. Only one of these participants later decided to step back from the study after I talked to her. She simply did not feel confident enough to share her experiences because she thought it might raise the awareness of the Chinese government.

Lastly, I was able to recruit both of my teachers for in-depth interviews which helped me tremendously to understand background information and operation methods of both schools as well as their motivations to teach for these facilities.

4.9. Inside the Chinese classes of the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School

Since I developed a large part of my understanding about the motivations, experiences and perceptions of my participants, derived from having a similar experience of learning Chinese in Cape Town, I will dedicate this next section to describing my experiences in both Chinese classes. I will lay special focus upon the structure and organization of each respective class and further try to capture some of my impressions in order to create a comprehensive representation. To begin with I will focus on my experience and impressions at the Confucius Institute. This will then be followed by a description of the Chinese class at the Chinese School. These representations are based on specific fieldnotes I took during both classes as well as participatory

experience I gained myself. Since note taking in an environment like this can be a very self-conscious activity I therefore decided to utilize mainly German in order to do so. This admittedly created a more comfortable situation for myself, not because I did not want my participants to read my notes, but I rather preferred to explain the notes in case someone asked about them instead of distracting them during class. Although I told my classmates that participating in these classes is part of my research and that I would like to take notes — they reacted by being very understanding — it is rather intimidating to constantly scribble in a notebook when no one else in class writes during those moments. After all I wanted to build trust and integrate myself into the class.

4.9.1. The non-credit bearing Chinese class at the CI

The non-credit bearing Chinese classes at the CI followed a very formal structure, so much I realized already after the first couple of classes I attended. Every class our teacher ‘Sunny’ would initiate the lesson by showing two short videos as introduction. These videos contained small anecdotes about Chinese culture and/or a historically important event for China. The videos were produced by China Radio and part of a series called ‘Hello China’. Besides being mostly animated and at times funny to watch they did not present difficult content, it was rather simple and basic, like ‘Who is Confucius’ or ‘The Spring Festival and its customs’ etc. These videos were very obviously praising China’s great culture and undoubtedly educational, but only for people who have never heard about these cultural features before. During the classes I found out that my classmates already had built a substantive amount of knowledge about Chinese culture, mostly, as I will portray in the next two chapters, based on their own experiences. It was therefore not a rare sight to see them use their phones or role their eyes until the videos were over; our teacher often used her phone as well during that same. Luca,⁴⁰⁶ one of my classmates, was often the only one who was interested in the origin of the characters that were shown during the videos. Some of the videos offered vaguely funny animations, which frequently triggered laughter. People clearly did not take these videos very seriously.

⁴⁰⁶ This name used is a pseudonym in order to protect my participant’s anonymity.

These first ten minutes of the class reminded me tremendously of a quote Starr referred to. Saying that the propaganda used in CIs is “so transparent [...] that they were no threat to student minds.”⁴⁰⁷ I can only concur with this sentiment. In fact, naming this propaganda in my opinion would be far-fetched based on the simplicity and actual usefulness of these shorts snippets of information for the individual student. This was very apparent by the student’s reactions towards these videos. I will present in-depth opinions about this in the next chapters.

Following the videos, each lesson would continue with a short review of the previous week’s content. Mostly, the teacher would ask very simple questions in regards to that, how to build different kinds of interrogative sentences, for example. Initially this content surprised me, because this was supposed to be an intermediate class. However, many concepts were still very basic, which ultimately showed me that these classes do not progress fast. As my participants told me later, it is difficult to progress faster if the class only takes place once per week for 1.5 hours. Although not progressing faster the class environment was relatively enjoyable which I thought initially was partly because our teacher, who was still very young, tried to ask students frequently for their opinions about the exercises and if they understood everything.

The next part of the class was usually dedicated to a dictation. The teacher read out different Chinese words in order for the students to internalize the use of the tones. Every word she read three times. And each class most of the students, myself included, had puzzled faces because no one was able to comprehend the tones she read out. The class was very clearly struggling with the tones. After the dictation the teacher would go through the list of words and wrote them on the blackboard one by one, asking the students about the tones. Some examples were: ‘ben1pao3’ or ‘dai4tou2’. Interestingly, while doing the dictation the translation of the words did not appear to matter much. However, while going through the words the teacher very patiently answered the questions of the students. Most of the people in this group were very interested

⁴⁰⁷ (Starr, 2009, p. 79)

in why and how certain tones match and are formed. One of the students was often just texting on her phone. While answering the questions of the students about the tones or the pronunciation our teacher would, for example, engage in conversations about the difference in tones according to the region — Beijinghua is very different from Shanghaihua and the dialects in Guangdong, or the way people pronounce Putonghua. My first impression about the teacher was that she was very open-minded and interested to know the people she taught, which is why at times she gave in to the questions and interests of the students although these were not directly related to what she planned for the class. In fact, it soon became obvious that the students usually clarified quickly what they wanted to know; she did not impose any cultural or political concepts apart from what she was showing during the videos. Sometimes the topic would fall back into the Taiwan-China relationship simply because some of the students were very interested in global politics and international relations. What was further interesting during one occasion was that our teacher tried to state that Taiwan is China. She explicitly said that “we have the same culture, so it is the same.”⁴⁰⁸ Sunny hesitated to argue further because she seemed to be aware of the standpoint of the students and the knowledge they acquired about this topic. She refrained from standing her ground, because the students’ opinion was visibly stronger.

Nevertheless, her English skills also often appeared to stand in the way of faster progressing the class. During these situations, the dynamics between teacher and students resembled a group learning activity, because she was younger than all of us. Regardless, the interactions in class were genuinely friendly apart from one of the students who was constantly bothered by the pace of the class.

Somewhere in this slightly chaotic learning experience I realized how I personally enjoyed the language barriers of our teacher, it created a non-threatening atmosphere and the students were equally not afraid of making mistakes.

⁴⁰⁸ This sentence is a part of an informal conversation during one of the classes at the CI.

Her youth especially showed during times she told us cultural anecdotes related to the historical development of words like ‘wife’ (taitai, qizi, tang ke). Tang Ke for example rendered her giggling in front of the class as she tried to explain that this word is very old fashioned and not used in modern China because it refers to the fact that the wife needed to stay in the kitchen.

Although these topics came up unexpectedly, especially because some of the students were very eager to talk about themes like gender related topics in the language; she always happily tried to explain them, at least the parts that she was aware of. Sunny often appeared a bit embarrassed because some of these topics shone a very negative light on China. I was surprised that she was not afraid to refer to these negative connotations, which in my opinion clearly works against the common critique that CIs only present a positive image of China. Sunny instead displayed China’s culture without exaggerating and in a way that helps understanding the cultural aspects of the language, in that she neither presented an overly positive image of China nor did she try to convert something negative with overly positive imagery. Her authenticity and at times visible naivety made the class despite the obvious language barrier, still a pleasant experience.

The last part of each class we usually spent on the next chapter of our book — including a vocabulary exercise that was based on repetition and reading of the new words, as well as a simple reading exercise. Our teacher then spent time explaining different concepts, which were on the one hand very helpful like the origin of li3bai4 (week), but on the other hand she repeated those concepts during almost every class which is why it soon got tedious and some of the students started to address the progress of the class. Especially because the whole group visited the beginner’s level taught by a different teacher the previous year, repetitions of simple concepts like the use of ‘de-的’ often encouraged some of the students to point out the slow pace of the class. There was seemingly not much communication between the different teachers about what different levels learnt. This could be related to a frequent rotation of volunteer teachers within the institute itself. Whenever a student posed a

question about a cultural or custom related concept, she explained a lot about China especially in regards to customs. Several times she spent more than ten minutes to explain the differences between ‘mei2 guanxi1’ and ‘mei2 shi4’.

The final minutes of each class she would normally give us some homework, which in my opinion did not make much sense because there was simply not enough time to go through the homework in-depth and correct everyone’s answers during the next class. After giving us homework she also updated us with information about the summer school and the next HSK examination, which most of us enrolled for in order to have a goal in mind. While telling us about the summer camp, she told us that it would be organized during the coming summer from the Confucius Institute in collaboration with its partner university. However, she struggled seemingly with explaining it in English, she jumped from expression to expression and it was difficult to understand all of it. But apparently the students were already used to it as some of my participants told me later. Sometimes, I tentatively asked questions in regards to tones or words, which she struggled to understand in the first place. I would then try to ask it more simply or, I gave up my inquiry defeatedly, as it would take too long. The language of instruction definitely posed a problem for our teacher. How this affected the students I will address in chapter 6.

The group of students in general appeared rather intellectual. Everyone was working full-time and was equipped with at least one university degree. One of the students had a PhD and was working as lecturer at another university in Cape Town. All of them were well established in their lives and knew what they were working for. The age range of the class was between early 30s to mid 50s. Frequently, some of the students did not show up which left about three students in some cases — including me. It became obvious that, although they took Chinese learning seriously, it was not a priority for them. In case of work or family related appointments they either did not join the class or refrain from putting any effort into learning or studying Chinese (see chapter 5-6).

The overall understanding I developed from attending the Chinese classes at the CI was that there was indeed a structure to each lesson, but I often

questioned its effectiveness as some of the students kept complaining — in front of the teacher and after class — about the slow progress they make each week. Although enough content to teach was available, repetition and language problems on the teacher’s side hindered the pace of the learning experience for the students. I do not believe it was because the teacher was not educated enough on how to teach Chinese, because she did know how to answer questions immediately once she understood them. It is therefore that the intermediate class was still operating on a very basic level. I also could not shake the feeling that the CI is not working explicitly on its presence in Cape Town. During my stay I only discovered one advertisement about learning Chinese and the summer camp on campus inside one of the faculties (Figure 9).



Figure 9

Finding this was only possible because a friend showed me around campus and introduced me to the department she was working for.

While these advertisements looked rather appealing and well-received by students, it did not translate to seeing that many people in any of the non-credit bearing Chinese classes. One of my participants, who joined the summer school during that summer, told me only around 20 people joined it, most of them being UCT students from the credit-bearing classes. All this supports my

impressions that this particular institute is not interested in expanding as much as possible, and it further only seems to appeal to a certain group of individuals. On the one hand the students from the UCT in their credit-bearing classes and on the other hand a group of upper middle-class individuals that have been exposed to the Chinese culture before visiting the classes at this institute, as I will show in the next chapters.

Summarizing, on the basis of my experience, I would like to state that the interactions in class were never threatening or imposing. Our teacher always tried to be as helpful as possible. Even though she faced her own language-related problems, she was always curious about cultural concepts of South Africa. I had the feeling she was genuinely interested in helping us with our Chinese. During no occasion did this class implement any gentrifying ideas about China into our mind that have not already been there. Even though the videos were informative in nature, all of us were educated and self-reflexive enough to question China's political intentions on the whole while still appreciating the cultural insights. Throughout the semester, students appeared critical and very certain about what they expected and accepted content-wise from this class. While it was clear that learning Chinese through this course was an enjoyable and cheap experience for them, their primary focus was somewhere else. Although they did learn new information, the pace of the class hindered all of us to progress fast enough to be at some point able to actually speak this language. In some ways it is appropriate to say that it was just a welcomed hobby or an opportunity to revive already learnt cultural and linguistic facts, especially because most of the students have been in contact with Chinese, Mainland China or Taiwan before. More information and implications deriving from that information will be the focus point of the upcoming chapters.

4.9.2. The Chinese classes at the Chinese School

In comparison to the Chinese class at the CI, the lessons at the Chinese School were enriched with an even friendlier atmosphere.

Each Saturday from 12:00-15:00 about 12 people would come together in a fairly big room to learn Chinese at the Chinese School. The room itself gave the impression of a multi-purpose room. There was a small kitchen corner in the back of the room and a piano in the far front corner, hidden behind the movable blackboard our teacher used. While the Chinese class at the CI was conducted in one of the departments on campus, their room was a small but formal classroom with multi-media equipment. However, this classroom, being obviously used for many different occasions did not give that impression. This did not hinder the students of this Chinese class nor the teacher ‘Yang Laoshi’⁴⁰⁹ to create a very friendly and enjoyable environment, as I could already feel during my first class. As aforementioned, the group of students was very heterogeneous in age and ethnicity not so much however in gender contribution — they were all female. I remember once or twice a male friend or brother on one occasion was sitting in class. Although this appeared to be an exception, it was not uncommon that new students would drop in every now and then, often being equipped with some Chinese already. In this class, children from about six years, and teenagers of 12 or 15 years were learning alongside still enrolled and recently graduated university students and young professionals. But also a small group of middle aged women between 50 and 70 years old were taking part in this class. Furthermore, a lot of second generation or even third generation South Africa born Chinese, Taiwanese or Hongkongese were studying in these classes. Even a mother was studying together with her daughter. The atmosphere was in many ways very cordial, I often felt well looked after, because frequently someone would bring sweets or self-made cupcakes in order to make the class more enjoyable. Even Yang Laoshi would join in and provide snacks from time to time. Some of the older women would bring some gifts in form of rubbers or pencils for the youngest ones.

⁴⁰⁹ A pseudonym has been in order to respect the teacher’s privacy.

Our teacher was well into her 50s and as she told me a bit later, she had been teaching about 15 years in this very school, therefore having plenty of experience, which was undoubtedly recognizable throughout the semester.

While the Chinese class at the CI was focusing on working through the chapters of a book and following a relatively structured outline, this class was much more focused on conversation and going through concepts that would help you 'survive on the streets'. Although there was structure, our teacher would change some of it every now and then. This kept the contents although heavy with repetition still relatively exciting.

This class did not have supporting media like the videos shown in the beginning of each CI class, but from time to time our teacher would bring for example traditional clothing to show what she was talking about.

The structure of each class was quite simple. During my first class the teacher spent approximately ten minutes to introduce me and another new student to the class. She engaged me in a Chinese conversation to see how good my Chinese was because I told the director I studied Chinese in Taiwan and Mainland China before. She then encouraged everyone to quickly introduce himself or herself and their Chinese names, which we consequently had to write on little paper stands in order to address each other properly during class discussions. Since the class lasted about three hours I observed the teacher set an alarm on her phone to give the students a break every 45-50 minutes. During the first break we usually went into the backyard to buy some Taiwanese food that was sold by a local family of Taiwanese descent. Many of the students engaged with them speaking Chinese to see their improvements.

Content-wise our teacher would spend the first 20-30 minutes on repeating the contents of the previous week in-depth by asking many questions and addressing students directly by their Chinese names. From what I saw, the concepts our teacher introduced were not exceptionally sophisticated but

nonetheless useful in day-to-day interactions; much more focused on usefulness than working through a list of chapters. These concepts ranged from learning how to introduce oneself and counting properly in Chinese, including telling each other phone numbers etc., to giving taxi-drivers the right directions. These discussions were then supported by printed material Yang Laoshi put together herself, from vocabulary using pinyin to dialogues to read in class with pinyin and traditional characters. From time to time we would learn some grammar rules but more as a side effect of the content we were going through in class.

Although the classes were very interactive, longer and therefore quicker progressing, the younger ones especially lost their focus and interest along the way. Nevertheless, because the class atmosphere was mostly cheerful our teacher took it with humor and asked amusing questions to those children to keep them engaged. There were two other groups visible in class, those who wanted to learn eagerly with many questions and those who only had time to learn Chinese during these three hours per week, struggling visibly with their confidence. Besides, these various groups in the class everyone including myself felt integrated quickly, because our teacher made sure everyone was challenged during class. This might have been a bit overly engaging for some, but worked favorably on the class's progress. In comparison to the CI class it was visible that Yang Laoshi pushed the students much faster and much harder than our teacher at the CI. The special focus on interaction with the teacher and one another fostered our Chinese conversation skills. The organization of the teacher and the way of engaging her students reminded me tremendously of my previous experience in Taiwan learning Chinese.

In comparison with our teacher at the CI school, Yang Laoshi had been living in Cape Town for more than 20 years and her English, although not perfect, was better than Sunny's English abilities. Especially in terms of her listening skills. While students in this Chinese class portrayed some interest in cultural customs, particularly in regards to Taiwan, our teacher had less difficulties answering these questions but moreover it is important to state that Yang

Laoshi spoke as much Chinese in class as possible which is assumingly why her English skills were less of a concern to the students.

Lastly, the teacher in this class put a lot more emphasis on homework than the teacher at the CI did. When I started the class I received two notebooks I was supposed to use in turns for homework each week. Our teacher would take time to go through it each week and discuss it during class with everyone once she gave them back, usually during the last ten minutes in class.

However, similar to the CIs class and because this class' atmosphere was, albeit challenging, very friendly so that most students were not afraid to admit that they forgot or have not had time to practice or do their homework. This further supported the observation I made during the Chinese class at the CI. The motivation to learn Chinese seemingly did not exceed other responsibilities like work etc., in their lives. Again it appeared to be a nice side occupation and especially for the younger students a task that was more important for their parents than for them. This last observation became especially clear during informal conversations the whole group was taking part in.

In conclusion, I would like to state that this class subjectively was more comfortable to attend for myself. But in saying so I am addressing a clear bias I was carrying within myself. I felt more comfortable in this class because it reminded me of the experiences I gained in Taiwan and therefore almost brought a nostalgic feeling with it. Nevertheless, and more objectively, it is necessary to state that although the classes did not seem to be as structured as the classes at the CI, they were progressing faster, in particular because of the motivation of our teacher.

It is further necessary to mention that later during the interview with our teacher, it became clear that this class had only been introduced recently, and the offer has been further expanded due an increasing demand from the people.

Was [the Chinese School] originally only for Chinese children? Or like children from Taiwanese parents or Chinese parents.

Yeah Taiwanese, Chinese and Hong Kong. Local Hong Kongese. These last few years we had some conversation classes. Because a lot of local people came to the Chinese School and ask for: “Where can I learn Chinese” and the principle thought oh maybe we can have a conversation class. And before we had only one conversation class and they asked the principal for another class and we needed an upgrade and so we opened another conversation class this year, because they were not beginners. So they wanted more and asked the principal: “We need another class” [laughing] so this year we just opened the second one. Before only one.

(Yang Laoshi ‘interview’ June 26,2016)

This is comparable with the general mission statement of the CIs I previously presented in the introduction:

*“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 [...]”*⁴¹⁰

Having the critiques, such as the CI is used to push Mainland China’s political intentions, however in mind, and subsequently discovering this, clearly raises questions in regards of the presentation of the CIs in general.

And it is therefore that this thesis draws an obvious line between Mainland China and Taiwan, because the different operations of the governments are visible on the ground through the non-existing cooperation between these schools or institutions that offer Chinese language instruction to the local community in Cape Town. And this is very likely not the only case in Cape Town since there are Taiwanese schools throughout South Africa detectable, as, for example, the previously mentioned Pretoria Chinese School.

Yeah, I know the Chinese government does a lot of things like that. They have the “ Kongzi Xueyuan”.

Yeah, that’s the Confucius Institute!! Okay so you know what it is.

Before... I think... I’ve heard they put one in the UCT?

Yeah they are on campus.

⁴¹⁰ (Hanban, 2014c)

Oh still? I heard it closed... or something... not anymore.

Yeah, I take Chinese classes there, too.

But in Stellenbosch... there is one too... You know the problem is that our Chinese School, the money comes from Taiwan government and we can't have that many contacts with China.

(Yang Laoshi 'interview' June 26, 2016)

It is undeniable that the need or will to learn Chinese is increasing. Before introducing these conversational Chinese classes — beginners and intermediate — to people outside the local Chinese/Taiwanese community, this school provided a structured school system from grade 1-9 for mainly second and third generation South African born Chinese or Taiwanese students as a weekend school to attend every Saturday.

It would be incorrect to state that this group of students showed increased motivation in comparison to the group of students I met at the CI. A heightened motivation could only be attributed to those students who decided to take part in both classes, at the CI and at the Chinese School. But as I will point out in more detail in the next chapters, these students had specific reasons to take part in both lessons. This however further underlines the basis of my argument. It depends on the agency of the people itself, especially in regards to their preferences, motivations and experiences and not on the soft power effects of the CI. How attracted they are to one class and what is ultimately important for them to learn, and why, will be my concern in chapter 5 and 6. My bias in this context additionally points to how experiences influence each and every one of us. How my participants' experiences further play into the creation of meaning and preferences for them will be the main focus of the upcoming chapters.

4.10. HSK vs. final test at Chinese School

Before presenting the voices of the local Chinese learners in-depth, I will proceed by describing the last experience I gained at those two institutions — taking the HSK at the CI and taking the final test of the semester at the Chinese School.

4.10.1. Taking the HSK

Shortly after I started the CI Chinese class our teacher, Sunny, brought the upcoming HSK examination to our attention. During the beginning of one of the following classes we started talking about the registration process and that instead of being able to register via the CI we needed to register online, using the portal: '<http://www.chinesetest.cn/index.co>'.

To provide some context, the HSK is the internationally standardized and accredited Chinese Proficiency Test,⁴¹¹ which is structured similarly to the DELE for Spanish or the IELTS for English non-native proficiency testing. However, the HSK is solely based on listening, reading and writing skills. If a Chinese learner would like to get his or her speaking skills accredited there is the HSKK (HSK Speaking Test).⁴¹² Furthermore, there are several other language certificates that one can take, similar to other language diplomas.⁴¹³

At this point most of the people in our group decided to register for the HSK because it sparked motivation to study more diligently. But although our teacher told us during the previous class that she would send us an email about the HSK preparations with information about how it would take place and what was necessary to know, however, she forgot to do so, which made this process a slightly chaotic and discouraging experience. Sunny was simply too busy to send out this email.

Although I have attended several different Chinese classes in my life, I never had taken an HSK before. I therefore had very little knowledge about the actual

⁴¹¹ (Hanban, 2013-2016)

⁴¹² (Hanban, 2013-2016)

⁴¹³ (Hanban, 2013-2016)

process of registering for it, which allowed me even stronger to reconstruct the feelings and circumstances of my participants later on while talking about it.

Different slightly from my participants in my existing proficiency of Chinese, I decided it would be more beneficial for myself to register for HSK 3 while my participants chose HSK 1.

At the beginning of March I tried to register for the HSK online and it proved to be much more difficult than I had expected. During the registration process, once I figured out how to operate it, a small survey appeared on the webpage (Figure 10), which was admittedly, unexpected.

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying a survey on the HSK website. The website header includes the logo for '汉语考试服务网' (www.chinesele.net) and a search bar. Below the header is a navigation menu with icons for Home, Announcement, About Test, Test Registration, Test Center, Practice, Test Regulation, and About Us. The survey itself is titled 'Small survey: Please take about 20 seconds to answer a few questions'. It contains five questions with dropdown menus for answers: 'How did you get to know about the Chinese test?' (Others), 'How long have you been learning Chinese?' (3-5 years), 'Nationality?' (GERMANY), 'Mother Tongue?' (German), and 'Why do you want to learn Chinese?' (Out of personal interest). A 'Submit' button is located below the survey. At the bottom of the page, there are links for Home, Test And Registration, Score Enquiry, Download Center, and Others.

Figure 10

Although this picture does not show the whole survey it gives a good impression of what information was necessary to include. Not only did they enquire how long the respective student had studied Chinese but further enquired where and why. These data are clearly collected to impress the international stage with ever increasing numbers of Chinese students coming from all corners of the world, as becomes visible in the annually published Confucius Institute report.⁴¹⁴

The biggest difficulty I encountered during the registration process was the use of language. Although seemingly available in English, parts and especially the commands were not fully translated into English and therefore made it difficult to operate if one did not master intermediate proficiency of Chinese including

⁴¹⁴ (Hanban, 2017)

the ability to read characters. Only because I have been studying Chinese extensively before could I ultimately figure out how to operate this system. But without knowing characters or at least knowing how to search for them, it proved to be close to impossible for some of the other students to enroll themselves. Because my classmates did not enroll until a couple of weeks later I only found out by then that my impression was indeed right.

After the successful online registration and payment of the fees of 350R, the student is provided with an HSK admission ticket (Figure 11).

(自行打印)

新汉语水平考试 (HSK) 准考证
HSK Admission Ticket

准考证号: H3160434202000007

姓名	Monique Rimkus	考 点	3	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
中文姓名		代 码	4	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
考 号	0	国 籍	2	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
序 号	0	籍 贯	0	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
	0		2	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
	0		0	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
	7	性 别	6	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
			1	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
			6	[0][1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]
证件类型	护照	证件号码		
考试科目	HSK三级	座 位 号		
考试日期	2016-04-16			
考试时间	13:30			
考点名称	Confucius Institute at University of Cape Town			
考试地点	Room 3.02.2, Level 3, Masingene Building, Cross Campus Road, Rondebosch, Cape Town 7700			
考场位置	Room 3.02.1, Level 3, Masingene Building, Cross Campus Road.			
考生须知	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.考生在收到准考证后应核对本人信息,如信息有误,请立即联系考点修改。 2.考生必须带准考证和带有照片的身份证件进入考场(以报名时提供的有效身份证件为准)。 3.纸笔考试,请考生自带2B铅笔和橡皮。 4.考试前30分钟开始入场,听力考试开始前,迟到的考生可进入考场参加考试;听力考试开始后,迟到的考生须等听力考试结束后才可进入考场参加阅读考试,阅读时间不补;阅读考试开始前,迟到的考生不得进入考场参加考试。 5.考试结束约30日后,可登陆汉语考试服务网 (www.chinesetest.cn) 凭准考证号码和姓名查询成绩。 6.考试结束约45日后,凭准考证到考点领取成绩单报告。 			
联系考点	电话: 0027 021-650-5417 / 0027 071-2216894			
传真:				

请妥善保管准考证。 Please keep the admission ticket.

Figure 11

This ticket contains all necessary information for the test provider and, in Chinese, for the test taker.

I was left with about a month to study for the HSK. I studied every day and due to this research it became a very self-reflexive activity. Since I was aware that I had, unlike my classmates and participants, a very flexible time schedule I started wondering how much actual time a full-time working individual can spend on the test preparation. About two weeks away from the test I further noticed my progress was very slow. Not only did I have to study characters,

while HSK 1 and 2 were held completely in pinyin, I also had the feeling that neither the CI administration nor our teacher invested the time or interest in supporting us further. The website of this CI does provide a general introduction to the HSK examination and although they offer that:

*“If you need practice and preparation for the test, Ms. Qiling Ying from the Confucius Institute is willing to help. Schedules will be made after you contact her.”*⁴¹⁵

When I was contacting the institute for additional information in order to prepare, I was merely told that our teacher would present us further information later on and that I would not be able to borrow books for the HSK preparation, I had to buy them instead. The email conversation unfolded as follows:

M: Hi,
Could I borrow books at the CI to prepare for the test??

CI: Hi Monique,
The teacher will inform you the detail of HSK test in later stage. What book do you want to borrow??

M: Do you have books that prepare for the HSK examinations? I would like to borrow one of those if you have.

CI: Hi we do have the books and you have to buy it.⁴¹⁶

I refrained from buying these books and instead tried to accumulate preparation material on my own. At this point, I had the feeling there was no interest by CI staff in preparing us for this examination, which is why I ultimately needed to find material on my own. The whole process of registering for the HSK was very impersonal retrospectively, everything was happening online, apart from paying the registration fee, which had to be paid at the institute itself. Unfortunately, the process of payment turned out to be chaotic as well. Upon approaching the administration to pay my registration fee for the HSK she was not aware that I had registered in the first place. I therefore needed to forward my HSK registration confirmation email in order for her to proceed with the payment process. However, she was visibly overwhelmed with my request and was apparently unsure if the payment process was supposed to be happening at

⁴¹⁵ (CIUCT, 2017f)

⁴¹⁶ Excerpt from my email exchange with the CI administration.

the institute. After a couple of minutes and more confusion she decided to issue a payment confirmation of 350R for me. The next problem she encountered was not having change for my cash payment which took an additional ten minutes, the attempt to return my change with her own pocket money and asking one of the staff in Chinese if she had 50R. Only then did she figure out that they had a cash box from which she could take the change. Additionally, I had to bother her with yet another request. Since I never received a payment confirmation for the Chinese class itself I asked her at that moment if she could quickly provide me with a copy. As soon as I finished my question, I realized that I 'plunged' her into yet another misery. The chaos kept piling up, because she did not know where she stored it. She scrambled a very untidy pile of about 30 payment notices out from a drawer in her desk and started looking for it. She could not find my name. It took her about 15 more minutes and several utterances that she remembers me and that I came in before, later we agreed that she would go through them and send me a copy via email once she found it. She seemed very stressed and it made me feel really uncomfortable to ask her yet another question. This one addressed simple details on the HSK examination, e.g. where it would take place. She could not provide me with any information, because she told me that the person in charge of the HSK examination did not provide her with this information. Therefore it appeared that internal briefing or information exchange at this CI seemed to be hardly working either.

I then proceeded to find help elsewhere and I was told from friends that there are several mock exams available online, many of them not connected to the Hanban and some were provided through other CIs. From my own experience, I knew that other CIs provide preparation classes or at least a broad offer of material for HSK test takers, this one, however, refrained from doing anything apart from offering superficial information on the website. This in particular pointed towards the poor management of this CI.

On April 16, 2016 — I finally went through the process of taking the HSK examination. It took place in the Masingene building, the same building where

the CI is located. The students who enrolled to take this examination — approximately 15 — met in front of the building at around 12:30. The exam took place at 13:00. All levels were taking the exam at the same time and from conversations I had, it appeared that there were two groups, one taking the HSK 1 examination and the other one, including me, taking the HSK 3 examination. While waiting with everyone else I started a conversation with a girl standing next to me. She told me how she studied Chinese for six months in Durban before moving to Cape Town and that she works in the fashion industry. She further explained that they have many products and fabrics from China. I initially assumed that is why she wanted to learn Chinese. She further told me that she was going to take the HSK 1 exam. Interestingly, she additionally explained how she would like to do her masters degree in Japan. This admittedly caught me off-guard because at this point it seemed that she is willing to go to Asia but not necessarily to China, it just offers another opportunity for her. Moreover, she mentioned how she went to Fuzhou with the CI in Durban at the beginning of that year and spent about two weeks there. Lastly, she explained that she taking the beginners class here at the CI and that initially their class had about 20-25 people joining but that now the number was fluctuating dramatically. Soon after this conversation more and more people came together waiting for the staff to guide us to the examination room.

All of us sat down in front of the CI facilities, waiting for them to tell us what to do. First the staff guided the HSK 1 takers, approximately seven of us upstairs and let the HSK 3 takers, into the CI itself. Since the institute was relatively small there was limited space and the test takers, including me, were seated in front of the employee's computers and some in the multi-purpose room behind us. When we were finally seated about four CI employees distributed the exam booklet and answer sheet. We were handed a sheet to fill in our details, admission numbers, age and name. They checked our IDs/passports quickly and we had to put our bags in a corner of the room. They then proceeded to initiate the listening part of the exam while the four employees supervised us. There were short introductions in Chinese on what we were allowed to do and what not. The students around me were drawing

funny faces and the guy sitting next to me said jokingly: “Don’t question them just do it!” in a notably sarcastic voice.

We then had about 1.5 hours to complete the test, which with enough preparation was fairly easy. Especially because I studied various mock tests the questions seemed rather familiar (I assume there is a fixed pool of questions that get randomly generated to compose the overall test). The listening part took about 30 minutes. Then we had time for the three other parts and completing in the answer sheet. During the test the employees were standing around us, snacking and chatting to each other. I heard one girl during the listening exam asking if they could stop because she did an accidental mistake but the employees did not agree. I was done early, gave them my form and left. Going through this whole process clearly highlighted the fact that each institute rises and falls by the interest of the people who run it. This very institute was obviously facing internal struggles, probably also an employee shortage but from an outsider’s perspective, or from the perspective of someone who engages with this institute, it appeared extremely disorganized. While there is clearly a working network for the HSK established there is no lack of material and therefore, this suggests once again the point that there is need for nuanced research on this matter. A research that highlights the social agency within the institute in order to provide better insights to the broader debate. These institutes cannot be generalized since every individual working in them, and also those individuals who decide to engage with them bring their own interest and meaning with them.

Lastly, it quickly became visible that some of the students, who had less time for preparation and finding material online, struggled even more than I did. Since I operated with utmost honesty throughout my research it was not a secret that I interned in a CI in Germany and therefore some of the students then turned to me for help. This admittedly further helped me to gain trust and foster friendly ties in order to later engage them in in-depth interview.

It further made me realize that the help we provided among each other, not only concerning the HSK, but also other suggestions for other useful Chinese learning material in general, was far greater than what the actual institute provided us with. From my experience I therefore can conclude that at least on the level of non-credit bearing Chinese courses, this CI does not specifically tend to build a strong network of students. They are simply promoting their offers, being Chinese classes, scholarships to go to China, and taking part in the HSK.

4.10.2. Taking the final test at the Chinese School

Different from the CI, the Chinese School did not offer an internationally accredited proficiency test. While I had the feeling that the HSK heightened our motivation to keep studying Chinese, we were told we had a final exam at the end of the semester in the Chinese School. And although it is not comparable to the official HSK examination it had a similar effect on the class, since we would receive a certificate at the end of the semester with our final score. Besides not being internationally accredited but being part of our conversation class, Yang Laoshi spent a lot of time preparing us for this test. During the first half of the penultimate class Yang Laoshi extensively repeated the concepts we learnt during the entire semester. The second half of this class, she then provided the test material which we subsequently had to take using only pinyin. This test was neither content-wise nor pressure-wise comparable to the HSK examination but nevertheless the class, including me tried to complete it to the best of their ability. To my impression, because the atmosphere in this class was very cordial, everyone was motivated to do well in order to prove in front of our teacher that we had learnt something. After finishing this test we handed it back to our teacher and whoever finished early went home.

During our last Chinese class we proceeded with learning some new concepts as some sort of outlook for the upcoming semester. During the second half of the class, we joined the general graduation ceremony in the sports hall of the Chinese School. During this ceremony all approximately 150 students of this school were sorted in blocks according to their classes. Afterwards, each

teacher proceeded to call their students names one by one and handed over a certificate in an envelope. Our class was the last and Yang Laoshi read out our names one by one and one by one we went towards the stage to collect our certificate.

The atmosphere was very cheerful throughout the event and although it was a rather unspectacular setting it generated a grateful feeling and a sense of common bond. After the graduation ceremony the class shared some future plans. While most of the students were going to keep attending the classes I had to make my farewells.

4.11. Summary

Summarizing, I have to state that of course this presentation is only a partial reconstruction of what is occurring in these institutions, nevertheless it is based on my experience. An experience that I gained similar to that of my classmates and which facilitates my understanding towards the meanings they attach to their experiences. This renders me able to measure their experience against my own. It therefore provides me with fruitful insights that support my ethnographic intentions for this research. It is however, further necessary to understand that most individuals only gain a partial experience while engaging in similar institutions like the CI or the Chinese School. They are not exposed to every offer of these institutes unless they decide to engage in-depth on their own terms. They are further not exposed to high-level individuals that are normally questioned in regards to this debate. This research therefore provides valid and new insights observing individual motivations and meanings in regards to these institutions.

What became visible in this chapter is also that the socio-demographic location in which the CIs are physically located should be taken into consideration while discussing their impact. Not only does this specific CI appeal almost entirely to upper-middle class members of the society, it further mainly advertised its existence on campus.

Especially because of the process I went through — in terms of enrolling into Chinese classes and taking proficiency tests — offers striking insights on the lack of ‘threat’ this institution poses to the society. In my opinion, it is just another institution that offers a language to study. And especially because the teaching capacity is at times questionable, a large part of study concerning this language has to happen during self-study.

Outstandingly visible is the lack of negative influence that the CI wields by contrasting it with the Chinese School. This is especially the case when considering that most research refrains from considering that other facilities, which offer Chinese language classes, exist in Cape Town, like the Chinese School. This is particularly important to state, if taking into consideration that this Chinese School is partially benefitting from funding schemes that are connected to the Taiwanese government.

This undoubtedly highlights the problematic approach with which Mainland China’s Confucius Institutes are integrated into the government’s soft power quest, especially in regards to the representation in academia and the media. It is important to reconsider how the influence of the CIs is detectable when people obviously have their own critical minds and experiences that influenced the creation of their personalities and viewpoints previously to engaging with these institutes. And even more questionable is the impact if there are other possibilities to engage in learning Chinese like a Chinese School that is connected to a China opposing state-entity — Taiwan. The existing accounts on CIs do not include these bottom-up experiences and additionally exclude the diversity of peoples’ lives, pointing towards the possibility that soft power in this context has little or no effect at all. Ultimately, they do not observe the local socio-demographic circumstances. Therefore, these accounts remain at best superficial when it comes to a sufficient portrayal of the CI project.

5. Motivations for learning Chinese and perceptions

about China and Taiwan — an ethnographic journey

“[N]arrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society.... All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is often shared by people with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds.... [N]arrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.”⁴¹⁷

This chapter provides the second part of my data presentation within this thesis. Instead of focusing on the auto-ethnographic experience of the author, this chapter will provide ethnographic data derived from the ethnographic research. The purpose of the chapter is to engage the reader with the respective experiences of participants that triggered the motivation to learn Chinese. The reader may further keep the previous auto-ethnographic data chapter in mind in order to contextualize the settings in which these individuals found themselves and how they create meaning on the basis of these experiences.

Connecting to the intended research objectives stated in the introduction, this fifth chapter sets out to answer the first objective through the polyphonic voices of the participants. Polyphonic voices of my participants in this context refers to the multi-voiced representation of my participants opinions — as for social sciences common — in form of long excerpts from the official interviews I conducted with them. This form of representation will enable the reader — similar to the auto-ethnographic section — to participate with this research, by getting acquainted better with the thoughts of the participants. This objective reads as follows: Why did my participants decide to learn Chinese? What do they think about China/Taiwan and what are their plans with regards to Taiwan/China?

Ethnography is a useful but at times very sensitive methodology. It requires the ethnographer to collect tremendously private information on the respective

⁴¹⁷ (Barthes, 1982, pp. 251-252)

participants, which requires the ethnographer to remain very self-/reflexive throughout the data collection process. However, it is a mistake to consider the process afterwards, namely “[...] the ‘writing up’ of ethnographic work as innocent.”⁴¹⁸ It is there that the ethnographer has to engage continuously in reflexive thoughts as he or she has the “[...] responsibility for how we choose to represent ourselves and others in the texts we write.”⁴¹⁹ Since this research draws its inspiration from the ideas of liberal and literary anthropology, it is bound to present the ‘personal’ instead of an impersonalized overview of collected data. The voices of the participants are the focus of this research and will therefore be embedded in an evocative narrative that instead of revealing their identifiable information, draw from complementary fictive characteristics which in turn enable me to present my participants’ truths without compromising their integrity (see chapter 3.2.3.).

Furthermore, in order to maintain my participants’ anonymity throughout this thesis I decided to create pseudonyms for each of them. Some of the data have been further obtained through informal interactions and conversations aside from the formally scheduled interviews, which my participants were aware of (see chapter 3.2.4).⁴²⁰ This helped me to maintain their confidentiality without revealing information that could identify them as my participants, even though I am presenting personal experiences within this thesis. This is then reinforced by my intention to use a literary anthropology approach. The aforementioned fictional characteristics I am willing to add to each participant will neither distort the data I accumulated, nor compromise the academic integrity of this thesis. This will much more underpin and extract the reality of each participant and therefore help to answer my research objectives in an ethical but personal way.

Before I proceeded with interviewing my participants during my field research I explained my research intentions and in which context I intended to use their

⁴¹⁸ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2006, p. 258 as quoted in; O'Hare, 2007, p. 6)

⁴¹⁹ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2006, p. 258 as quoted in; O'Hare, 2007, p. 6)

⁴²⁰ Compare with Alex Cockain’s methods to maintain confidentiality: (Cockain, 2011, pp. 102-103)

information. Afterwards I provided a hard copy in the form of an information sheet and acquired a signed form of consent. Lastly, I emphasized the possibility to pull out from this study or the interview at any moment if they felt uncomfortable.

5.1. Motivations for learning Chinese

Throughout the ethnographic data collection process in the field it became more and more recognizable that every individual participant in this research had specific reasons for learning Chinese. These motivations are not connected to the particularity of the school or the institute they decided to learn Chinese in, but rather to individually formed characteristics that are informed by previous and highly personal experiences — true to the essence of phenomenology (see chapter 3.1.1). While some of the participants experienced interactions with partners, friends, acquaintances or family that led them to Chinese-speaking countries and a subsequent, more or less accidental contact with the Chinese language and culture, others are more broadly interested in learning a variety of foreign languages. Yet others feel the need to prove something to themselves or others. How these motivations translate from individual experiences will therefore be the main concern in this section by providing an introduction and extrapolation of these specific experiences that have been essential in connecting the meaning of learning Chinese in the present.

Richard was a tall and immediately friendly appearing South African man in his late 40s, maybe early 50s, when I met him the first time in class. He worked for a local business in a management position and his articulate command of language and sense of humor emitted a mixture of trustworthiness and seriousness, giving him the presence of a responsible and strong person. Although my first impression of him was not of an extremely outgoing personality, he enjoyed engaging in conversations and talking about his personal experiences in a very self-reflexive manner.

Talking to Richard, not only during the interview, but further during interactions in- and outside class, presented a very clear image on what experience influenced him in his decision to learn Chinese.

I lived in Taiwan in 2006 for a year. And I learnt nothing while I was there. I planned to stay there for three months and then I thought there is not enough time to really get into it. And you are in this country where there is everything so different and so far. And [I thought] about doing a class [while] I was just trying to find work and a place to stay and then it was another two months and then another two months. If I knew that I was going to stay there for a year, I would have signed up [for Chinese classes] within a month.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

At the same time, a strong feeling of regret resonated through the narrative about his experience in Taiwan, showing that not speaking Chinese had restricted him in that he missed out on having more extensive experiences while he was spending time there. This ultimately translated into the motivation for learning Chinese in the present to prove something to himself; to fix a regret he has had from the time he spent in Taiwan and did not become acquainted enough with the language or the locals.

[The city I lived in in Taiwan] lacked a little bit of character you know they are all very similar to me there are these little pockets that were quite unique but if you went out of the town center [...] I got lost everyday on the same road they all look the same. That's another reason I'd like to go back to China anywhere. And just be able to have a conversation, a very basic conversation. Just to say this is my address I am lost, where am I. I would even get lost just to be able to say that, because to go back to a place where I was completely just at a loss in terms of communication. I would love to just go back and have a simple conversation, say how much does this cost...

Do you think you missed a lot because you did not speak Chinese?

Definitely. Definitely. I mean I was lucky to have people there and I think a lot of foreigners do find... a local context you know who helps them out. So from that perspective you are in-between and you are always very, very much an outsider and I think you always will be no matter how good your Chinese is. But you just take another, you know, you go through a few more doors if you speak the language. And I don't know... it's not just the conversation I think you need access to be suddenly in a very different culture. I mean absolutely everything in Taiwan I found different. So just the sights, and the smells, the way people communicate and move and sing and celebrate... So I just found it fascinating that people can live such different lives somewhere else in the world. And I just, I have had an interest in that and I think having to be able to speak the language at least break the ice with the

language would be so valuable... you know to joke around with kids [while teaching], I could never joke with the kids because if you make a joke it just gets lost [laughs] so you are always the serious teacher unless you are throwing toys around the room or making them play games. You are not... you can't be funny or fun. So that was quite frustrating.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Richard emphasized the fact that he could have used this opportunity to learn Chinese but during that time he was simply not diligent enough to do so.

So I think the underlining here is well... that I was lazy [smiles with visible regret]. And I did not need to. But it was so often so frustrating to go into a shop and I couldn't even say: 'How much is this?' or 'Have a nice day'. So I felt like completely cut out from these people but yet I got the sense that these people are so friendly. There is a culture that I kind of wanted to be part of and all these festivals and we made friends with locals. And we kind of, in many ways, lived completely parallel to each other. Even though we were friends because there was such a big language barrier, but a really interesting connection. And I think I built up this fascination with Chinese culture. Not necessarily Taiwan. So then in Australia, I lived there for six years before coming back here [implying SA], I took, I think about three months of Chinese class at a language institute.

Ah there was an independent language institute?

It was not a Confucius Institute?

No, it was just independent.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Listening to Richard's extremely self-reflexive narrative of his experience in Taiwan and subsequent experience of living for six years in Australia, before finally moving back to South Africa, outlined the development of his interest in Chinese/Taiwanese culture, which was seemingly awakened by — and is still perpetuated by — his lifestyle choices and a strong desire to travel. After finishing his first degree in particular:

I think we just wanted to do... my girlfriend wanted to immerse herself in the language and I was keen to travel. So I finished my degree, I didn't really feel like getting a formal job and just to get here and earn some money... and I thought, I might as well! [Referring to traveling] you know?

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

One last experience Richard referred to summarize his intentions particularly well.

I mean there is something about that [Chinese medicine]... I went to a doctor in Taiwan with my girlfriend translating, for a stomach thing if I remember correctly, but minor. But she said just go and experience this whole thing and I just was like: "No... I just wait it out and then I go to a

pharmacy and get tablets”, and she said: “Just try this stuff.” And this person checked my pulse, and my teeth and my nails and my eyes and... within seconds told me about things in my body that *I* knew about, there is no way she could have known about. And I thought that she couldn’t have known that from looking at some signs. And I was like: “I am yours”, you know. “Tell me what to drink and when to drink it, because I trust you.” So I am quite interested in those sorts of things, but there is no way I am going to get involved. It’ll be Confucius Institute or probably the Taiwanese class on the weekend. My goal is to learn a language to some extent, I need to work out to what extent, and if I come across other interesting things maybe.

So it’s more like a hobby for you at the moment,
maybe it’ll lead to something?

It’s a hobby yeah. Yes exactly!

(Richard ‘interview’ April 6, 2016)

Richard’s experience was a very distinctive one. Although observable in different variations experienced by other participants, as I will keep showing within this chapter, nevertheless it is very particular in its nature. The experience he had while in Taiwan created a process of development and attaching meaning to learning more about the language and the culture to which he was exposed for a year without really taking part in it. Phenomenologically, this experience was clearly motivated by a previously established personal interest in travel and, additionally, by following a friend who had decided to spend time in Taiwan.

Strikingly, when keeping in mind that I met Richard in the Chinese class offered by the Confucius Institute, it became visible that a socio-historical context played a role in his decision-making process. South Africa had operated official ties with Taiwan for decades before changing its official relations to Mainland China. Many educational facilities throughout South Africa had offered Chinese classes even before the diplomatic ties were re-defined. It is therefore seemingly more difficult to apply or outline something like soft power in the context of CIs in South Africa. For this reason, it appears further impossible to define the influence that soft power is having through the CIs. This became clearer the more I was dialogically engaging with the narratives of my participants.

Unlike Richard, Luca was taking Chinese classes at both the CI and the Chinese School. Luca was a tall and thin academic, dressed neatly but not overly concerned with wearing business clothes. He was born in Europe but of mixed decent and therefore already combining several cultural spheres within himself, all neatly wrapped up behind a strong accent. He had been living in Cape Town for a couple of years when I met him in class. He appeared to live an unconventional life, not paying much attention to material things as I found out while interacting with him more and more throughout my six months in Cape Town. Luca was one of those individuals who almost hyperactively followed a million different interests, was knowledgeable, often engaging in critical discourse, and was reading constantly to keep up.

Similarly to Richard, Luca developed an immense love for travelling, especially in Asia. Luca defined himself not only through his travels but also through the languages he was able to communicate in. And within this strong personal interest, which he had created through previous experiences, we can find one of the ‘phenomena’ that helped creating his motivation to learn Chinese:

I want to learn new languages. I could keep going on learning more Western languages but I have English, French, Spanish... I learnt a little bit of German a little bit of Italian. But it depends on my girlfriends usually [laughing]. My girlfriend now, we started the relationship recently. But she is also very interested in going back to China and living there, she lived there before.

[...] I could go to Portuguese now, but what is the point, what use would I make of that. But now I see Chinese people are everywhere I would like to spend time in China, I would like to be interacting in Chinese. And I would also like to be able to read basic characters and in fact, if you look around you Chinese characters are everywhere. On my laptop, the sticker at the back has Chinese characters. Everything you buy... I bought a spare glass for my Hyundai today. On the label there are Chinese characters. Uhm everywhere on every object you buy its made in China. This is one of the very pragmatic reasons to learn Chinese and it really makes sense definitely to learn Chinese in today's world. Definitely, there is nothing that makes more sense, so yeah I am happy. It's a long-term project... And this is a project, which is not nearing completion at all. I mean Chinese will never reach completion. So this project is really interesting to me, because I tend to start a new project and then give up because of some new interest or something else. But I think that the depth of this project... of learning Chinese and the

characters and the culture, there is enough depth to prevent me from getting bored and soon switch to another project.
(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

There is certain pragmatism detectable within Luca's motivation to study Chinese, which mirrors his personality very well. Through dialogic interactions I had with him it became clear that many things he follows are rather pragmatic. And although he enjoys studying Chinese, it becomes quickly obvious that he simply does not have enough time to fully immerse himself.

So yeah I do want to learn Chinese. It comes completely from my own interest; there is no professional project for me or not in the very near future. [Um] as I told you I went to China in 2013 — in December — two weeks [for a chess competition]. And I was really interested in this different world. And I am very happy about learning languages. It's because I want to learn German for the literature and be able to read Kafka and Nietzsche. And I also have some ancestors in Bavaria so yeah for German that's a thing. But I love to learn languages because it's also learning a culture and I like the idea of being a foreigner. That's also why I love to travel I love being a foreigner somewhere and with languages, when you start a new language you are a foreigner to that language. You have to find your way; it's not always easy to understand somebody talking Chinese to you, of course. I like it. It makes you a little bit more humble. And that is important for me. Maybe it equals my yoga practice or my meditation practice in that way. It's purely for my own interest. And I love characters. I am really immersed and mesmerized by the culture [and] the fact that it's the oldest language still in use.

Would you think this whole topic learning Chinese, knowing about China... does it take up a lot of your time? Would you sit down... lets say [during] a normal week, would you sit down after work and read about it [...]?

My problem is that I have so much work these days because I am lecturing and I am also trying to do my research. So yeah it's crazy. It is really crazy and I have 140 first year students. So I have three groups for the practical and I have three groups for the tutorial. I have two groups for the lectures so I repeat myself twice or three times a week and I have... I give a couple of research lectures a week so for me it's six times one hour for lectures etc., It's crazy and not very healthy.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

As he mentions here, a second motivation to learn Chinese or interact with Asian cultures derives from a strong interest in yoga, which he is very serious about following. He told me that this, in many ways, builds the underlying structure and peaceful practice for his life.

You are very interested in different cultures, right? Do you read a lot on your own?

Yeah, I would like to be able to read more — to have more time or to make more time to read. Definitely the ‘inter-culturality’ and also there is also something about my current journey in spirituality. I grew up in a family with no religious education at all. But... I was never imposed any religion and I am not religious. I tend not to be very happy with the three main religions in the world today. I am not very happy with the way they try to impose things which do not makes sense sometimes. And in the way they classify good and evil things etc. So I am very interested in Buddhism and Taoism. So I read a little bit about that. That’s also my... maybe one of the reasons why I would be happy to live the next chunk of my life in Southeast Asia probably, or in Asia. I am very attracted to Asia for that reason. I think people live better or just understand life in a healthier way than we do in the Western world. So it’s also about that... I have a book offered by my cousin with quotes from the tactical king [Sun Tzu’s Art of War] and I am really happy reading this book and Buddhism is also close to my practice of yoga and yoga is really important to me in my life. So this culture — the Eastern cultures I am interested in. And we are planning a trip to India soon in July. And I have been to China two weeks in 2013 and I have been to Vietnam, too. I have been there in 2009 and in 2011, I think. Yeah I enjoyed it so much. It’s lovely. And you feel just very comfortable living there and being there and being yourself and eating wonderful food. Vietnam is crazy nice for that and not so many tensions. People are friendly people are... everybody breathes. It’s just relaxed and its more life. So these tensions I see here in this cultures [in South Africa] it’s tough.

(Luca ‘interview’ April 16, 2016)

With Luca it quickly became clear how important traveling is for him. During the six months I spent in Cape Town (Jan. 25-Jul. 26, 2016) he completed several trips to Europe and a longer holiday to India, always with the will to immerse completely into the cultural and historical background of the places he visited. Frequently he told me about books he was reading on Chinese culture or Taoism or the creation of Chinese characters. He would often bring books to class to show everyone or to present some information in class. His ambitions to learn Chinese clearly derived from a deeply rooted ability to wonder about and soak in all available information on foreign cultures he could come across. This was only strengthened by his particular focus on an Asian way of life, which is certainly an additional motivation for him. Learning Mandarin — as he stated himself — will take years to complete and will therefore keep him entertained in the process of learning it.

The last participant from the Chinese class at the CI who was willing to meet me for extended interviews was Mthembi. Mthembi was a young aspiring businesswoman. Being in her early 30s and occupying an associate position, Mthembi was working for a big international marketing company in Cape Town. Upon first impression, I could not shake the feeling that a sense for fashion and material wealth followed her like a well-selected perfume and exaggerated her radiating business appearance. She further brought along a rather ‘girly way’ of talking which gave her a friendly, approachable character, albeit occasionally slightly superficial in nature. Often she would sit in class playing on her phone, obviously tired after coming directly from work. She was originally from another part of South Africa and told me that she had moved to the Western Cape for her current job. Mthembi had a very striking experience that introduced her to Chinese. While enjoying coffee she opened up about her parents sending her to a Chinese primary school, which exposed her to language and culture much earlier than any of the other participants I met.

I would like to know about the experience you had with learning Chinese?

Okay. So, when I was in primary school, which is about long time ago, my parents put myself into a Chinese School, which is in Pretoria. So it’s called Pretoria Chinese School. So my mum and dad were just basically taking me there because it was like a small private school and Chinese people are known to be good in Maths... So like, I was the only black girl in the class but then when time went by, actually a lot of people started to go to that school. So then I left that school in grade 6 so basically I did Chinese from grade 2 to grade 6. Then I left the school.

So it was incorporated into your normal classes?

Yes, so basically in your day-to-day class they teach you in English. So whatever subjects you do, they are taught in English but then you actually have a Chinese lesson. So you learn like Calligraphies and you basically practice Chinese culture in a way, they expose you to that — like Chinese food. [...] They would sell Chinese food, like [um] Chao Mein and all the other traditional Chinese dishes, and every year in the beginning of the year they used to invite our parents and us to celebrate the Chinese New Year. They used to have Chinese dances and stuff like that. So yeah they take you to the Chinese embassy, you also go to the Buddhist temple so they didn’t like force Chinese culture on you but they exposed you to it since you were in a Chinese School, so that you can be open to it. So that was very nice then that’s what we did. Then obviously I stopped

and then like after I stopped I wanted to go back and actually learn Mandarin. This was the opportunity. I don't know, I was looking for private lessons but they were working out to be very pricey then I found out about the UCT Confucius Institute.

It must have been hard though, like its been quite a while that you studied Chinese and get back into it?

Yeah. It's easier when you are younger, from what I have realized, because I only started doing pinyin now, when I started at university [at the CI]. When I was in primary school, we didn't do pinyin we did characters.

Oh right away?

Yes

Traditional characters?

Yes.

Oh was it a Taiwanese school then?

No... Yeah, I think it was actually. I don't know... what I know is that we learnt Mandarin but we did characters like the ones that we do now in class. That was what we did... We didn't do any pinyin. And then we used to do the paint... What's it...?

Calligraphy?

Yeah the calligraphy and the bamboo... we used to do that. And then like obviously speeches, they used to have different books with different levels. Just like we have now and then we would finish obviously the book and then we would carry on. And then we would do speeches. They would encourage you obviously to speak in Mandarin. But now it is hard hey. Because I only do it once a week, as opposed to that time when I used to do it every single day.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

After talking to Mthembi about her past experience at this Chinese primary school and some subsequent research it became quickly recognizable to me that, similar to the Chinese School in Cape Town, this school too was established by an early community of Chinese overseas immigrants who came to South Africa mainly from Taiwan and Hong Kong in 1934.⁴²¹ Similarly to the Chinese School in Cape Town, the goal of this school was to provide a cultural space for overseas Chinese “as an attempt to preserve their culture and quality education for their children.”⁴²² This once again enforces my argument that South Africa has a long established infrastructure to engage in Chinese language learning and cultural activities — long before the first Confucius Institutes were established. Although these schools were originally established for the Chinese community only,⁴²³ their doors were soon opened to everyone,

⁴²¹ (Pretoria Chinese School, 2016)

⁴²² (Pretoria Chinese School, 2016)

⁴²³ (see Yap & Man, 1996)

as we can see here in Mthembi's example. I therefore see problems with the argument that the CIs possess a lot of influence in this country in the first place because there obviously were logistics in place to engage with this language and culture. Mthembi's narrative about her experience at this Chinese School further clarifies that although she was exposed to Chinese culture as such, she only internalized the information to a limited extent — not knowing extensive background on certain cultural activities or food. Nevertheless, this 'phenomena' gave root to a substantial interest in Chinese language and culture within her. Now it might be interesting to wonder why she decided to retake Chinese lessons.

So I don't know where it will take me [referring to retaking Chinese classes] but I know there are a lot of them inside Africa. They call the Chinese the future language to learn. There is a lot of deals between the Chinese government and the South African government where their people, where the government actually pays you to go there and study, learn Mandarin... as well as you know teach English. So I know there is like a whole lot of partnership that is happening between our government and the Chinese government to create jobs and all that. And in turn people learn Mandarin. So that's what they call it now. I don't know where it will take me but for now I will just do it because it is like a half foundation to have it.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Mthembi's motivation is partly connected to seeing a future in business with Chinese. She is very aware of Chinese investing in Africa in general and the Chinese and South African governments creating deals — as often seen on the news, similar to what I heard through the many informal conversations I had (3.2.4). Apart from seeing a career opportunity, she is drawn to this idea because of the experience she had during her early childhood. Nevertheless, she is further aware of the difficulty learning Chinese is posing to her especially when only attending class once per week while engaged in a full time occupation.

Doing class once per week... Yeah it's hard.

Especially after work when you are tired and not able to focus anymore ...

Exactly, yeah... So for me with work I am a bit tired. I mean honestly they have a project that I might need to book us on. I have been fortunate enough. As much as work gets stressful, I do have an opportunity to go to class then and there. But there are times that it's going to be tougher than now... so when I am in an environment where I can learn then it works out way better.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Mthembi was further one of the participants who were able to visit the summer camp organized by the Confucius Institute, which for her offered an opportunity to visit China for the first time. She expressed quite frequently the will to learn Chinese in China because just attending it once per week does not help her progress much, especially if she cannot use it outside class. She further seemed to be aware, similarly to Richard, that learning Chinese is not more important than doing her actual job. But what further emerged to be important to Mthembi, after engaging in long conversations with her, was a general intention to travel and experience the world.

I have done Spain before. So that was very, very nice. I would definitely go back. But I just want to create this culture of travel and stuff like that. So I am hoping next year I can do Europe even if it is for work and stuff like that. So work does offer me that opportunity to be a globetrotter, if I want to.

Is it easy to? I don't know much about that company.

So you just basically apply for secondment. And then if there is availability and if they need people depending on what sector or what service line you are in. You apply and then the managers and partners will kind of approve it. And then the process will start. So you can end up staying abroad for three to six months to whatever. Yeah and they pay. They give you a subsistence allowance and everything. So next year, I am considering applying probably towards the end of the year.

But do you need, like a for example, if you want to go to Germany. Do you need to speak German?

No you don't. As long as you know English and you have got the qualifications for what they specifically need it's just the willingness to go and your expertise is the most important thing. Then the process starts and I have a met a friend from Germany, who came here for secondment. She came here last year for three months to Cape Town. Now she is going to be permanently moving to South Africa. So that is very cool. So you see you have options. I mean they love you that much and if you prove to be like an asset. This is what happens.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

In Mthembi's case a combination of past experience during her childhood and the experience of dialogic exposure to people who took advantage of secondment within her company formed a genuine interest to explore the world — and China in particular. However, although expressing interest in traveling to China and furthering her language abilities, I could not shake the impression

that this is just one of many possibilities for the future she is taking into account.

I am now taking a step away from the participants affiliated with the CI and towards those I met in the Chinese class at the Chinese School.

When I met Marlize for the first time I could not help but feel that I was in good hands. Marlize was a relatively small middle-aged woman with meticulously blow-dried hair that formed slight curls on her shoulders. While being a little suspicious about me in the beginning — as she told me after a couple of encounters — because she did not know how to read me, she opened up quickly and often offered me lifts after Chinese class ended out of worry it was too dangerous for me to be walking alone or just waiting for my Uber. Marlize was working as a secretary for a friend and so it came that she invited me over to her office to have the interview with me. This setting for the interview was not only chosen in terms of convenience for her, but also because she obviously felt safer in her own neighborhood. I took an Uber to get there; 45 minutes and several messages from her expressing her concern about me coming alone later, I arrived at the office. Placing homemade cookies and a steaming cup of coffee on the table in front of me, Marlize spilled her experience in a very motherly manner for 1.5 hours straight. In fact everything about her experience with learning Chinese was connected to her being a mother and wife. Funnily enough she started questioning me once the interview started.

How long have you lived in Hong Kong?

In September it's going to be two years. Minus the six months I am spending here in Cape Town.

Oh gosh! I always admire young people who are so adventurous, even my son who lives in Taiwan... I would never have seen it that he would end up living in an Eastern country.

How did he end up living there?

He fell around a lot, he studied... Psychology and then he decided he wanted to do research so he did his honors. And then right towards the end of the honors he came home one day and said he doesn't think he wants to do this. So my husband helped him pack his bags in his car and said 'ok well either you pay back all the money we spent on you [or you finish your degree]... we are not paying for your cover', actually he was at Stellenbosch. And you need to

have a job because you are not moving back home. So he got back in his car and he was only eight weeks away from completing. Yeah it was a little bit hard... I felt so sorry for him, anyway he finished it. And when he had done that he decided that's not what he wanted to do. He then went and did an IT course. Not sure what he did in there, I think it was programming because I know he did Java. And when he finished that he didn't want to do that either. What luck that my youngest son, who decided already that he wanted to be an attorney, or he wanted to be a patent attorney [...] and he has done that. [...] He is not a patent attorney but he is done. But [Ben]⁴²⁴ kept falling from one thing to the other, to the other. Eventually he said: "Actually, you know what? I am going to go and teach English in the Eastern half [of the world]." And I went: "What? Are you out of your mind?" I mean come on. And anyway he did. Off he went to Taiwan and ended up meeting [Mary] and... well you know the rest of that story [laughing].

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize was the mother of three children and married to a husband who had some interest in Chinese medicine, as she told me later. One of her sons had decided to go and teach English in Taiwan. One thing led to another and he ended up married to a Taiwanese woman and starting a family in Taiwan.

[Mary] is Taiwanese I suppose?

Yeah. She had actually just come to the same... he started the school first and she joined the school I think about a few weeks later, she had been studying in Australia for at least five years. So she speaks English properly. Because they were both new they obviously connected so... now they are married, have a child and seems my son is going to stay there. Because then you know, I know for him it's the culture, it's everything, it's the food... he still struggles with all of that. So when they came to visit in 2014 he actually came here to do an extra English course. And because they just had the baby. I said: "You are being silly! If you come here, then you don't have to pay for accommodation" because they could stay with us, "and there is somebody to look after [Mary] and the baby and you can just concentrate on your stuff." So they came here for three months and I taught her a lot of the Western things. And I really thought she was enjoying it, but when she went home, it wasn't that, she was actually happy to go back [laughing].

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize is motherly and very protective in nature, and she quickly tried to establish a bond with her daughter-in-law, which seemed to be very difficult for her. Moreover, Marlize was a very conservative person. She was used to women bringing up the children while the man went to work. She was used to

⁴²⁴ A pseudonym has been used in order to keep my participants confidentiality.

being in charge and in control when it came to her children. Some of these sentiments lingered in the stories she told me. Nevertheless, I very quickly realized that she would do anything for her family.

So he worked from 12 in the afternoon until 9 at night or 9:30. And he said that after... in 2014 when they were here they were going to start their own school, because there is a huge gap in the market for young children. He was doing tutoring with, I think it was high school students, but that was private work. [Um] for the very young children, there was no market... no one was doing anything with them so they actually started, I think the age group is from about three up to [um] high school. He didn't want to do those young ones. Because I mean, he is a man, he didn't want to do that, but I mean he is so brilliant with them, and I promise you they speak English like you cannot believe it. Anyway so that's how I got to decide I am actually going to [learn Chinese]. And I must admit I was a little bit odd with my son because he had started learning Chinese and then when the baby came, you know there is no help, between working and cleaning and looking after her and looking after the baby, he is very hands on, he doesn't really have a choice but I don't think that is a Chinese cultural thing, that the husbands have to be in the... do all sorts of things, 'cuz it's definitely not a South African thing. South Africa, we are... the lines are differently drawn. You are the mother and I am the father and I work and I earn the money... Your job is here... but for the younger generation it's not that bad. The younger generation is much... I think cleverer than we are. They get the husband involved. But in my time, my husband only went to work, not anything he had to look after... I looked after the children... I worked and looked after the children ha ha [slightly ironic sound]. Its not that simple I am just saying because men can't do two things, but he then decided to give it a break [back to her son and learning Chinese] but I don't think he ever got back. I noticed that he does speak a little but when he came back here in December he was horrified and shocked because I was better than he was [laughing].

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize's 'phenomena' can be found in this context. Learning Chinese rendered her more able to communicate with the family of her daughter-in-law and especially with her grandchild, which was her ultimate motivation in starting to learn the language.

And that is how you came into contact with all this?

Okay, so now this is how it is. And then he met [Mary] and I went over to visit him [in Taiwan] and he introduced [Mary] and I didn't think about speaking Chinese. I mean it was way beyond my... even understanding. And I was so frustrated. I couldn't read anything, I couldn't understand anything, I couldn't ask anybody anything and I actually felt intimidated. I thought I don't know how he copes, because he only coped because she would take him to the

market, introduce him to somebody there and say to him: “These are the places you need to buy food, this is what you need to say.” So he could do that, but he said to me: “Mum I can’t even go shopping because there are lovely shops but I don’t know what’s in the package or what’s in the tins, because its all in Chinese.” So she did a lot of that with him. That first visit I realized, mhm [negating] mhm [negating] I don’t know where I am, I can’t tell anybody who I am or where I want to go. The penny didn’t drop yet. Then they — I went there again when they got married. I cannot speak to her mum and she speaks to me the whole time and I just say: “Yes” and I speak to her and she says: “Yes” and I don’t know what she is saying. I still didn’t buy it [that I had to start learning Chinese]. And then they had a baby and when I went and visited when the baby was six weeks old I thought hell you know this is going to be difficult because she is going to be speaking to [Michael] in Chinese. And although she tells me that: “Don’t worry, [Michael] is going to be speaking English, too.” I thought but he is going to be asking me things, when she is not around, and I might not know what he needs. And I went to visit for his first birthday last year and then I just... then I decided. After they left here, [Michael] came here at four months old, he left at seven. And I thought I do have to learn to speak Chinese for... well not just for [Michael], it was for me, too. Because I don’t... when I say that I don’t literally mean it, but I don’t like being stupid [laughing] I don’t want to be that: ‘eh eh?’

But please let me tell you, it is very difficult for me Monique, because I can’t concentrate as well as I used to and I really don’t remember things as well as I used to. And I am not going to blame anything for it, but I do feel that it’s because there is a week between my going and the rest of the week is so full of everything else. And I don’t ever have an opportunity to speak it.

But I am also, if I have decided to do something, I am very committed. And I am like a dog with a bone you know, I am not letting it go. I am a bit crazy. But I do have to share with you that I thought that I would make it in two years. And I am not going to speak Chinese properly in two years I am actually going to give myself five years. But that’s because I don’t have anyone to speak it with, but I am going to consider going to Taiwan maybe for a period, if I can get enough time off work.

(Marlize ‘interview’ June 1, 2016)

This experience with her family and her strong will to be able to communicate certainly motivated her to engage with the Chinese language, even if it proves to be very difficult for her. It further opened her up towards dialogically engaging with the culture and Chinese-speaking people, which became visible through a second experience she had. As Marlize was working part-time only, the rest of the day she started to tutor a little Chinese girl she came across by accident. Once again her maternal personality and her previous experience

motivated her to help this little girl, which additionally gives her some, although very little, exposure to Chinese. But this commitment further restrains her time-wise and therefore, apart from Saturdays, when she joins the Chinese class at the Chinese School, she does not have much time to practice.

[Abbey]⁴²⁵, [...] she has no home... her mother works and lives within the beauty centre. She works for a lady called Kim. It's a very big house and all the rooms are divided into areas for whatever they need to do. But they sleep in those rooms at night. So there is no bedroom and no space or area for [Abbey] to actually sit down and do homework and today at 15:00 or 14:30. We are having a meeting with [Abbey's] teacher at school. Because [Abbey] doesn't do any studying. I was getting a little bit upset with her because we work so hard during the week and then on the weekend I give her worksheets to do, which covers the work we have done during the week. She never does them. And when it came to the other subjects in her exam, she failed them hopelessly. She has got like 24% for Science but I wasn't teaching her Science I was only doing Math and English. And I am helping with the Maths and English, well what she got so far for these, the others, the comprehension and the teacher book. I can't do anything for that. So the teacher is going to try and explain to her mum the importance of her actually going through the work that has been covered with her.

[Abbey] and I only speak English. Every now and then I would ask her: 'How would I say this?' and she would tell me. Two weeks ago she was very keen to teach me 'if you're happy and you know it clap your hands' so because she does everything I ask her, I have now learnt to sing 'if you're happy and you know it clap your hands' in Chinese. But other than that there isn't any opportunity, because we do both Maths and English and you think the two and a half hours is a long time. It's not a long time when you are busy all the time. Well, we get home from school at about 15:00 if she has a short day. At about 15:30 she has changed and she has had some lunch, and we can generally start. But most of the time, say... on average we start 16:00 so she has half an hour break just to do nothing, she can watch TV or she can do whatever, because she is kind of strained from school and I feel like I am jamming her the whole time. And then at 18:00 off she goes. So I am not getting that from her. So I think it would be easier if I was actually able to use it during the week, because by the time I get to school on Saturdays I am so nervous and so scared I could brain freeze [laughing].

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

In Marlize's case it is visible once again that she was exposed to Chinese culture because of one of her family members. She would never have decided to learn Chinese if she had not had this specific interaction with her daughter-

⁴²⁵ A pseudonym has been used in order to maintain the participant's anonymity.

in-law and her grandson. Additionally, I would argue that her very extensive maternal instinct caused her to finalize this decision.

The next participant, Daniela, was the complete opposite. Daniela originally came from central Europe and I met her during the Chinese classes at the Chinese School. She was a typical globetrotter and one of the most cordial people I have ever met. One of her other core interests lays within advocating Human Rights. She moved to Cape Town because of this interest. At the time I met her, she had just found a volunteer position within a local NGO. She didn't have a family yet but was seeing someone in Cape Town with similar interests. For our interview she invited me to join her for breakfast at her home, which was as unconventional as she was. Her flatmate was extremely charitable when it came to animals, so I was greeted by several breeders full of all sorts of chicks, some rabbits in the small backyard as well as a Rooster crowing in the back. After settling down at the kitchen table she opened up about her journey into learning Chinese, which was yet again seemingly unintentional. She surprised me right at the start with an extensive knowledge about Chinese speaking countries in general.

How long did you stay there?

[Um] 16 months. I've stayed for six months working in a kindergarten — that was almost volunteering if you think about the money.

But were you there to teach English? And where was it?

Yeah. The first six months it was in Xiangtan, which is in Hunan province, the city of Mao. Where Mao Ze Tung was born. It was nothing though. It was just big, great Chinese city. Then I moved to Pushan, which is near Guangzhou. I liked it. It is a place of martial arts. And it's quite near to Guangzhou. I would take the train for half an hour. [...] There I was teaching English in a primary school. That was very nice, I loved it.

How did you get the idea to go to China?

I wanted to travel for a long time. My good friend who became my boyfriend at the time was traveling already; he was in South America, the US and all over. I don't know but seeing him traveling I was like why don't I do it, why am I in a stupid office. I want to travel!! And then I just decided to go. It was time to go. Oh it always was a money issue I thought I need money for plane I need money to support myself there, but eventually I was like, ok it's not going to happen for me to have money so [laughing]. So I

borrowed the money for a one-way ticket to Beijing. It is because... [Victor]⁴²⁶ — was the guy and he also went to China but he went to Sichuan and I went to Hunan so we basically didn't see each other for like 16 months [laughing]. And it was yeah... I pretty much went to China because it was very, very different. I didn't want to go to [some other place in] Europe...

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

It became obvious quickly that her will to travel and to get out of the situation she found herself in at that time was the catalyst behind her initial contact with China. Meeting someone who was already acquainted with traveling ultimately led to making that decision. China then just seemed to be exotic enough to be her first experience as a globetrotter.

Did you have any contact with China before, was there something that made you go to China instead of Australia for traveling or something like that.

It was nothing like that. I was not attracted to China, on the contrary. At the time I was working in a foundation that dealt with minority rights so I was very much aware about you know minorities and human rights and all that kind of stuff and China is bad. The situation is bad. I don't like China but it's still different and I've read all of these books about Mao and stuff. This was not the country... I was... I was in two minds... on one hand admiring the long culture but then on the other hand despising the recent history. But I never wanted to go to Japan for example which is also very different from Europe. But it's like what you said about Hong Kong, it's all about work. I didn't want to have that pressure with money. I had a ticket to fly to Beijing and once I had the ticket I started to look on couchsurfing you know this girl who posted and was looking for an intern in Xiangtan and whatever. I did not trust anything at that time I didn't trust that I can teach English... I didn't trust my English. It was very hard for the first week because my relationship just started at the time and then we separated. And we didn't talk much. [Victor] wasn't the kind of boyfriend [who cares much], too cool to keep in touch. It was more like you have your stuff I have my stuff. He has been traveling for a very long time he was very used to that. So I arrived in Xiangtan. I knew nothing, no Chinese. I learnt 'ni hao' and 'ni hao ma'. I wasn't planning to stay longer than six months to get me started with this traveling thing. I was vegetarian I couldn't even say that I am not eating meat and there was meat everywhere and it was just bad and it was February, I landed in Beijing and February in Beijing is just so ugly and cold.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Similar to Richard, she did not expect to stay for such a long period of time in China and therefore only started to study Chinese relatively late — and that

⁴²⁶ A pseudonym has been used in order to maintain the participant's anonymity.

only out of necessity. Moreover, the initial period of time in China seemed to be very difficult for her not only because of a language barrier but further because the person she expected to travel with did not really care. This then only changed by her meeting the right people.

Yeah it was so bad [laughing]. The one that saved me was an 11-year-old Chinese couchsurfer. Because I arrived a little bit before the kindergarten opened, they hosted me in this small room with no windows in the kindergarten. It was freezing cold there was no one there. The teachers weren't there yet. There was a lady who was cooking for me. Just for me and just stuff with meat. And I told her I can't eat this I am just going to have the rice and the stupid jingcai [laughing]. And it was cold and I didn't have a phone. It was bad, bad, bad. And then I got in touch with the only couchsurfer in Xiangtan. It was after New Year and two weeks after it was lantern festival. She took me to her family and it was so nice. This was like four days after. So four days was like an ordeal and a few days after it I was fine... it was nice it was like okay there are humans here also. Its fine you will survive. Six months and I was not planning on learning Chinese to be honest. My mind was like I just go after six months and it would not be very practical. I don't do things just for the sake of doing them. But after the six months, I loved it. I really liked China and wanted to stay longer. And also I didn't have a plan for what to do next. And I was like, okay I stay a little bit longer and already somehow there were people recruiting me. I don't know how they got my email but that's very China. So I got these e-mails on we have this offer do you want to teach dadada. So when I knew I am gonna stay for another ten months I decided to make an objective to learn Chinese for the ten months because with the second contract I was paid. The first was so shit there was almost no payment. So I decided I am going to put money aside and learn Chinese.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

It became obvious rather quickly that Daniela started being interested in Chinese language and culture but what was even more important to her was traveling and helping people. Briefly after China she started to explore Taiwan and India.

I went to China and then from China I went back [home] for three months. It seemed a little at that time because I haven't seen or talked to my family for 1,5 years. My mum doesn't do Skype and stuff like that. And I wanted to spend time with my boyfriend. And it's the time it took me to find a 'volunteership' in India. Right after China in fact I went one month to Taiwan. I stayed in Buddhist temple. I love it. It really changed my life. It's not China you know it's nothing like that... its one month in a Buddhist temple. It was great... that temple. So I was in a Buddhist temple and then I went [home] for four months then I went India for six months and then I went [back home] to apply for my visa for here [South Africa]. And then I went to Taiwan to the

temple again for one month and then from Taiwan I flew here.

What did you do in India? How did you end up in all those places? Was it the same like China, just the will to travel?

I was volunteering. I think in India I also found something on couchsurfing. A couchsurfer, a girl from the US who was working with an NGO in India. She has been working there for two years at that time and we talked and she was the only one with western mindset, with a mindset ok we are an NGO we get money from somewhere like donations and that stuff and we need to be accountable for that money. Those people didn't really have that mindset, it was a small NGO they had different objectives. They had a shelter for women who were kicked out of the house, which is plenty in India especially in North India. Then they had a hospital and there was no health facility. They brought in a doctor from Germany actually. Then they had a small school a remote village which is where I went to teach English. Not really English because they were speaking English just having classes with them... history, a little bit of computer science, I just taught them how to right click and how to create a folder and stuff like that. I did few training with the teachers because they were openly admitting that they beat the kids. I was like there are other ways and it's just different it was more like a participatory thing. So I was there for 3 months and I felt like this is not getting me anywhere. It was cold also. I was in Uttar Pradesh which is in the [North].

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Being very self-reflexive Daniela then stated herself that her travels are always somehow connected to her relationships.

My travels are always related to my relationships. When I was still in that school, it was December so me and my boyfriend — the same I was with in China but we were separated at that time — we went to spend New Year in Kolkata and then we were back to Uttar Pradesh and he was like you know... I just want to go to... he is a monk now.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Listening to her narrative and interacting with her, I soon was convinced that Daniela is someone who just 'goes with the flow'. She is very critical with her surroundings but she appreciates the small things once she starts to figure them out. Chinese for her was a fun side effect of her travel experience. Although she kept learning Chinese in Cape Town, because a friend suggested it to her, she is not making it a priority. She loves to interact with Chinese people if she has the chance but she was very busy with her NGO work. This became further obvious because while I was able to spend some time with her, it did not happen frequently within the classroom since she quickly decided it was too easy for her.

Different from Daniela, Karen joined the Chinese classes at the Chinese School every Saturday. Karen already graduated from UCT and was now working in her first job in down town Cape Town. Meeting her for an interview turned out to be slightly tricky. The first attempt around, we were set to meet in a café not far from Mowbray. Unfortunately this café was closed without notice when I arrived. Karen was stuck in Cape Town's notorious rush hour traffic and still about 30 minutes away and it was already dark outside. This being ultimately related to being safe, because it was already dark outside and we did not want to walk or wait alone for each other, we briefly texted to figure out another solution but could not find one that was comfortable enough for us, so I had my Uber driver turn around and went home after we postponed the interview to a couple of days later. During our second attempt I decided to go work at the same café before our interview and just waited there for her.

Karen was tall and a little timid but soon I realized that she was one of those people who always had a smile on her face. Being extremely positive and friendly about everything, it was very easy to approach and talk to her. Karen was born in Botswana and spent some time in the US for an undergraduate degree before moving to Cape Town for her graduate degree. Karen was extremely knowledgeable and educated. Interestingly when she found out that I was originally from Germany she started chatting in German with me — which already hinted towards an extensive interest in languages in general. Her story about why she started learning Chinese is relatively straightforward, she started Chinese classes at the UCT and she even joined the summer camp organized by the CI.

I basically just want to know why you study Chinese. What your motivation is, basically the story behind this.

Okay... I always wanted to study languages. So yeah Chinese or Mandarin, whatever you want to call it, was on the list. And I managed to do so because in my final year of university we [um] I finally had a time slot available when Mandarin class was. And because Mandarin was, it has mandatory lectures Monday to Fridays and set tutorials separately. So... yeah so that's the difficulty. If you are in a different faculty for example [um] it's difficult to have an available time slot across the week, like Monday to Friday so usually you have other classes or other lectures that overlap on some of the days, but not all of the days. So yeah, so final year I finally had that 11 am slot Monday to

Friday where it was completely empty. So I was like:
“Okay its time for Mandarin now”.

What [major] did you study?

Economics [laughing].

Economics. So it was just an interest you had, like
studying German for example?

Yeah. So I have really done a lot of languages [um] I'd just
never... in my university timetable I actually had a slot
open to be able to take a full-time like language course
rather than doing it part time.

Did you think about studying languages before?

Language? In general? Oh languages! So Mandarin is my...
sixth foreign language.

Oh man that's a lot.

So yeah I thought about it before.

So What else do you speak, German...?

Only German [laughing]. Okay so [um] I did Spanish,
Portuguese, German, French, a friend of mine taught me
Russian, but I wouldn't count that 'cuz that was a long time
ago. [Um] and then... I tried self-studying a few languages
but that takes a lot of work.

This is very interesting! So was it just
one semester you started learning or a full year?

Oh I did it for a full year and that has been inspired by the
wonderful dreams of: “Oh wow I could actually learn this
language” and then second semester I started to realize how
difficult the language is [both laughing]. So that's when the
yeah... that's when the bubble burst.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

With Karen it is obvious that she has a talent for languages, even though she is very humble about it. From class interactions I could tell that her German is very advanced. It is therefore not a surprise that she started studying Chinese. But she also realized how difficult the language is, which is why she does not take it extremely seriously. At the time I met her it was more a hobby than anything else. Additionally, she pointed out that a lot of students learning Chinese at UCT are doing it because they are interested in Asian languages in general. It is unfortunate that the university does not offer Japanese — as many would be interested in studying it — but only Chinese.

Okay so you liked it so much that you kept
studying Chinese basically, or was it more like: “Well, it's
an opportunity. [...]. So why not??”

[Laughing] So that's the thing 'cuz I always wanted to
study languages anyway [um] it's really hard to separate
those two because it's more like okay the opportunity came
now to study Mandarin — I mean I could be doing Russian
instead right now, or Japanese maybe. But there is no
Japanese at UCT, so that's another reason why a lot of

students, who are in the Mandarin class, are in the Mandarin class because there is no Japanese offered. It's a way for them to learn characters — to learn like the ideas around [um] the culture and readings without learning Japanese itself.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

By mentioning that many students at UCT actually would prefer to study Japanese we can assume that Chinese does not occupy a particular role in the syllabus of foreign languages offered by the UCT. Learning Chinese, for many, seems to be a way to follow the fascination with Asian culture and languages in general. Especially as these languages often differ in the writing systems, which, as Karen addressed, is particular attributed to the idea of learning characters.

Karen also told me about the ROCSA community on the UCT campus, which a friend introduced her to. It is a group for people who like to share their interest in Chinese culture. Having this interaction may have rooted her interest in the language as well.

There is a UCT class society and it's called 'ROCSA', Republic of China Students Association. Not everyone has to... I mean you don't have to join it, a lot of students joined. And it's not just limited to students of Chinese descent... there are Korean students... like different ethnicities. It's mainly about having an interest about Chinese, or Chinese culture but you do find that a lot of students of Chinese descent will join and it becomes kind of like a home away from home. So a lot of them are friends and they do dinners together, they cook food. They do a lot of activities together so it's social you know like so I know some members from ROCSA either people I have met through my classes or through the society.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

In general it seems that Karen had a lot of contact with Chinese communities in the US, and some in her home country, but not so much in Cape Town. All of them she met during classes etc.

Did you get to know like Chinese, Taiwanese or I don't know [...] outside this society [ROCSA] you meet them on the street here?

Probably not in Cape Town. I met a lot in the States.

How did you get to meet them there?

School. They are like in your classes, at your school. The ones in the States... oh its because we have mutual friends

and usually once you met one person in the community you meet the rest of the community as well.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Karen's phenomenological momentum is detectable here. Her motivation to learn Chinese comes mainly from an interest for languages. This interest is very likely connected to her previous experiences outside her home country. She has lived in many different countries and enjoyed a very diverse experience and education. Nevertheless it is visible that although she has contact with Chinese speaking individuals, her intentions are mainly to master another language as a hobby. The institutional setting of where she learns Chinese does not really matter to her, because although she knows about the after hour classes offered by the CI, she decided to join the Chinese School instead because it is more convenient.

The last individual I talked to was Julia. Julia, like Karen, was a student at UCT. Unlike Karen, she was still enrolled in her Bachelors degree and taking credit-bearing Chinese classes at UCT and the Saturday classes at the Chinese School. Julia was petite and from all the participants I spoke to, she had the most diverse upbringing. Her parents had worked in several different countries and Julia, although of European descent, was born in an African country. Due to her diverse upbringing she is able to speak four languages with native ability. What impressed me immediately was the immense importance she attached to knowledge and academic excellence. Talking to her was above all extremely interesting, although she appeared a bit shy and very self-composed. Out of all my participants she was the only one who did not have previous experience in China or a Chinese-speaking country.

Different to the other participants, she immediately stated that Chinese is related to her career perspective.

Oh basically [um] I only started studying Chinese the first year of university, but I always was interested in doing it because I am doing a humanities degree. Because if you do a humanities degree you don't have that many option for when you finish degree is... kind of... very general. So I wanted to find or to have something which will give me an edge when I, you know... finish my degree. That the person will say: 'You are different because you have — let's say — Chinese as an extra thing.' I am a Bachelor student. So I

am in my second year now and I will be graduating next year but now I want to go into [academia] so I didn't know it back then, but it's always good to have Chinese as a back up. So I mean, South Africa is part of BRICS we do have the extra leeway when it comes to do anything with China.

What are you studying?

I am studying Economic history as my major with comparative politics and German.

Is it global economic history or South African?

Yes it is [global economic history] we have different courses so in the first semester we did global and second semester we did [um] well, first semester second year, we recently just did Asia and Brazil and Nigeria. So we did the whole East Asian model. So that's why I think it's also a nice way, so if I do want to specialize in it I do know Chinese. We do study China, and Japan and Korea quite a lot. I was thinking of either going in that direction [of global history] or going into development; global development or economic development. We do politics so we do a lot of development.

And what pushed you into the direction of learning Chinese before you decided to do it? I mean if you say you started in your first year you probably didn't know much yet about East Asian economies.

Well I guess it all depends on where I come from. I grew up in Tanzania my parents are development workers [...]. And my parents, when I was seven months old we moved from [the country I was born in] to Tanzania and stayed there for six years. So I grew up and learnt Swahili and was fluent in Swahili and then we moved [...] to Germany then to Durban that's where I learnt English and that was that. I was about seven or so and then... lots of languages and we went back again to Tanzania for a year and then now Cape Town. So in all that time I have been exposed to different cultures and languages and I guess I developed a little bit of a thing for languages. So Swahili, English, German, Afrikaans and now I really wanted to learn a new one. And I thought I might as well start now than later and [um] yeah. And also I guess I wanted to... I like to explore. I have always been used to moving — we have always been a family who moves — and I guess I have that in my blood. I always need to go somewhere. And my parents are willing to send me off somewhere else well so... [laughing] So I was thinking... I might as well go to a country I have never been to.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Julia's experience and upbringing clearly ignited her love for different cultures and fostered an openness that allowed her to pursue an adventurous life in terms of getting to know new cultures, languages and countries. Her will to learn Chinese is a natural side effect of her being willing to travel to a continent she has not been to yet. But it's further combined with pressure to

make a career or find a decent job in the future, which is in turn heightened by dialogically created past experiences she had with other people who told her it would be a good idea to learn this language.

And how do you like Chinese?

I knew it wasn't simple, when I went into it. But actually I liked the melodic-ness of the language.

Did you hear it before? Were you exposed before you started your lessons?

Kind of, kind of not... It was more like, let me just do it because I think it's a good idea. And I did do a lot of, how can I say, career advice and all that, and one of the things was 'you need to have an edge' because they always kept telling me you are pretty average when it comes to the job market. It's just a sad reality...

Are the professors telling you that?

Yes [laughing] so I had a friend who is in my parents bible study, he is a professor of economics and he just told me Chinese is maybe a good idea, but try and get that edge and then he told me that he had several people to come over which he has conferences with. And he is also the Dean of economics and he said they have problems communicating with the Chinese. So they — I went like oh wait that could be my edge, I don't have to be an economics major but I can maybe, you know, translate or I could try and find a way to mediate us and them. So it's still a long way from that but we see how it goes [laughing].

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Finally while talking to Julia it became clear that her motivation to learn Chinese is not directly connected to the institution she studies it at which reinforces my previous argument.

And... so you have Chinese friends here?

[Um]... yes, yes. [Um] I mean we... since about three years ago we have been in contact with our Chinese doctor. Because my mum and dad are very alternative and they made us think in ways they did and all that. So it is quite interesting going to that. And I also realized oh okay it's a Chinese doctor so I connected the dots. Well I guess I always had a little bit of a Chinese or Asian leaning but now that I actually decided why don't I actually take Chinese.

Do you have any other Chinese friends here or any other exposure to Chinese culture [...]?

I am part of the 'ROCSA', the Republic of China Society and [um] yeah. So sometimes if I do have time I try and go and socialize with them. Obviously that includes Koreans and Taiwanese and other people as well. But it's quite nice!

How does it work?

Oh the society? Well the society just posts different events like movie evenings or skate events or hiking and we just join. It's quite nice. It's just a way to socialize. You don't necessarily have to speak Chinese but at least we get to interact with each other.

And were they mainly born here?

[Um] I know that in my high school we had mostly Koreans coming and they were here to do some of their educational... they were exchange students. But then they would mostly go back. I am not sure about Chinese. I know we only had one Chinese student and he stayed.

And this society is that only for the university or is it for Cape Town in general?

[Um] its mostly for UCT 'cuz you have to sign up at the UCT but it's through your student account which you sign up with. But I am pretty sure you can bring friends.

So is it an official [society]?

It's an official society. [...] So yeah there are societies and different nationalities as well but ROCSA encompasses whole Asia.

Do you know how long that society exists already?

I think several years. It's not the first time I heard about it — I mean I heard other names and I only joined second year but I know last year my Chinese classmates and all my Chinese friends would call it ROCSA. I mean mostly in Chinese class we have a lot of Taiwanese students who want to learn how to write.

Even at the UCT?

At UCT, yeah. I mean we did have several Taiwanese. They are able to speak a lot of Chinese but not necessarily read and write.

Because they were born here?

Yeah but also some of them could also read the traditional but not the simplified and they teach the simplified here.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Julia clarifies here that her personal 'phenomena' have been very pronounced in her decision to learn Chinese. Not only did her parents 'condition' her to be open-minded, but she also had a lot of further exposure to Chinese culture through engaging with Chinese medicine and an official society that fosters socialization between cultural spheres. A different layer opening up here is that there is a relatively large Taiwanese community embedded within Cape Town/South African society — once again showing the existing infrastructure for learning Chinese. That Taiwanese people join the Chinese classes at the Chinese department at UCT adds an additional factor towards judging the influence of the CI in Cape Town.

Overall it is noticeable that every participant within this study brings an individual experience with him or her that led towards the decision to learn Chinese. While some have a general interest to explore our globalized world and especially the Asian continent, others have a strong affiliation to learning languages in general. What all of them have in common is the fact that it did not really matter which organization they chose to learn Chinese. It was more a matter of suggestions from friends or acquaintances and convenience, which influenced the choice they made in the end. Nevertheless it becomes obvious that Chinese is generally perceived as a skill that nowadays is undoubtedly useful and that some consider it a necessity.

However, although China's growing presence in South Africa is becoming more and more tangible, the Chinese learning community is still relatively small. Besides having largely negative perceptions about China, many people in Cape Town are not interested in engaging with the Chinese community, as we will see in the following chapter.

This shows that explaining the activities and institutional features of the CIs on a strictly political or international relations related lens omits the individual agency within the process of learning this language. People have the ability to choose what they learn and how they learn it, what information they consider useful and what they considered unnecessary.

Within this section it already emerges that the individuals interviewed are naturally self-reflexive with past and present experiences. Knowledge they acquired by means of experience is translated into a specific meaning. Where they acquire further knowledge, is subject to their own preferences. Institutions do not seem to present a major concern. What the CI is transmitting in terms of soft power and hence in terms of improving the image of China is therefore not detectable or definable as a major influence.

The following second section of this chapter focuses on this image of China — what is known and how it is perceived. This section will further include images

and perceptions of Taiwan, since it occupies a special place for some of the participants and some of the previous gained experiences are directly connected to it

5.2. What is the existing image of China/Taiwan?

“What, then, does phenomenology mean for sociological ethnography? It means the study, through various participant observation-like methods, of the structures of the life-world, meaning the forms, structures or features that people take as objectively existing in the world as they shape their conduct upon the presumption of their prior, independent existence.”⁴²⁷

As I have discussed earlier, Confucius Institutes in academia and media are often presented as a one-way street of information transmission. This seems to be heightened by the idea that “Confucius Institutes address, usually but not exclusively, a mainstream public audience that normally doesn’t have any special knowledge about China.”⁴²⁸ There is a difference drawn here between the mainstream public audience, and an audience that has already established knowledge about China. While we cannot be exactly sure what ‘mainstream audience’ means in a globalized context — since the author did not specify this in his paper — I would like to add that all individuals — formal as well as informal participants — I encountered during this research already had pre-existing knowledge about China, and therefore built the majority of the audience I encountered. Doing ethnography on this audience supported by phenomenological assumptions as well as dialogic conversations has guided me towards an outcome within this study that has not been addressed much within existing literature. Especially when it comes to perceptions about China and Taiwan that the participants established on the basis of their previous experiences, it becomes pronounced how experiences create meaning. And although this is a partial insight, I consider myself able to present a valid discernment because this study presents a point of intersection of many different backgrounds of Chinese learners in different institutions and levels.

⁴²⁷ (Katz, 2003, p. 283)

⁴²⁸ (Hartig, 2010, p. 7)

James Paradise argued the CIs are a “[...] type of impression management, an effort by China to craft a positive image of itself in a world fraught with danger.”⁴²⁹ While I do not refute this opinion, it is important to understand that the information the CIs provide is not the only information these individuals are presented with or inclined to make use of. The knowledge they have accumulated about China/Taiwan is connected to various media outlets — especially the Internet — and dialogic interactions with other people, their own experiences as well as other schools like the Chinese School. Although the CIs provide some information, it is not the only source of information. To add yet another layer to the position of the CI, we need to keep in mind that social interactions also happen within the classes. That means that not only the teachers convey information, but also the classmates who have had previous experiences in China or Taiwan or bring extensive knowledge about this topic to the class. I am arguing along these lines because I believe that CIs are not able to influence individuals into perceiving China in a specific way — they merely present a means to engage, in a social setting, with yet another language, which is a necessity in our globalized world. Additionally, and here I agree with Zaharna, they present an opportunity to facilitate “[...] cultivation of shared interests.”⁴³⁰ Zaharna also addresses the opportunity Hanban provides to create external networks, such as the CI affiliation between local (Chinese) and international universities. This is indeed true — however it seems that individual local CIs do not work together or form networks. One of the teachers of the CI in Cape Town assured me that they do not cultivate ties with other institutes in South Africa.

There is a Confucius Institute in Stellenbosch as well. Do you work together? Do you have exchange or something like that?

Yes they — we are Confucius Institutes but we are separate, because that institute is Xiamen Daxue and Stellenbosch University.

So among the institute you don't have a network or something like that. It's just you and the partner university in China.

Yes.

(Sunny 'interview' June 16, 2016)

⁴²⁹ (Paradise, 2009, p. 662)

⁴³⁰ (Zaharna, 2014, p. 18)

Being aware of this somehow diminishes the perception of an extensive, all-encompassing network, and proves that the CIs in South Africa, as one example, do not possess a strong and organized influence within the society.

It is therefore additionally important that we portray the polyphonic — or multi-voiced — agency that people bring into those institutes. Individuals perceive China based on their experiences — not because an institution presents it in a certain light. I further argue that these individuals are self-reflexive enough to process the information they get without immediately perceiving China as an inevitably great country. Information transmission in this case is not a one-way street as soft power is often portrayed.

This section will provide insights into what the unstructured Chinese learners I encountered already knew about China/Taiwan and what their perceptions and thoughts are, and especially how they negotiate meanings created on this basis for them.

Confucius Institutes are overwhelmingly connected to the soft power discourse, which argues that they are able to wield influence on their participants. What is often forgotten, however, is the ability of individuals to think reflexively and be aware of the intentions of CIs. Luca is a good example for this. When I talked to him he seemed to be extremely aware of the entire soft power debate and the connection of CIs within this sphere.

It's interesting the way China tries to broadcast its language or to make it so that foreigners increasingly learn about Chinese. I am interested also in this sort of soft power that China is trying to build. Okay on the political level I think I am, I used to say, in conversations with my cousin, it would be interesting in this world, if China would play its role as a big role player in international politics and international diplomacy. Because so far, especially with Africa, here we see that China builds roads, bridges, stadiums everything. But so far we don't hear so much about the voice of China, in terms of for instance talking about the situation in Palestine. And there is a deadlock in Palestine because Israel is this strong local power completely, 100 % backed by the US. And in front of the US in this world today you have Russia that tries to do something. Europe is not really; I mean in Europe we don't have one voice in terms of international politics... So it's not that I like... **I am not really a fan of China. It's stupid to be an unconditional fan of China but I think it's very important for the**

world to have different major poles, or different... not just one big...[emphasis added by researcher]. And I see in my work, I see that also the United States are building soft power through Google, through lots of initiatives, IBM researchers [create] lots of initiatives. They understood that ok in the 21st century it's not so much about having the power to colonize a new country or to wage a war somewhere' that is something from the past. And they understood that the real power is the power over the minds. If you can have people think the same way you think, or use the tools you use or be annoyingly addicted to Google and Facebook. Its soft power but it's a very strong power. And China maybe understands it a little bit. And for China it would be much more convenient to have people outside of China speaking a little bit of Chinese. So I am interested in that, in seeing how China tries to play the world.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Mthembi also showed awareness of the debate on China's influence growing bigger and bigger on the African continent, which raised some interest in her since she interacted with this cultural sphere during her childhood.

I am actually interested in African development as a whole and obviously Chinese influencing all like... China's relationship with Africa and all that I know there are a lot of ties they have established through governments and corporations.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Julia as well was extensively educated on China-Africa relations and very aware of how other people perceive her idea of studying Chinese. She further pointed out that South Africa has a lot of internal problems, especially with 'Rhodes-Must-Fall', which is why China does not seem to be the main concern for many people, or if it plays a role it is not perceived very well:

But why would [other people] want [...] to start learning Chinese?

Oh! Because they have seen that trade and all of that is increasing between South Africa and China. So... I mean if you look at the future, we obviously predict that... hoping that China will stay stable. That would be a great opportunity. But it's always good to have your sight opened. And I know that my previous primary school, they just started teaching Chinese now. So they just expanded to grade 2, but they already teaching grade 5 to grade 7.

I mean you obviously studying economic relations between Asia and South Africa but do you think... for example [your family], are they following the whole process of China and South Africa or do people in general?

Not very much, no. [When] I have told them I am learning Chinese, they would be like: "Oh... why are you doing that??? Why are you going through all of that trouble of learning Chinese?" And then I have to explain to them, so I

guess it's not a commonly known but a lot of people are also looking down on the fact that I am learning Chinese, because here it is seen that China is colonizing; its 'neo-colonialism', because they are expanding in South Africa greatly. I mean the deals they are selling at the moment are insane. So yes you are looked down upon, if you... especially if you tell other university students, especially in economics or politics, that you learn Chinese. Cuz they are like: "Oh why, are you supporting neo-colonialism?"

So the 'general' society here in South Africa or Cape Town...?

They are not too positive about it, so I mean I am taking from the interactions I had I know that there are some people who are like, yes it's good to have trade and I think its good... but yeah, the conversation I had with some of the fellow students they aren't too happy about it.

Would you say most of the people aren't very happy about it?

Well it depends; I mean UCT is going through... I mean we have 'Rhodes-Must-Fall' and we have this whole change of perception. I mean I am a politics student and most of my fellow politics students are either for 'Rhodes-Must-Fall' or somehow involved in it. In this whole thinking ideology of we must unite as Africa, especially South Africa and get out of our cast and work through it. And China's interference isn't really going together with our struggle. So we are looking quite a lot especially in economic history and politics about colonialism. So obviously this new deal of BRICS and especially China is seen as yeah... the new invader so to say.

But I must make my way somehow like I said I will graduate with a very average degree. Not one, which will say you graduated with a doctor, so now you are doctor. Now you are an engineer.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Although the UCT is not the immediate focus of this research, it is, however, important in this context to understand Julia's (and Karen's) phenomenological momentum by listening to her experiences in regards to the interactions she has as a student. Julia additionally gave me many insights on language learning in general when it comes to the structure of the UCT. Students, especially in law or economics, need to take at least one year of language education next to their major. The internationalization ambitions of the UCT, I mentioned earlier, are mirrored very well in this undertaking and it further reduces the conspiracies revolving around Chinese, because it is just one possibility among many other languages.

Your major is economic history... Do you have a minor as well?

Yes: Economic history, politics and German. I have a triple major.

German okay.

So usually you have two majors but I decided to start another one. So all the subjects I am going through are my majors.

But you already speak German so I guess that works.

Yeah I skipped to second year. So I am able to carry it right through.

Are a lot of people learning German here?

The more you specialize not so... in first year well at our university if you do law you have to do a language. So in first year there is a lot of students, about 50 or so, and I mean that's because of the language and so that usually happens because you got law students coming. They have to do at least one year of a language or one semester of the language so they do that. In second year we only had 19 in our class and the third year we specialized even more. So you only really do literature in third year.

That's difficult [...]

I enjoy it so much more than grammar cuz I am used to German obviously but I only ever spoke it all my life. I went to German school to learn how to read and write but I never really wrote an essay in German. So writing essays is a demanding task especially if you know what you want to say but you don't know how to grammatically put it down correctly. And academic language is fine-tuning your language. I think that's why I also find Chinese is quite difficult as a language to learn, because the more languages you acquire — well I find it's one of the downfalls is that I stutter, because my brain is scrambling up all these words. If a person says hello I don't know if I should say ho or hallo or should I say it in another different language. So I guess learning Chinese, the nice thing is, it's melodic so I am able to... I must take a deep breath and hopefully get all words together compared to, I don't know, different types of languages.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

In fact, as we saw earlier in Karen's statement above, students are waiting for languages like Japanese and Korean to be available to study, Chinese seems to be just the only available alternative for now that is close enough, to engage with an East Asian language. In Julia's case it becomes clear that her existing image of China is very diverse. She is very aware about the neo-colonialism debate within the context of China engaging in Africa but she further sees it as useful to learn Chinese for the future. Julia further reinforced the understanding of how the Chinese speaking community is 'othered' as discussed above (section 4.2.). It further points out the strong stereotypical connotations people in South Africa associate with Chinese. Nevertheless she further puts recent socio-demography and socio-historical implications of the country into context

by pointing out that foreigners of any kind are perceived rather negatively, because they mean competition in a city that has not enough employment for everyone in general.

Mh, lately I have been realizing that there are a lot of Chinese coming to South Africa. I mean the population is increasing as well. And recently I tried how many Chinese stores there were here. Because I wanted to, you know, make Chinese food and all that. And there are quite a lot. So that is quite nice. And Chinatown; everybody knows where Chinatown is. And the only connotation is that you say anything is Chinese. It's seen as something cheap or something that is not good quality. So people ask: "Is that Chinese or is that German quality?" So there is a difference between connotations of that.

Do you know where that comes from? Or why it is so negatively perceived?

Well it's because we have got places like Chinatown where everything is so much cheaper. So and then I just grew up with the connotation where my parents used to say we should rather invest in something with a better quality than in something cheap the Chinese way. And sadly, I mean if you think about, I have seen one of my Chinese friends over at the Chinese School, I used to tutor. She had an iPhone she got from China. It was cheaper when they got it in China but it was a good quality iPhone. So not necessarily bad quality, if you get it directly from China, not imported. So I guess the difference is... Chinese know where to get good quality Chinese products.

Do you have any, I mean you said you go to a Chinese medicine doctor but do you have any other actual exchange with [Chinese people]? Like was it difficult for you to talk with them at first, are there like miscommunications etc.?

Uhm well no, but my parents have a very bad connotation about Chinese, it's like as in they would always, I don't know if you know that 'ching chong chang' game. They always find it funny and lot of my other friends who don't take another language they all think it's just gibberish and Chinese are just people with very small eyes, it's very — I guess superficial comments. But I find it culturally interesting. It's so different. Because I moved all these years and done and seen different cultures, I like different. I don't like the same. So I am... yeah especially I like their diet, their cultural ways of seeing and saying things. Especially the amount of respect they have in their language. [...] There is a reason for everything. And it's just an old language as well so we must learn an old language. I am very fascinated by it and I guess if you don't learn a language by learning its culture as well it's just a language but it's much more than that. I guess... I don't know, for a lot of people it's a lot of superficial things [...].

Okay. This is also very interesting. Because the people I have been talking to [here], even my Uber my drivers; I always try and ask:

“What do you think about China”. And most of them are like: “Yeah you know...” they are actually very negative about it. And this is very interesting to hear in a way because what you see in media is very different. So I was just wondering, do you think people here on the ground are affected by the government decisions?

I think yes, well a lot of common issues come from people who open businesses. I mean my dad works [...] with people in Kayelitsha and Vuvuleto all the shacks all those really, really poor areas. And a lot of them have very negative connotations against foreigners.

Doesn't matter where they come from?

Doesn't matter where they come from! And especially people from Zimbabwe, from Nigeria any... West Somali. They don't like any type of competition. So the fact that Chinese products are coming in, it is a competition because they are cheaper, or most of the Chinese products are. So I know that it is a really ungrounded thought [...] but there is a lot of hate coming in like: ‘Why are you bringing in new products?’ and I know that our country is trying to get... South Africa to, you know, really boosts their industry. And now our textile industry is run down because of the Chinese. It's totally... we used to have the best textile industry in South Africa... well, in Africa actually. So we used to have such a good industry, actually here in Cape Town. It is really going down. And they recently just had a new meeting with Chinese stores and said: “We can't be [competing with] Chinese and Chinese imports” like I said it's connotation that Chinese imports mean cheap. I mean our industries are affected badly by this. So I guess it is a lot of negative connotation and the media will try to put it down and also not just China. Recently we had a lot of bad connotations about America because of the chicken import. So it depends on whichever country is taking advantage and a lot of people on the ground feel like our own government is selling us out. So it might be a deal with America or China, mostly China because we see it.

Do you think that is a general problem with the government right now people have?

Yes! The signing of deals so we can save our economy, which is on the downfall. Yeah I guess we aren't really happy that we South Africans aren't really able to contribute anything to the economy. It is so difficult when we have all this competition that our government is deciding over. So I guess that this whole neo-colonialism kind of aspect of it...

It is difficult to call it neo-colonialism I think because your government is encouraging it.

It's allowing it yeah. So I guess it's also, put it in a way that China is very smart about doing it. They won't just send products but they will send the curriculum, they will send Chinese themselves and allow them the leverage and the culture to kind of take over. And a lot of people haven't

seen it that much yet 'cuz its just happening, because they recently signed a deal saying its compulsory for all schools to have the capacity to implement Chinese, must teach it now. So the last two years or so they implement Chinese.

That's the governments' thinking?

Yes. As an [additional] language. So that's why a lot of people, especially teachers now, are getting very edgy. They say: "Why?" We've got eleven official languages in South Africa, why aren't we teaching IsiXhosa as a must language, or Zulu?

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Especially in Julia's case we can see how well educated she is in terms of China's engagement with Africa, particularly in South Africa. If we take this a step further we can argue that she gained this knowledge mainly through her economics degree and her own interest. Through engaging with the Chinese language at UCT, participants are further exposed to critical engagement with the debate revolving around China. To re-connect with the argument of Sahlins in chapter 2.4., above, I would therefore argue that the involvement of the CI at the UCT does not pose a threat to academic freedom in the context of Cape Town.

Where do you get your knowledge from about China? Is it stuff you study in your degree or do you follow media?

Mh, it's mostly from what I study. And the nice thing about university is that... they give you a lot of reading, so you are able to expand your horizon. It's not just what you get from the media. I don't trust the media at all. I took a media course for a semester so I don't trust it enough so I just stopped [laughing] so — but a lot of people don't know the difference here. I also do a lot of research as well, my own private research about China, and I try to read the newspaper, the Chinese newspaper just to get my character game up.

What do you think about China then [laughing]?

Well.

You can be honest.

From the political point of view I think it's doing really well; Economic point of view as well and I think they are very smart in what they want to do and what they attempted to do. I just think they are rushing it a bit too much. But their development and everything, the aims and I am not too keen on how they are destroying the environment, from that point of view. We had to write an essay on — in an exam actually for economic history — on the amount of pollution and environmental problems they have. But I think they are smart. They have people to contend with and their will power, which I think is very strong, or rising to be very strong. So I don't mind them at all I think it is good to have that. Well personally as a politician — well, future

politician — I want to see America being challenged because I don't think we would want a world power. So yeah I am actually very positive about China. I think it's a good... opportunity for people to explore, especially those on the sides of the deals and all that. But I guess there is always an edge — you have to be very careful that it is not gaining too much control. But I know, especially with China, it's still something we have to watch. And we have had debates in our class itself, in our lectures, but if China is going to succeed and stay with the way it is, if it is going to relapse to democracy we are not too sure it would. I recently did a whole essay on the relationship between democracy and economic development. And the Asian countries were the exception to that, so were the Arab oil countries; the oil rich countries. We kept seeing that we are thinking of Japan or South Korea who built democracy afterwards, I don't know if China would do it. They might just have to reach a certain point to relapse to democracy.

So the Chinese government does not offend you as such?

I am interested what they are keeping from us. I am maybe intrigued but I know that I am partly... It is interesting... like I look at the Chinese government and I don't 100 per cent approve what they do and I know it is very different to the governments from South Korea and Japan. They very much closed and it's a very different concept from that so I don't fully get the way they are structured I think it's too... it's gaining a bit too much control.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Julia's case furthermore portrays that you can be interested in China's growing presence from a political and economic point of view but still be critical about internal issues China is facing. This indicates quite well that people seem to be ready for a change in perspectives when it comes to having just one global powerhouse, as Luca points out above as well.

When talking to Richard he once again summarized the whole situation very self-reflexively especially when talking about the fact that CIs are Chinese government institutions and the assumption that people are subject to brainwashing when attending classes. He not only talked about his view about China but also what people in his circle of acquaintances and friends think about it. His response reinforced the picture Julia drew towards othering Chinese in society.

I must say that my mates reactions when I tell them about [learning Chinese] like yeah you know one day you are going to be pulled into a van and driven off somewhere and this and that if you are getting involved with the wrong crowd. This is a joke you know, but there is an underlying truth I think in what they say. It is a bit of what they believe

and I know its... you just playing into the hands of this big machine that is trying to influence Africa and the world and you know they catch you by offering you free classes and they will send you overseas and pay for your accommodation and to some extent I understand that and I accept that, if we did the same for South Africa I wouldn't question it. They would say oh we are just promoting South Africa instead of in an advertisement 'we are giving out hamsters' [jokingly] and promoting the country. And you choose to learn about it or not you know it's up to you. And I am not politically connected to anything whether China is this or that or this or that happens tomorrow I am still going to be interested in Chinese or the culture, whether there is another agenda that I choose to see or not doesn't really matter.

Yeah there is nothing sinister about it. But I can understand people who are... who have... who don't understand China and who have maybe politically been affected by whatever the case may be there I would see this would be immediate... that it would raise the hairs on their back.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

This in particular shows that people have their own thoughts and agencies. What Richard is further addressing here is the fact that China is often portrayed as particularly dangerous even though other governments engage and have been engaging in similar practices. For him this means just because he decides to learn Chinese does not mean he is unconditionally supporting China or any other government for that matter. Luca's statement above goes in a similar direction.

These perceptions become especially relevant in regards to soft power in this context. As I have pointed out above (chapter 2.1.), soft power is: "[...] the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced."⁴³¹ Richard clearly states here that, although he is learning Chinese he is not explicitly supporting China's political agenda, which therefore defuses the soft power debate within the context of the CIs and especially when it concerns the micro-layer within this debate.

Richard further acknowledges that his experience was essential in creating his current perceptions and the understanding he developed towards Taiwan, and that people or friends cannot really understand what his opinion is because they

⁴³¹ (Nye Jr, 2004, p. x)

have not had the same experiences as him. For them China represents ‘a communist bully’ and they do not care much about Taiwan anyway. It shows again that this personal ‘phenomena’ led Richard to be interested in Taiwan or China, and therefore he decided to learn Chinese or engage with an institution that facilitates culture and language promotion.

When I talk to my mates about studying Chinese or... something about China. They do this like: “What about China?!” You know! And it’s not something I found in my immediate friendship group that they find interesting. Like if I say come along to this opera, they would probably not. I think it’s ‘cuz it’s so different and so far and it’s... I think it’s just a lack of any understanding of what Taiwan is. I think a general perception here is probably that China is this big communist bully. And... like it’s not really on the top five list of holiday nations. It’s a different language, it’s really foreign and it’s quite a tricky thing to digest and understand and interact with. So why would we make the effort? I think that probably was my perception before having gone to Taiwan and having gone there changed it.

(Richard ‘interview’ April 6, 2016)

Within this context he further stated that because of his experience he is probably more prone to reading about China in the media than about other countries and therefore somewhat extends his knowledge continuously albeit not extremely pro-actively. During the times I met him it became relatively clear how busy he is with work. Even during the interview he had to check his phone several times to make sure the project he was working on was carried out smoothly. I therefore do believe that his interest only surfaces occasionally like any other leisure activity would.

I pretty much just [know stuff] from my little bit of experience but I think when there is something about China I do probably listen to it more carefully or read into it more than I would have before. So if there is a Time magazine with something about China on the front, I’ll probably buy it, or you know there is an article on... I do find stuff *exclamation mark*, but I am not too pro-active on it, but lets say if there is an article on Brazil, I am less likely to read that if the same article two pages long is on China, I would probably read it. So yeah I think it’s again just a weird fascination, it almost feels like I am fonder with China, I am not sure what it is. Is it cultural, or just a little bit of a sub-conscious connection that I build up during my time in Taiwan. So yeah, I don’t actively seek it out but I do, I would say, probably I read it more than I would other things. Like I read it more than maybe other people.

(Richard ‘interview’ April 6, 2016)

Unlike Richard and Luca, Mthembi and Karen were able to experience China for the first time when they decided to join the summer camp that is available

for credit- and non-credit bearing Chinese language learners, and which is organized by the Confucius Institute.

Being able to talk to Mthembi before and after she attended the camp gave me a particular insight into her experience and helped me explore the evolution of her perception towards China. Before Mthembi left she was admittedly a bit worried about the foreign culture and the food, perceptions that lingered in expressing stereotypical tribulations.

That's what I am saying. Probably even for myself it would be so much better if I had to go to China. I think it makes a huge difference. I would have personally for me, if I have to go I want to go to a place, which is like... I mean I don't mind exploring the culture but I also want to be in a place, which is very cosmopolitan. But I mean apparently in Hong Kong but I mean there is a... I don't know if it's Hong Kong but apparently because they are so fascinated by black people they touch your hair! I find that so annoying. I find that *so* annoying!

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Interestingly Mthembi had a very clear image in mind, what would be suitable for her and what she probably would not enjoy very much. While she was willing to learn more about the culture, she was more inclined towards being in a metropolitan setting. The perception of metropolitan settings for her was linked to cities like Hong Kong or Singapore, which is not even located in China. At this point in time, it appeared that she does not really care about China *per se*, but she would like to be in a setting in which she is exposed to the Chinese language and experience culture and language first hand.

Yeah it should be interesting [to join the summer camp], I am very excited to explore and see if that is something I would consider like moving there for a short time. I mean the most common places I had ever thought of working or studying there is like the US or Europe. Maybe I would even consider Singapore. 'Cuz they speak Mandarin as well. I don't know how different it is from China.

[...] That's why I am actually going on this trip; just to get the feel, be there and as opposed to like this side, because a lot of Chinese people say that, when you on this side, it is actually very diluted like... the Chinese culture or even like the way people speak, what they eat etc., so yeah I want to explore and see you know.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

She is nevertheless very interested in seeing this new 'world' in order to discover if she would actually be able to consider it as a place for her secondment. But going there also meant a tremendous effort for her because it

was costly which is why she had to ask for help from family and friends. This indicated that this trip was indeed important for her.

I mean obviously you have to plan for these things and — I mean I had other commitments — I mean even going there was by chance — I mean I have been asking some family and friends to kind of give me whatever they can because I am using basically all my money to go to China.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

When Mthembi came back from the summer she agreed to meet me again and explained everything she experienced in detail. Starting from her arrival in China, which posed the first challenge to her.

Oh my god. China where do I start [laughing]. So we left on the 17th of June and landed in Hong Kong. So I left on the 17th at 12:30 from OR Tambo and I was very excited. I was alone at that time. But I met one of the guys who was on this trip so it was very fun. We [arrived] in Hong Kong the next day and it was already night. Hong Kong was fine, until I got to Guangzhou airport. So the flight from Hong Kong to Guangzhou just [takes] two hours. So we get to Guangzhou and my bags are missing. And obviously I mean... I know Chinese but I know minimal for asking people where the bags are and they are not understanding I am definitely getting frustrated. So this is in the morning now I think around 9. And I am thinking the whole time about my stuff in the plane and they were telling me that I only going to get it at night. Like later on that night. So when the last people arrived which was like 22pm or 12ish that's when I got it. Then I went outside and it was hot! Like so humid. I never been in such humidity in my life I mean Durban is very hot and humid it's one of those places which is hot throughout... But when I got out of the plane and it was so hot!! But I mean it was very exciting so obviously I met everyone else.

Did everyone meet at the airport?

Yeah we all already met at Hong Kong airport. So we had people waiting for us, there were two students who volunteered they became such good friends.

Chinese students?

Yeah Chinese students, one of them the English name was [Jamie]⁴³² she was so sweet. She helped us and even when they didn't understand what to say they would try and it was so cute how they tried to speak English but they don't know. They get so frustrated with themselves. But I mean it is what it is... So we got there went outside and go into the bus and it's so humid and I was basically wearing winter clothing cuz it was so cold in Johannesburg. I am literally dressed for winter. No culture shock as of yet and then we went to the schools, Sun Yat-Sen University where we all going to be staying and then we got picked up. But obviously I couldn't do anything because of the clothing so literally my first encounter of having to speak to these

⁴³² A pseudonym has been used in order to maintain the participant's anonymity.

people telling them to go to the shop and went to the Chinese girls and we went to the shop and I am telling you my favorite word in China is 'tai gui le'. It's like my favorite word [laughing]! I literally go there and it's all about negotiating and I go: "Tai gui le! Duo shao qian?" I mean obviously... So I ended up just getting something for that day and we went to the restaurant our first Chinese food that we had and honestly speaking I did not enjoy it [laughing].

(Mthembi 'interview' July 22, 2016)

She proceeded telling me about her time in Guangzhou and the Chinese classes and cultural activities she attended and enjoyed a lot. After staying about 10 days in Guangzhou the group continued their trip to Beijing.

So Beijing was like jammed packed because from the morning to night we were really busy and we would tour the whole day and like I said Beijing was even worse than Guangzhou because every person was so fascinated about how you look and they never seen like black people or like my hair... or the braids... but I mean overall I definitely loved the experience... it was a complete culture shock... from the food to the toilets... the fact that they are on the floor. And I am like: "WHAT? NO!" [laughing] and it was pretty weird but then I got used to it when time went by... I mean yeah the first couple of days was a bit hard and the hotel was pretty fine... I mean the overall experience was pretty good. Very very good. I think... when time goes by when you live there... I would probably get used to it. **I wouldn't like to live there for too long but I would definitely like to explore 'cuz I mean I want to meet different people from all over the world teaching [and learning] Mandarin...**[emphasis added by the researcher]. Oh and what was a complete culture shock was the spitting. Oh wow... like that is... that was just like — wow. But overall the experience was very nice.. I mean obviously just like every culture you have people that are nice and you have people that are not so nice but we encountered a couple of nice people who were you know very fascinated you know not out of just being... funny but genuinely interested about where you come from... because they don't really have the luxury for getting to know about the rest of the world so you know... their fascination came from the fact that they actually didn't know. That was really nice and people genuinely wanted to know English and wanted to know something about South Africa... so the overall experience was nice and I know we have a company in... our [...] company in China... so maybe I would like to go there... I would make my way around the food... Like some of the stuff was just shocking... I would never eat a scorpion — one of the guys in our group ate one! — I really applaud him because he is a better man than I am. 'Cuz I definitely can't [...]. And I was like: "WHAT?" and he ate one of the big ones and those things were alive!! They just like spiced it it up and yeah... **China is just something else ey. It was a complete culture shock but it was a good experience overall and I mean it was good memories for me I am glad I actually did this... it was nice** [emphasis added by the researcher].

(Mthembi 'interview' July 22, 2016)

Mthembi pointed out several times that the hygiene and food in China were causing her troubles to adapt, but she acknowledged that she would be willing to try living there for a short period of time. It was almost as if she wanted to convince herself that she could do it, because her own lifestyle was subject to higher standards than what she perceives to be common for China. Nevertheless, it became clear that this trip meant a lot to her, not only in terms of experiencing it first hand and supporting or refuting perceptions and ideas she already had before going to China, but also because it helped her realizing what is really important for her, which does not necessarily include China.

Is there one thing you took for yourself like going to China one specific experience or something you didn't know before like understanding wise... It's a bit vague the question I realize but just something you came to realize...

About Chinese people or just in general like my whole experience?

Just the whole experience...

There were a couple of things. For me I just realized how... not specific to China but it just happened while I came to China. It just opened me up to wanting to know more about different parts of the world, traveling. Not only overseas but also within my own continent. I just think like traveling just opens you up so much more because then you meet different people from different spheres. So that thing somehow just ignited... I swear if I had all the money in the world I would just go and travel and just experience different cultures... experience different things... I mean the world is beautiful. We have... and also it gave me again an appreciation of my own country, because sometimes all this I want to leave... I never want to leave because my country is bad but for exposure purposes but that also gave me a thing that I appreciate my own country more... the fact that I can drink water from a tap you know stuff like that. But also like at the same time, although I appreciate my country, I also started appreciating other cultures and exploring more... being open-minded, learning new things, learning different things, which I may not be comfortable with...

(Mthembi 'interview' July 22, 2016)

Ultimately joining the CI on the trip to China not only helped her experience China for the first time, which she appreciated a lot, but it helped her acknowledge her own country which shows a certain self-reflexivity. Without a doubt, the CI played a tremendous role in creating this experience for her. However Mthembi's self-reflexive understanding about herself within this experience and the subsequent creation of meaning show once again that, if

connected to the argument of soft power, it is clearly not identifiable as a one-way street. Even though the CI facilitated this opportunity for her, I believe she would have followed this pursuit through other means and institutions as well. As a matter of fact, Mthembi did not undertake steps to go to China for an extended period of so far.

Also Karen gained experiences in China because of joining the summer school.

China [laughing]. Yeah that was the one weird thing... people touching my hair [laughing]. Yeah, but definitely the: „Oh my gosh, your hair, your hair“, that was, that was very weird... yeah, China is many things.

Did you have a negative experience [in China]?

[Um] just... the cultural difference of what is considered polite and impolite. Those were the hard ones for us to deal with, because like someone would knock into you and wouldn't say sorry and then you have to remember — Oh yeah, here it's cultural acceptable not to say sorry if you bump into someone but initially the first time it happens we were like: "Wait!!! He didn't even say sorry, what's up with that, why would you be so rude!!" Yeah... not a problem anymore.

'Cuz I feel you spent a lot of time in the more like foreigner friendly places. Guangzhou wasn't too bad, because there are a lot of African migrants. But Guangzhou definitely didn't have as much of that type of experience where someone said: "Oh my god, lets take a photo with you!!" But again other places... we have been in Beijing that was... we were told it was because a lot of them were tourists who were, who came in for the summer, yeah. So they weren't the same people from Beijing and that's probably why they stared a lot.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Karen's perception about China related to her experience as a foreigner. There were not many places where she could go to without being addressed for her appearance or stared at. Nevertheless, because she had lived in different environments already including the US, she had this experience to relate to. Instead of forming a distinct image in her head about China, she tried to be as neutral as possible before going there.

And what would you say; did your perception of China change after you went there? Like what did you think about China before, what did you think about it afterwards?

[Thinking] I kinda went in with no expectations because I didn't really know what it was really going to be. I mean you always see cities and towns like on TV but it's never the same of actually being there and experiencing it if you have time. So [um] I lived in the US for a while and yeah I

remember like watching stuff on TV about the US but then actually being there and realizing oh look there is homeless people here? You never see that on TV. Having that kind of experience kind of just let me be okay with going to China and see what it's like.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Although Karen enjoyed the trip to China, during our interactions — and knowing her motivations towards learning Chinese — it became further apparent that she was not extremely interested in China, and that this had not changed after actually visiting it. She took it as an experience but, as will become visible in the next section, she does not have pronounced expectations for the future in relation with China.

Besides this, Karen voiced another interesting point of view in regards to the internal information transmission in the form of cultural anecdotes within the textbooks. As previously outlined (chapter 2.4.) the textbooks the Hanban is utilizing for the CIs are often connected to the use of propaganda. When asked about how she gets her knowledge about China she independently brought up this topic. However, she also clearly stated that it does not really mean much until you actually experience it yourself.

Would you say you get your knowledge about China through your experience in China or through classes you take or how do you get your knowledge??

Well that's a really interesting question... and it's hard to answer, because in the classes at the end of every chapter there are always cultural notes. And so I mean we did read through those and they vary from anything from art to drama, theatre, Chinese opera... the interactions between families, like how you address grandma, grandpa all of that. [Um] but it's all very... abstract when you are just reading about it. I think it's... I think I have probably learnt more from actually being there than just me doing the cultural notes. 'Cuz reading is fun, you can read that and then compare it to, you know, what it says about life in Singapore or you know in Peru. But yeah until you actually go and experience it, those don't really mean much.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

I therefore concur with Starr's statement that the textbooks in use are "so transparent [...] that they were no threat to student minds."⁴³³ Even though it might be an attempt to use propaganda in order to present China in a more positive image, Chinese students are able to self-reflexively process the information.

⁴³³ (Starr, 2009, p. 79)

While talking to my participants I further questioned their knowledge on such topics as the relationship between China and Taiwan or the so-called 'One-China-Policy'. This is particularly striking since it once again shows that the participants do not really care with which institution they engage while learning Chinese. While Richard engaged with the CI when I met him he also stated the possibility to engage with the Chinese School as well. But above all he was aware of the political situation between China and Taiwan, especially in the context of South Africa.

I think there must have been some strong ties [between South Africa and Taiwan/ROC] but I think with the growth of China it put this relationship under pressure, because I am sure at some point when things were really easy between China and Taipei, Taiwan. China would have said we only recognize relationships if you recognize us only, and not Taiwan. So I think there was a bit of strain but I think there is a Taiwanese consulate here in SA and they are still running formally between the two countries.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

To put this into context, Richard further told me about the interactions and experiences he had with other South Africans in Taiwan. Even though South Africa's long relations with Taiwan have officially been terminated, they are still kept alive by individuals on the ground.

So this is quite interesting, [...] there were *so* many South Africans I mean — many, many, many — South Africans go there... my girlfriend's cousin has been there for seven years. We met *so* many South Africans... actually from Stellenbosch University.

Do they have exchange programs?

No I think what happened is that... Probably ten years ago that South Africans went across to teach and when they came back they told people about it, these people, for me... knowing that somebody I know has been to this school, stayed in this part, gives me so much confidence. And I think that this build up this flow, informal flow of people between... Particularly ex-students of Stellenbosch University and well we stayed [...] just South of Taipei. And yeah it was South Africans that came after us and strangely most of them were Afrikaans speaking, first language, and they went to teach English as second language speakers [laughing] which I think that is a bit... [um]... yeah.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

In the attempt to understand Luca's perception about China he confirmed what other participants addressed and what I saw during my experience in Cape Town in terms of interactions between locals and Chinese speaking

individuals. He further highlights some of the interactions he has but that he usually does not seek to meet Chinese people outside from the contacts he already established.

Mh I have a colleague, I play badminton with Chinese people [at my university]. I play Xiangqi, Chinese chess. So through that I meet some people. I went recently to... there was a Chinese market... from the Chinese School it was in February I think. It was for the lantern festival. It was nice... yeah you meet people. But I don't feel the need to really hang out with Chinese people. I know that they are very... I was talking to my girlfriend this morning, it's very difficult for a Chinese guy to marry a non-Chinese, because they want to be... to have the upper hand. She said they like to down marry and not marrying somebody who is more intelligent or who has more degrees... Chinese people or Chinese men don't like to feel that they are of less value than their wives. And also they tend to stick together. I know these communities. Here in South Africa white people stay in a group, black people stay in a group, Chinese people stay in a group!

[...] It doesn't happen so much here, but in Paris yes. I had a good friend in school; yeah I had one friend from China. Here not so much. I am quite happy with the interactions I have here, the Chinese events that are organized by the Chinese School or the interactions we have with our teacher here. I had a very nice teacher before at the Chinese School. She stopped teaching at the end of the first term because she went to... take a job in Singapore. She is now working in Singapore. She is going to marry there but she was born in South Africa.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Marlize had many different interactions, especially with family members. Her son, who had moved to Taiwan and married a Taiwanese woman, as well as her husband, who is interested in TCM, have exposed her to their experiences and ideas. Additionally, the interactions and experiences she had with the girl she was tutoring formed a specific perception towards China and Taiwan.

She is Mainland Chinese. She comes from the Northeast. She is right up there on the Russian border, right next to Korea. Their town, it's not a village, I forgot what it's called now — it's the town where the Koreans when the lake is frozen, they try and cross it. But she says the Koreans know that the police is lying in wait there for them. I learnt a lot of interesting things from her about Chinese history and we don't know anything about the Chinese really. We just know this communist awful stories, well I do. But she tells the most horrible stories of what happened to them, when the Japanese invaded. Before all of this other stuff happened. Not nice.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize further highlighted some of the experiences she had with other people around her and their perceptions about China. Some of them are relatable to statements Julia and Richard made.

They would say that they are not... I wouldn't say racist against them... It's the same thing if you don't know anything about... It's something new. You avoid it. And I have a very good friend that upset me the other night. I was taking [Abbey] home and I passed him. And when I got home I phoned him, I am sorry I wasn't home for you to deliver the meat, he is a butcher, and he said to me: "Oh I saw you go down the hill with your ching chong China child"... I wasn't happy about that... She is not a 'ching chong China child' but it's because people are not informed. They are stupid and ignorant. I say terrible things sometimes [laughing]. You know sometimes I think I shouldn't always say what's on my mind. But that is being rude and I didn't want to say to him: "You know [John] that's very rude, she is just a little girl!" Doesn't matter that she is... You see now this is the other thing, too. I grew up with it was, my mother was really, we won't ever... we didn't ever discriminate against color. She didn't ever point out, that, that was that and that was that, it was just... it was as it is. It was that. So I have not grown up with this... no they are black and they are this and you can't do this and you can't do that. I know what you can't and what you can do. But you can choose yourself what you want to do and just because people are different it doesn't mean they don't feel the same that you do. They are exactly the same as you are. So it is very difficult for me when people are stupid, because that is a stupid comment to make. Why didn't you say to me: "I saw that lovely little girl, that you are teaching' that's what I want him to say [laughing]."

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Once again it becomes obvious that many acquaintances of my participants are actively 'othering' against Chinese. Marlize further connects it to the historical racial segregation happening in South Africa as addressed in Harris' article on 'othering', which outlines the sentiment towards Chinese during apartheid. Harris especially outlines how Chinese migrants were pushed — similar to blacks — into marginalization.⁴³⁴ Nowadays, many people associate Chinese speaking individuals or the community with a very specific sentiment. The recent outbreaks of xenophobic attacks (referred to in chapters 2.3. and 4.2.) "[...] made the South African Chinese minority far more conspicuous and more prominent in popular consciousness and led to reactions entirely disproportionate to their miniscule numbers."⁴³⁵ People who are interacting

⁴³⁴ (Harris, 2017)

⁴³⁵ (Harris, 2017, p. 3)

with them or have had experiences that woke their interest in Chinese culture and language are a clear minority; something rooted so deeply in the perceptive formation towards other cultures can clearly not be overcome by institutions like the CI on its own.

With Daniela it was different yet again. Although she decided to live in China for a while to teach English, she initially did not like China because of her interest in human rights. She was very aware of China's human rights violations and although she found it interesting, she is very aware of the negative side of it, too.

I was not attracted to China, on the contrary. At the time I was working in a foundation that dealt with minority rights so I was very much aware about, you know, minorities and human rights and all that kind of stuff and China is bad. The situation is bad. I don't like China but it's still different and I've read all of these books about Mao and stuff. This was not the country I was... I was in two minds... on one hand admiring the long culture but then on the other hand despising the recent history.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Although being aware of this negative side, the experience she gained in China created favorable memories for her.

I am not sure why I love it so much. One of my friends, the one who did his PhD in Hong Kong, he studied in Nanjing for a year. And he also... probably it's all the stories he told me about Nanjing... I got this feeling Nanjing was a city from a fairy-tale. All the history and stuff... And I got there and it was spring time, very, very beautiful and they have this plum hill... it's a very hilly area just outside the city covered in trees and they were all in blossom and this small pagoda, just beautiful. And I didn't have time to spend... I think I stayed like three or four days but I liked the place and wanted to stay longer and I left this place with the feeling I hadn't had enough of it, maybe that's why I want to go back. And I met people on the streets, there was one guy from [my home country] and he was a sailor and he knew [this] port near from where I am. It was part of this experience, very nice.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Daniela is a good example about how having particular experiences and interactions can influence the creation of meaning towards a particular topic or country in this case. Even though she is still critical about negative things she learnt how to see beyond black and white or good and bad.

Many of my participants had particular experiences in Taiwan, which is why this next section will highlight some of these. Not only Richard has fond memories — also Marlize had particular opinions and perceptions about her experiences.

It's an amazing country [Taiwan]. I think that... I have found it fascinating during the time that I was there... they have half our population living in the equivalent space of the Kruger National Park!

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Apart from pointing out the beauty of the island, Marlize further addressed the fact that people she is interacting with in general have the wrong idea about Taiwan.

You know where I have been to, it's really beautiful. It's called... now you know people don't believe me when I say that. They say it's a filthy place. I said but where did you go in Taiwan? I don't know where they went... I said you know when I go there, for the number of people that are on the streets or on the markets, there is a tidiness about it. [...] Because I get upset with people when they say: "I don't know why would you want to go to such a dirty place" and I think: "Are you mad?"

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Her case further illustrates how prejudices against certain places or people are often only overcome when actually engaging with it or them.

I mean we all live differently. I mean when I go to... when I first went to [Maria's] place, when we walked through the market... when I first went to their place. [...] My god Monique... we walked through this market and then suddenly there was a door and they said we have to go in here... and I am claustrophobic. I said: "In there?" and they said yes. It was a busy market and we went behind the steel door into this dark passage just for a while it was dark and then up these stairs... and then into this amazing apartment. Okay his apartment was very tiny, but they I mean they had the most beautiful apartment but it's the same. They are just off the road from where the market is and you can walk over there, the market starts over there. But it's also just a big stainless steel door and you go in there and all the motorbikes are parked before you go up the stairs and you go into a different door and you're in a totally different place and my goodness... it's great!

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Finally, Richard summed up the interactions between the different layers in Cape Town society. Even though the Chinese community in Cape Town is not a recent phenomenon it is growing perceptibly, but nevertheless we need to keep in mind that the socio-demographic implications in this city are specific.

As I referred to in my auto-ethnographic chapter, people are naturally suspicious, especially to race-related issues, it is very difficult to meet local ‘Cape Townians’, and ultimately the battle of apartheid is in many occasions still fought until today. This makes it indeed very difficult for certain immigrants, especially Chinese but also other black Africans, to be accepted. Furthermore, people do not see a reason to interact with others unless they are looking back onto a certain experience in Chinese speaking countries. There is simply no common ground and even though the Chinese language is expanding, many people still do not see the need to engage with it. The CI therefore simply does not seem able to convey a positive image of China to large parts of the local community. Not only because the majority of people are not interested in engaging with Chinese, but also because there are other settings to engage with Chinese as it is — there is no need to perceive the CI negatively.

Do you have a lot of contact to Chinese people here in Cape Town?

No. Where I live [here in Cape Town] there are quite a few restaurants and shops and things. So you see them more and more. I mean I was... when I came back from Taiwan. My girlfriends’ cousin came back with her Taiwanese boyfriend and kids. And other people would see us with him walking around Cape Town and I couldn’t believe they were saying: “Jackie Chan, Jackie Chan!!” And now you see Chinese people about everywhere, but I don’t interact at all. Maybe it’s about because the hard work people do... I mean we live in the same place but from a work perspective we don’t cross paths, from a cultural perspective we don’t go to the same things, but I think this is probably just a matter of time until there is a bit more integration. So... I mean I am not going to them and saying: “Hi are you from China?” [jokingly] I mean I am tempted to go but... [laughing] but I must say I see them around a lot more than I used to, but from an interaction perspective. I wish there was more opportunity... I mean it probably starts with the fact that either we don’t have much common ground or we don’t know what common ground we have. And there is probably the language barrier as well, which makes it harder. I think naturally they, as anyone would, stick with people you are comfortable with, especially when you are in a foreign country. And you know as a local, if I was overseas I would be a lot more open too, I think, in your own country you go lazy about mixing.

(Richard ‘interview’ April 6, 2016)

5.3. What is your plan in terms of Taiwan and China?

After presenting the existing perceptions of my participants and the perceptions of China in their close circle of family, friends and acquaintances, the final section within this chapter will highlight if my participants have existing plans to engage with China or Taiwan. This is important to — phenomenologically — understand their existing motivations to engage with the CI or the Chinese School. This section will further function as a bridge between the two previous sections and towards seeing how useful the CI is in terms of ‘affecting’ people into supporting China unconditionally and including it in their future plans — true to what soft power implies.

As we have seen earlier, Karen is one of the participants who particularly stated that it is really just the language she is interested in. This further became clear when I asked her if she is thinking about integrating China into her future plans.

Is China a place where you can see yourself;
maybe in future? Would you go [back] and try it again?

We probably shouldn't — I mean, living here for example, people talk about pollution, but it is nothing in comparison to there [laughing] yeah and you can be outdoors here all the time and it doesn't matter, whereas there... I don't know 'cuz we've seen... I had a friend who lived in Beijing for a couple of years. She ended up with this kind of never ending cough because of the pollution. So yeah she still encouraged me to go and check it out for myself but having seen her like this... the skin used to be quite irritated as well. It's probably not the healthiest place to be in a long-term sense [laughing]. We didn't see the sky the whole time we were there — that was like really sad. When we got there we thought it was like clouds and that it was going to rain and the next morning it was still there and the day afterwards we realized oh wow okay its pollution. WOW. China [for the] long-term rather no. Not now. I mean if there is some improvement about the air... yeah maybe.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Karen mentions the pollution as one of the factors why she is really not thinking about going back to China, which not only shows that although she is learning many positive things in class about China she is still self-reflexively able to decide not to engage with China even though she is learning the language.

Also Daniela, who definitely developed a deep appreciation for China during her travels, as visible in her first quote below, is not so much interested in including China seriously in her plans for the future.

Did you see any preferences/differences between India and China?

Very different, though. In terms of... For me it's tough to compare them. India came after China. I cannot say... maybe if India came first I would have liked it more. Now I like China better... I wanna go back and it's like when I close my eyes I wanna go to China. I feel like crying I want to go... The reason [I] can't go now, because it was far too expensive and I didn't want to go for just 2 weeks. In China, I felt very safe for me — it's very important to feel safe and to walk around in China I felt super safe...Traveling any time of the day... so it was easier to meet people. And I could spend nice time with myself — I just get a lot of energy from meeting people. **It was a challenge of language, which I love, and it was the change in the people when you start to learn Chinese compared with the time you were not speaking Chinese** [emphasis added by the researcher]. When you speak Chinese, they adore you. It's so different; it makes such a big difference to just speak a little bit. It's just changing so much the experience of how they relate to you. And the food I loved it in China more than in India. It's not... I think my body was better in China. It liked it more... no spices pretty much. Guangdong doesn't eat spicy, Hunan is spicy. It's just I felt better.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

For her it is a place she grew close to but it is also only a place to return to travel and experience how it changed. Her future plans are manifold and more connected to her interest in human rights and a will to facilitate development and help reduce poverty; for example:

It's so much hatred [in South Africa]. I would stay longer [here] if I'd get a visa... I don't know how to stay longer... Just thinking of doing a Masters in Public Health. It's interesting. And the UCT has a good Masters in public health. It's actually good... work-wise... I would like to do it in a place like South Africa.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Mthembi, as we have seen above, is interested in spending time in China mainly for her own development. Reinforced by attending a primary school that exposed her to Chinese language and culture, she also told me about one of her extended family members who goes on business trips to China every now and then.

Yeah my cousin actually works for... for the SABC, which is the South African Broadcaster, and they actually were there for a couple of business meetings with the Chinese

governments and their broadcasters... so she was also in Beijing and then unfortunately I missed her in Beijing and she was in Hangzhou. But she told me it was very, very beautiful. I wish I could have gone... Like hopeful all goes well — I applied for this other thing in Hangzhou... what's this... how do I put it... like an opportunity there... Hopefully I get it... You do like a rotation and then afterwards you decide which market you want to be based in... whether UK or US or wherever... but it would be pretty cool... but I would learn a lot.

(Mthembi 'interview' July 22, 2016)

Talking to Mthembi it became especially pronounced that although she seemingly did not appreciate many local things in China like food or traffic, she kept telling herself that she wants to live in China for a year. But she is further very clear about the fact that she does not want to settle in China. It presents an opportunity for her to personally grow but she does not seem to be extremely serious about pursuing it. It appears that she almost forces herself to engage with China because of the career opportunities she associates with speaking Chinese, rather than actually enjoying it. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the previous section Mthembi puts a lot of importance on travelling and exploring, rather than actually living and working in China.

That's how I felt in Beijing. And the traffic is insane... even at 22 pm there was traffic... no but... I definitely see... I don't know how things will work out. I am hoping and praying that all goes well and you know... even if I go there for a year.

So that's definitely something you want to pursue?

Yeah, something different. I'll settle in Cape Town. I love Cape Town. I'll definitely come back to Cape Town to settle but meanwhile I'll just go travel and explore.

(Mthembi 'interview' July 22, 2016)

This seems to present a common theme with many of my participants. Richard is also interested in going back, mainly because he would like to travel more. Although he could see himself pursuing another degree in a Chinese speaking country, through my interaction with him and informal talks it became obvious that he does not necessarily make a difference between Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and it is not planned for the long-term. Especially in the more and more interconnected global context, it becomes obvious that China just presents one opportunity among many other possibilities; an opportunity that lets him re-visit a time in his life that shaped him and his plans in many different ways.

So do you kind of aim at going back to China or Hong Kong or Taiwan to any Chinese speaking country, for work or for long-term?

Well... I think initially just for travel, but I have looked grandly at options to study. I think just... I love to travel and see a lot of China. You know from a study perspective, if I can and it's a worthwhile course and it's a course with a bit of an interesting perspective, given that its from China, could be quite interesting. Then I would love to stay there, just because it's so different. But I mean I would be probably, realistically, probably a year, a year and a half depending on what I am looking at. So yeah I would love to go back to Taiwan, visit old schools and teachers, and some friends, who are still there, strangely. I'd love to go to Shanghai and Beijing and those places. So yeah travel or study and if there s a work opportunity that flows out of that, then why not consider it.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Taking Julia — who is possibly closest to creating a career involving China in some ways — as an example; she puts this pursuit in context. She is very aware that Asia in general should be considered in global economics and politics. This is why she puts her willingness to engage with China in a broader context, not making it her main goal for the future but being flexible enough in case job opportunities guide her towards it.

Would you consider studying other cultures as well or is your main focus on China right now?

It all depends, I might want to do my fieldwork for my... you know, if there is a possible masters degree, maybe in Ghana or in Nigeria because of their economy. If I want to stay in Africa itself, I think yeah you specialize in an African country, an Asian country and a European country. You got to choose. So if I did do an African country, I would probably go for Ghana or Nigeria, if I go for an Asian country, I would probably go for South Korea, Japan or China. But I mean from an economic history point of view those are my three favorite countries, the models. And Europe I was thinking Norway or Germany is too close to home for me. So I rather I do a country which I am not familiar with. If I did go to America, to the South of America, it would probably be Brazil.

So you have to do field research for your first year of Masters / Honors?

I can choose what area want to specialize in. But it is usually on my continent so you can choose where and then you do a fieldwork there. Sometimes a year or sometimes it is even longer. Depending on how long you need to write up the report. [Your fieldwork would be mostly for your doctorate]. So if I would do comparative politics. Just compare to be choosing your countries and then compare either their economic structure or political structure.

So you want to do a PhD at some point?

Definitely. I want to lecture at some point. That is my biggest goal. I mean I love teaching — I would just rather like to teach people who specialize in something, which I am passionate about. I don't generally *just* want to talk about things, I want to specialize and you know, okay this field of study is what I am really passionate about, let me tell you about it. So in high school it is difficult to specialize, because you teach history, normal history. And not, lets say, history of this time period.

Would you study Japanese or Korean at all?

I am not sure. I mean it all depends if I am going to go into comparative politics for my PhD or masters or if I am going to do something like economic history. If I do economic history I would probably be... or I might just choose South Korea and Japan, because of their economic structure. But if I do the politics I might go to China. So I mean it depends on which region. I haven't decided yet. But I know that somewhere in Asia and somewhere in Africa.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Although being very flexible when it comes to job opportunities and career building, Julia knows her roots are in South Africa. Nonetheless, a strong desire to build a career inclines that she will take any way — not necessary only leading to China — if that is what it takes. We can further identify a general interest, especially among economic students like Julia, towards Asian economies. It is not only China that arouses interest but further the cases of Japan or South Korea; an interest that is very likely connected to the so-called "East Asian Miracle"⁴³⁶ studied by students of 'economic relations/ history'.

I personally don't want to live in Europe as much as I want to come back here (to South Africa). But it all depends on where I find a job or where I study.

So you are open to moving somewhere else?

Yeah I am open to it yeah. I am even open to moving to China. I mean I am ok with a lot of the connotation of what China is. I am fine with that.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

But with Julia it becomes further recognizable that she would definitely want to travel to China. She previously thought about joining the summer camp offered by the CI but was not able because of studies and part time job.

Have you been to China or Asia?

Mhm, mhm [negating]. Uhm I actually missed the Asian term. I was supposed to go to China with the rest of the class last year.

⁴³⁶ (The World Bank, 1993)

Oh you have class exchange?

Yes well, we have summer camp.

Okay. Are you planning in the near future to travel to China?

Definitely I am still waiting. I can say that I need to finish graduating next year. And then I still have to do one more year here to finish my job. Cuz I am home schooling a student.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Marlize on the other hand does not need to chase a career anymore. She would however include Taiwan and China in her future planning. In many ways, if she wants to communicate with her son's family, she has to. However, because she had previous positive experiences in Taiwan she intends to go to Taiwan for a longer period of time, although she is considering traveling to cities like Shanghai or Beijing. Her goal is to go to Taiwan for a couple of weeks to take a language class and be close to her son and his family.

I will turn 60 this year. And I feel I need a huge present and my huge present is not going to be a party or something like that. I don't want to spend my money on friends. So I am actually considering that... maybe I should go and spend some time in Taiwan. I mean I say Taiwan because she has family and I could maybe stay with someone. You kind of convinced me... because I think I need to go to Taiwan for a while. [chuckling] He will let me. I think I should do that. When I spoke to — I don't know if you were at the school yet — I spoke to our teacher and I said to her, as an incentive they should actually tell the class that we should go on a class trip. But you know I am just superficial, because a lot of them can't speak Chinese at all. But I think if *we* carry on with her next year they should use, they should give us an incentive and say the course can start saving and we could go on a trip and it would be nice. [...] You started something for me now and I am pleased that you came because I am going to give that going there for a while a serious thought. I am. I am going to just find out where I can go, where I can feel safe, because I don't want to depend on anyone. I am going to tell my husband. I need to do this. This is my 60th birthday present. Whether I do it this year or I do it next year. No matter. I probably like to do it, when the school here is closed [for school holidays].

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize had the plan to go to Taiwan even before I talked to her but because I told her a little about my experience she was even more convinced by this idea. This again shows that dialogic exchanges are integral to information exchange — I as the researcher do not think I influenced her because these conversations happened quite often in class between the different classmates. Experiences are exchanged and dialogically form ideas and perceptions.

Have you ever been to China? Mainland?

No. My husband has been twice, because he does acupuncture and he goes there and he does a little bit of Chinese medicine. Yes he does... he likes alternative medicine. He also is qualified homeopath. I am going to tell you, my husband spent most of his life studying. I think the homeopathy took him nine years, Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays. So know it's my turn because I have kept the fortune to whatever needed to be done... and he is being... he just said to me... he invited to take me. And I think I would actually like to go now... maybe not as far as the North East, but to Shanghai and Beijing.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Luca already had the opportunity and experience of moving to a Chinese speaking country. Ultimately, it did not work out. However, he stated that he is extremely flexible and that if something would come up in Hong Kong, for example, he would probably not hesitate to take this opportunity. Nonetheless, Luca is a person that is open to many different opportunities. China is not the only place he can see himself in the future but — similar to Julia — Asia in general is a possibility for him.

I had... last year I was chatting with a guy from Macau — I had the opportunity... not the opportunity but we were discussing about my possibility going there as a post-doc. It's in the United Nations University. It's... UNU, it's a big thing. Yeah I could work there. I am interested in working in an international organization... yeah I was contemplating going there for work and finally it didn't work out and they proposed me here this contract [here] for lecturing and I said yeah why not, its fine. So this plan of going to Macau is not going to happening. But I think tomorrow if I would have a great opportunity in Hong Kong I will go. I mean... and I don't have kids... I don't have... I have all my life here, my parents and relatives are in [Europe] but they know I am mobile and I don't have plans to go back [there]. I am happy being here but I know there is going to be a next project. Maybe it will be in South East Asia. Maybe it will be in Vietnam or maybe in the Philippines. Oh I applied for a position in the Philippines! [...] So yeah Philippines also would be interesting. We will see what happens. For the moment I am very happy to learn Chinese here.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

5.4. Summary

“The implications are clear and they are simple: no amount of presentation or spin will change opinion about misjudged, unethical, or poorly designed policies crafted and executed by governments in the national or international arena. The generation of soft power is a by-product of how governments behave, not an end in itself. Governments should focus on governing (and not on soft power) and do so in an ethical and transparent way in the best interest of all at home and abroad. This means that, to generate and exercise soft power — a genuine stock of soft power that does not depend on culture Confucius Institutes or CGTN [China Global Television Network] — the Chinese government should plan an execute policy with a greater appreciation of a global audience that is watching and evaluating its behaviour.”⁴³⁷

Uncovering the social layer within this much discussed debate we can detect that learning Chinese, for many, is an option for self-expression. In many ways it comes along as a lifestyle choice, or to “get the edge”⁴³⁸ that helps to distinguish oneself from other people in the same situation, e.g. finding a job, making a living. The choice of learning Chinese is often not the primary decision; it develops over time according to ones preferences, such as learning new languages in general. Institutions like the CI or the Chinese School undoubtedly make it easier to do so, but within the specific context of Cape Town, there cannot be an argument that is not referring to the micro-layer within this debate, as so many soft power related articles do. People in general, and my participants in particular, are able to make sense of information differently. Phenomenologically speaking, previous experiences and attached meaning are primary factors in the way they do it. They are self-reflexive and able to take in particular information while additionally forming opinions on negative or positive aspects. The information, however positively it presents China, is therefore translated and negotiated through each person individually and on the basis of their previous experiences and interactions. This further implies that learning Chinese does not mean that individuals unconditionally

⁴³⁷ (Rawnsley, 2017)

⁴³⁸ (Julia ‘interview’ June 28, 2016)

support the Chinese government. My participants understand the implications of the political actions of China and do not create a more positive image in their minds just by engaging with Chinese language or culture. This attitude crystalizes even further when considering the existence of a second possibility to engage with Chinese offered by a different entity that is somewhat connected to a competing state-entity. Soft power simply does not have a ‘one-way street’- like effect on individuals as portrayed.

The final chapter is concerned with insights on the CI and the Chinese School itself as provided by my participants. It will discuss how people perceive the CI and the Chinese School, what critiques they express and why and how self-reflexively they engage with either of these institutions.

6. Impressions and perceptions about the Confucius

Institute and the Chinese School in Cape Town

*“Phenomenologically speaking, any world that is not a subjectively experienced (erlebte) world within the meaning of this structural definition — in other words, any world that is not a life-world — is a fiction [...]”*⁴³⁹

We have seen in the previous chapter that the observed individuals in this study create sense from their previous gained experiences. They then guide their decision-making process in a similar direction and create a life-world that is specific to each individual. Not only do the majority of the participants possess a set of key experiences that guided them towards engaging with Chinese language, they also were self-reflexively connecting the intention of learning Chinese with these experiences.

After determining perceptions towards China/Taiwan and uncovering motivations towards learning Chinese in the preceding chapter, this final chapter aims to access the experiences these participants had within the CI and the Chinese School respectively. I determine this essential in order to fathom, as mentioned in chapter 1, how the individuals, comprising the micro-layer within this debate, engage with the CI in order to support or challenge pre-established, institutionalized and often superficial impressions of the CIs through their own personalized narratives.

To guide the narrative towards these experiences and the critical thoughts of the participants, I will first provide further insights on how they were introduced to these institutions and why they decided to engage with them. I encourage the reader to channel the previously created settings and the personal experiences I addressed in chapter 4 to create a thorough understanding and the ability to participate as well as reconstruct the situations in which my participants found themselves.

⁴³⁹ (Honer, 2015, p. 546)

6.1. How did they hear about the Confucius Institute

As I addressed above in chapter 4, this CI does not make extensive effort to promote itself within Cape Town society. The only advertisement I encountered was on campus. This mirrors the manner in which most of the participants got to know about this institute.

First of all — and most essential to recognize — is the fact that they did not come across the CI by accident. The search to find an institution to learn Chinese was intended and undeniably connected to previous experiences, and mostly carried out through the Internet.

I found out about it on the Internet, then I enrolled last year in July, so like the second semester. I only moved to Cape Town last year in January and then I enrolled in July for the second semester.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Not only in Mthembi's case but also for Richard, a simple Internet search guided them towards finding the CI. Further visible in several cases was the involvement of a friend or acquaintance that suggested the Confucius Institute for learning Chinese. Interestingly, those friends or acquaintances were previously involved with the CI.

I didn't know about a Confucius Institute at that time. And I didn't get into it enough and I just left [Australia]. And then... it was probably three or four years later that, so last year, that I came across the Confucius Institute and then... I just 'googled' Chinese classes.

So you were just interested?

Interested yeah. And [um] I was in touch then with my girlfriend I have been to Taiwan with, we broke up many years ago, but she is now working at Stellenbosch University and she said then yeah try the Confucius Institute, they have got one in Stellenbosch as well. Yeah it would be worthwhile. So that's, like, the kind of essence.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

However, even though other people suggested or mentioned the existence of the CIs to my participants, it once again became visible that personal experiences and preferences played a part in their decision-making processes. Without the specific will to engage with China or Chinese, individuals are simply not attracted to it. In Luca's case it is pronounced that having an open mind towards other cultures might make engagement with institutions like CIs and/or media specific catering to this interest more likely.

I listened to radio. I was born with no TV but radios. So I like to listen to radios, but shortwave radios, because I can listen to my friends radio stations or also Chinese radio stations or radio stations from the CCTV network. They are broadcasting in English. They also have lessons, Chinese lessons.

So I found out about the Confucius Institute through the Confucius Institute magazine. And then I saw at [my university] you have a Chinese cafeteria and there you have, maybe that is how I found out really about the Confucius Institute. There we have those magazines, quarterly edited by the Confucius Institutes. So I browsed through some of them while eating my lunch at the cafeteria.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

In fact, Luca found out about the CI through the institutes internal magazine, which was distributed in his university. This fact furthermore points towards the argument I established in chapter 4.4., that there is a specific audience targeted by this institute; an audience that is well educated. Pointing in a similar direction is the fact of how Julia and Karen heard about the CI. Since both took credit-bearing language classes at the UCT, they almost naturally encountered the CI on campus, since it is involved with the Chinese language department.⁴⁴⁰

Okay so our classes are 45 minutes.

Oh okay only 45 minutes???

Only 45 minutes exactly [laughing] so you do have to do a lot of work on your own at home yeah.

Do you have homework etc.?

Yeah a lot of homework yeah assignments and tests... We have tests, get tested every alternate week and homework pretty much everyday.

And it is every day 45 minutes?

Yeah Monday to Friday and then there is one extra tutorial session [um] which is also 45 minutes I think yeah... and then we have one lab session which is also 45 minutes and that is supposed to be listening. So you go to the computer lab and they have like audiotapes and like audio files that you listen to.

And who is running these classes, is it the Confucius Institute or do you have a language department?

So there is a language department [um] I guess they had hiring problems trying to find qualified people to teach so they finally found someone last year and [a previous]

⁴⁴⁰ Note: The focus of this thesis is concerned with the experiences and preferences of unstructured Chinese learners, not the language department of the university. This is solemnly pointed out to create an overarching image about the preferences and motivations of my participants.

university professor at Rhodes University and so he is basically the Mandarin department right now. So there is a Confucius Institute on campus but their main purpose is not actually running the classes so they have like students teachers coming from China who did their masters in teaching and then they usually do six months of teaching here. So that's how it has been running so far but obviously things are going to change now because there is actually someone to run the department.

So did you take classes in the Confucius Institute before?

Not at all [laughing].

How do you know all this stuff about it then?

Oh its because we... whenever we had questions for the department we had to talk to the Confucius Institute because they are on campus but then again they are actually not officially in charge of running the language department so there were a lot of wires crossed because obviously that was not what they were supposed to be doing. So yeah and they also didn't know the UCT rules, so there was a lot of confusion between UCT and CI.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Julia got to know about the CI in the same manner, was addressing similar concerns and taking her arguments about not engaging with this CI even further:

And did you consider the Confucius Institute? Did you know that you could take Chinese classes there?

[Um] yeah. I considered it but I thought I am at UCT so I might as well go through UCT. But I will think about it, if I want to advance more. But at the moment I am obviously trying to finish my studies at UCT itself. And Saturday is still moderate the three hours that is fine.

Did you have any contact to the Confucius Institute in anyway?

[Um] yes... well because I told you the communication was very weird between the UCT and the Confucius Institute. We always had to go down to Middle Campus to get to the Confucius Institute and [um] yes sometimes... we kept asking them about HSK. Sometimes it would work out sometimes it wouldn't so yeah. [Um] I am not really willing to go down there to ask for more because for me it seems very disorganized.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

These insights especially point towards a heightened self-reflexivity of my participants. Even though Julia and Karen are exposed to the CI on campus through the credit-bearing Chinese classes and internal university politics, they decided to not engage with the CI additionally and instead gave preference to the Chinese School to pursue unstructured language learning. It further shows,

that even though the CI is connected to the university and the Chinese language department, individuals will still make conscious decisions towards what is best for them — in this case take additional classes at the Chinese School, because the offer at the CI or the university is simply not suitable. This once again points out the dubiousness of the soft power claims.

In Daniela's case this is especially pronounced since she was not engaging with the CI but with the Chinese School in Cape Town, although she knew about the concept of Confucius Institutes and related it to other language and cultural promotional associations.

Mhm [negating] I've heard about it from [my home country]. I think one friend, when I was in India she asked me, when you are [back home] again would you come to the Confucius Institute cuz they have a series of talks with people who lived in China, and they want to... I don't know have me to just talk about China. I thought it was nice but I don't know when I'll be [home] next time. I mean yeah I know about them but I actually attended French lessons before, you know about Alliance Française and stuff like that.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Lastly, and this point is addressing the convenience for people in Cape Town, not everyone is comfortable with using the CI. This highlights the socio-demographic sphere including the safety risks people are facing in Cape Town. These risks are obviously playing into the decision-making process of engaging with the CI.

So you have heard of the Confucius Institute [...]?

Yes but I don't know anything about the Confucius Institute. Only, and I have not heard very much from [Anneke], I just know that that's where she, I think she started off there, at the Confucius Centre. You see I don't know very much about it, because I hadn't ever shown any interest. And when I got to the school here I was quite comfortable being there. **And I didn't think to ask if there is anything else. And had I known about the Confucius School I don't think I would have gone** [emphasis added by the researcher], because it doesn't suit me to go out at night. I would still have gone to [um] the school that I am at now.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

The following section will address why and how the participants engage with the CI.

6.2. Why do they engage with the Confucius Institute

*“Modern life is highly pluralized — that is, it is lived in a market where diverse interpretations of the world are on offer [...]; it is highly optionalized — that is, it is lived under the obligation to choose between alternatives [...]; and it is increasingly individualized — that is, it is lived without subjectively adequate “instructions” [...].”*⁴⁴¹

We have already discussed how the participants of this study formed their image on China and/or Taiwan by tapping into previous individual experiences that ultimately led them to make the choice of learning Chinese; a choice, which reflects the manifold options modern globalized life entails. We further addressed insights on how they discovered the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School as options to engage with Chinese language learning. This next section will focus on additional reasoning why people engage with each institution respectively and in what manner they do so in order to highlight their individual practices and self-reflexivity.

As I pointed out in the previous section, Richard did not know about the Chinese School until several people introduced him to this institution. But he further had specific reasons why he decided to engage with the CI in the first place. Between trusting a previous girlfriend that is involved in China-related studies at a different university, he further recognized that the CI does offer a cheap possibility to engage with the language without strong commitment.

This place is extremely cheap. I mean [it's just] paying for your book and that's it. And then this amazing thing is that they say 'thanks for doing our free course, come on join our summer camp where we pay for half your trip' [laughing]. So yeah I think it, I think that to me was... it took a barrier away to having... to trying it again [to study Chinese]. So I was like apprehensively should I try to have the time maybe twice a week... it was twice per week at that stage and after all, look it can be free languages, you can try it out you pay for the book and... if it doesn't work or I don't like it I am not locked into anything.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

⁴⁴¹ (Honer, 2015, p. 547)

While the affordability of the Chinese classes clearly took Richard's barrier away to actually start getting involved with Chinese again, he further pointed out that it is a good way of trying it and being aware of the fact that if it does not work out you can easily stop attending the class, simply because it is that cheap.

In comparison to Richard, Luca was already engaging with the Chinese School before deciding to also engage with the CI. In his case there is a strong need for objectives and goals in his learning process. He furthermore expressed several thoughts about the Chinese School that guided him towards engaging with the CI as well, as I will address later in chapter 6.6. These goals are strongly connected to obtaining an official proof of his language proficiency, which is offered by the CI in the form of the HSK. He further connects the HSK tests by comparing them to other language proficiency tests.

So in my... at some point I felt like, okay this Chinese School in Liesbeek, in Obs. is a bit too Taiwan centered. So lets see... what... I wanted... I like tests and this test, the HSK, first it's formal and you get a formal acknowledgment, or certificate saying this is your level, second because its going to be useful. [If] I want to find some work in China and [um] also because its just [um]... I like to work by setting objectives or goals. Then it's like... this week I learnt a lot about characters because I had this test [he had taken the HSK that very day] and it's a good way to work. So I wanted to take the HSK I found online, what's the equivalent of the TOEIC or the TOEFL or DELF in Chinese, and I found out about the HSK. And then I saw at [my university] you have a Chinese cafeteria and there you have — maybe that is how I found out really about the Confucius Institute. There we have those magazines, quarterly edited by the Confucius Institutes. So I browsed through some of them while eating my lunch at the cafeteria and I said yeah.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Also Mthembi did not know about the Chinese School initially but her will to engage with the CI is strongly connected to her interest in China's engagement in Africa, as we have addressed above in chapter 5.2. Her incentive to study Chinese was additionally not directed towards the CI per se, but since the CI offered a cheap alternative to pricey private lessons, she decided to enroll for lessons at the CI. Like Richard, she did not give the impression that she is extremely serious about it, but it does create an opportunity for her.

So then obviously I stopped [after leaving the Chinese School she was engaging with as child] and then like after I stopped I wanted to go back and actually learn Mandarin. So this was the opportunity. I don't know I was looking for private lessons but they were working out to be very pricey then I found out about the UCT Confucius Institute. So I don't know where it will take me but I know there are a lot of them inside Africa. They call Chinese the future language to learn. There are a lot of [um] deals between the Chinese government and the South African government where their people, where the government actually pays you to go there and study, learn Mandarin... as well as, you know, English. So I know there is like a whole lot of partnership that is happening between our government and the Chinese government to create jobs and all that. And in turn people learn Mandarin. So that's what they call it now. I don't know where it will take me but for now I will just do it because it is like a half foundation to have it...

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

I was talking to Marlize in order to find out if she would consider going to the Confucius Institute as well. This is when I realized that the socio-demographic location in which a CI is located matters. Because of the issue of safety, Marlize decided not to engage with the CI but rather with the Chinese School, because it simply was more comfortable and perceivably safer for her to attend the classes on Saturday.

I would like to but you know... I know about the Confucius Institute but I am going to be frank with you. I would not... I don't live [close by]. We live in [a part of Cape Town], which is further up that way. I won't drive at night.

Oh that's why. I was wondering...

No I won't. If I... no I wouldn't even... Not anymore I would consider driving at night. It's too far and for me too dangerous, [nervous laugh] to have to come home by myself. So I rather not do it. But I would like to go to class more often. I don't think that they would offer more classes at the school. It's easy for me to go to the school. But I think that school is used as a catering school. It's a catering school during the week. So you wouldn't be able to use it. So... only once per week is not enough. It's not nearly enough. But I am happy with that because there is no urgency for me.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

In Daniela's case there were similar obstacles to those addressed by Marlize. She did not have a car and getting to the CI in the evening only by train posed a security issue, which she wanted to overcome by going together with her friend.

[My friend] told me about the Confucius Institute and I think they are more serious and I am thinking about starting that when [I] come back from India. I don't know when they would open. Yeah I think I will go... It's even more complicated to get there because I don't drive and stuff like that. [...]

It was reading this article; I think it's a South African guy who wrote it. Every four minutes, a woman is raped in South Africa. The title was like, we need to be prepared to being raped something more like it will happen it's just a matter of time. It's so upsetting. So again... I am talking about [my friend] so our way of dealing with that and organizing [he] is making fun of me. But you see he is a tall guy with a dog, even without... [he has] a color... so obviously [he doesn't] have any issues when it's getting dark. For me, I cannot travel after dark and I don't have a car. For me yesterday, to get to [his] place, I had to walk from Gardens to the train station, which Saturday afternoon is not that safe. And get on the train just make sure you take a care where its lots of people and from the train station I walk to your place but this area just these few streets its not safe.

[Anyway going to the CI] I can take the train and get off the nearest and then [my friend] can pick me up from there and we go together... But at least if it's... ok July will be dark and August will be dark but then it starts to get better. It's just nice to practice it with someone.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Nevertheless soon after I left Cape Town Daniela found a job in another Sub-Saharan country, which put her into yet another different situation. Her plans to attend the CI in Cape Town were not realized after all, which reflects the reality that the choice to take Chinese classes at the CI is yet another opportunity along the way, which individuals can never being sure whether or not they will be able to realize.

This next section will highlight the variety of activities in which some of the participants engage with the CI.

CIs in general are known not only for offering language classes, but also cultural activities. The CI in Cape Town, as I have previously discussed, did not offer many of these activities during the time of my field research because not enough people were interested in taking part in these classes. However some of the participants had some experiences and thoughts to share about engaging in some of these festivities.

I was interested in the... apparently they give classes maybe its on Friday here at the CI more about the culture. Maybe they cancelled that one...

[...] When I started here... I asked them if they have calligraphy [...] and she [told me] this year [they] only have Chinese...

Seems so but from the website it seems like last year at least they had... it was offered throughout the year that the course, it was divided into four parts. I know one was calligraphy and the other one was the eight postures of Tai Chi... Sudo, Yoga you know the 'ba bao jian' something like that. So the first part was supposed to be demonstrations and postures. There was a part that was calligraphy. I was interested in that, I am very fond of calligraphy, I want to practice more calligraphy, I wanted to be capable of doing that. So if I could also take that kind of classes about calligraphy here I would be very happy.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

As we already established above Luca is very interested in many different things, it is therefore not surprising that he would have enjoyed pursuing more culturally oriented classes at the CI. Nevertheless — and this has been a distinctive experience with this particular CI — they were not able to offer any cultural classes the semester during which I undertook my field research, not only because of a shortage of teachers, but also because people were simply not interested in taking part in these activities.

Daniela, for example, who was not officially enrolled in Chinese classes at the CI but who had a friend who engaged with the institute on a regular basis, told me about a theatre-like performance that was being held in Cape Town.

Oh we went to the concert, it was a theatre, maybe a month ago. It was a troop from China playing traditional instruments — that one that is like a tube and then you have a little...

Ah that one I think its a calabash or something like that?

So it was pretty nice it was on a Sunday evening. [...] Yeah it was one of those events you know...

How did you get to know about it?

Oh I know... Confucius Institute! They organized it with UCT. Yeah. So [my friends'] teacher from the CI told him about it.

Were there a lot of people?

It was full, mostly Chinese; The Chinese community but also some South Africans.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Interestingly, this opens up a different layer within this research, which points towards a fact that the CI provides these events that attract mainly people from the local Chinese community. Richard also referred to some of these events that were mainly visited by the local Chinese speaking community.

So [the Chinese embassy] arranged this event in the municipal hall in Sea Point and they have this opera company come out, and they do amazing stuff, but it was like, it wasn't opera it was a variety show/circus, but then the component of the opera came in where they had these masks the guys changed and it was phenomenal I mean, it was... quite DIY altogether, not the best thing to meet people but it was an amazing show to watch and it was awesome that they opened it like to anybody, and there were probably like 1000 people there, 90% Chinese. So I wonder where these people come from [laughing]. Everybody was speaking Chinese. And the next one was the 100-year celebration of the People's Republic and they had a full-on banquet and they invited the Confucius Institute classes to go. A full-on banquet, beautiful awesome Chinese food! Calligraphy you could get involved in, lots of speeches, drinks, quite a formal thing... the consulate was there to greet everybody. It was quite cool I thought, you know. I didn't quite interact with Chinese people but it was nice to see them doing their thing you know. I'd love to... I mean if there is more of that for us to be involved than I would love to do more of that. It's quite impressive.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

This experience as described by Richard could be used to argue along the lines of Ding's critique,⁴⁴² which implies that the Chinese government uses CIs to reinforce its 'One-China-Policy' among countries with a strong Chinese speaking community, as previously pointed out (section 2.4.). Since we have already established the fact of Cape Town's long-established and very diverse Chinese community, coming mainly from Taiwan and Hong Kong,⁴⁴³ Richards's observation would support Ding's claim. In combination with what Daniela pointed out, there indeed seems to be a strong focus in organizing these kinds of events by the CI and the Chinese embassy. The will of addressing local non-Chinese speaking individuals seems almost secondary to this undertaking.

⁴⁴² (Ding, 2008)

⁴⁴³ (Yap & Man, 1996)

Apart from the Chinese language classes and sporadic cultural activities organized by the CI, one of the main reasons to interact with the CI was to take the HSK tests at the institute.

Daniela had already pursued this idea for quite a while, but needed some help in terms of learning the characters properly.

I wanted to get the test that you had level 3 HSK by the end of this year.

But you have to write characters... and you need to be able to read them as well.

Yeah...

How much time do you spend learning Chinese each week?

Yeah I work a lot... Sometimes I work weekends... I do practice my vocabulary at least an hour a week, which is... that's very, very little I know. [...] Should I start with the radicals and learn them, what is your approach that you think is the best?

I don't have a specific approach... At the very least radicals didn't help me much I think it's more important to use if you look something up in a dictionary, I don't memorize like ok that character has like a standing man in front of it. Maybe two or three I memorize like that for me its just stupid writing practice.

This is how I memorize the vocabulary, like a copy machine. It sounds very stupid but that's how it is. Actually no... I have this memorizing technique. But I found this book it is called writing 'Chinese Hanzi' I think and I learnt that for each character or for most of them it is good to come up with an interesting story because it helps you. But okay it works for 100 or 200 but when you have 4000 characters, you cannot have that many stories in your mind! It's too much.

I was so disappointed, because when [my friend] had the HSK 1, I was learning with him the 100 characters and I didn't know he doesn't have to write them. I learned the 100 characters; it was two months ago, was it?

The test was April 16th.

Anyway now I tried to write the characters and I forgot so many.

I am fine. Yeah, I mean I just need the time to do that. I like to do repetitive things.

I also like that, because you don't have to think so much.

Yeah it's like meditation, not bad at all. So it's not bad it all I was... yeah... I need to be more organized than... [my friend] hates me for that... that's how it gets done.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Having this conversation with Daniela was interesting because it facilitated a lot of dialogic exchange. When we were talking we exchanged a lot of opinions about traveling, our experiences in China and Taiwan, and our methods for learning Chinese. This exchange for me showed the essence of information exchange in this kind of setting — quite separate from institutional settings like the Chinese School or the CI. Daniela was definitely interested in improving her Chinese along the way, but on her own terms, when suitable and combinable with job, security and budget.

Julia mentioned the HSK examinations in relation to experiences she had with other people and what she thinks about how and why other people are interested in learning Chinese. She saw them as important for people who seek scholarships from the government.

Interesting and are there a lot of different people interested in Chinese, or?

Mostly because they realize there is a lot of, I mean international opportunities, especially scholarships. I think the minimum requirement is HSK 3 for any type of scholarship.

Scholarship from whom?

I think from the government.

From your government?

Yes. Something that... some scholarships do specify HSK 3 level, some of them don't have any requirements at all. But they want to see that you have some kind of prior knowledge of Chinese. So I think it's always better to have an official document, you know, saying or citing your level.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Mthembi also took one of the HSK examinations while I was doing my field research in Cape Town. Her experience and the way she is expressing the outcome once again points towards a direction in which she acknowledges the difficulties she has with Chinese and that she is likely to not pursue it on the side once it gets too difficult for her, especially since she is working a full-time job.

How did your HSK go?

Ah yes. So my HSK went well I thought I would fail that thing! It was so hard. I am not going to lie like the first part was like listening and I mean I could identify some words because we got like 150 characters that we must learn and stuff like that. So the first part you are listening but even the instructions are in Mandarin, so at some point you kind of get lost and then there was a section where you had to

basically complete the sentence, fill in the missing words. I literally thought I failed. I know the... what's her name... Laoshi our teacher said... Or told me that the results were out and I must check them. I went on the site and it was even in MANDARIN [raised voice, slightly angry] I just saw like numbers... But then like... the way that you passed or failed was in Mandarin so I was like... I took a screenshot and I sent it to her and I was like I don't know what's happening and next thing she said... I passed!!! Oh my god what a relief. So now I, at least, am encouraged to do my HSK 2. I don't know how far I will go honestly but I need to be in a place where I constantly am learning...

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Karen, being keen on studying as many languages as possible, simply looked for a confirmation of her abilities — especially with regards to her oral speaking abilities — by taking some of the official tests provided by the CI in Cape Town. However, she further sees it as requisite to keep attending the conversation classes at the Chinese School instead of going to the noncredit bearing Chinese classes of the CI, which would be comparable with my experience in taking the HSK because the CI Cape Town simply does not provide extensive help to prepare for these kind of examinations.

Will you keep doing it next semester?

Mhm [affirmative]. Yeah I will. 'Cuz I also want to prepare for the oral HSK this time. So it does help a lot coming to these classes and actually spending more time speaking rather than doing vocal and tests. And more tests [laughing].

So you rather do the oral HSK next time than doing the HSK 2?

Oh, I have already done HSK2 and I will be writing HSK3 probably this month, next month actually. [Um] and then probably do the oral exam by the end of this year.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Considering the ways in which my participants engage with the CI it proved indeed difficult to draw a line between the engagement purely with the CI and the Chinese School. These people seem to be willing to get the best from both institutions. This therefore underlines again the argument that the institutional choice does not really matter to people as long as it is comfortable to access and affordable enough to fit into their respective lifestyles. Apart from this it further seems evident that the CI focuses on the local Chinese community rather than non-Chinese language learners when it comes to organizing cultural events. I will highlight this further within the following sections by providing

voiced experiences in the Chinese School, reasons for engaging with it and finally tapping into opinions towards both institutions.

6.3. How did they hear about the Chinese School?

My participants went through a similar process of discovering the Chinese School as they did with the CI. First of all, it is noticeable that the will to engage with the Chinese language must be a given. It is highly unlikely to just come across the school by accident since its location is slightly hidden, as I described above in chapter 4. Moreover, especially with reference to Marlize, it is clear that her previous ‘phenomena’ led her to address the official Taiwanese representation in Cape Town (specifically, a man she was previously in contact with to sort out her visa for Taiwan).

How did you find out about the Taiwanese school?

When I decided that I wanted to... I didn't know where to start. I phoned the Taiwan embassy. And there is a very nice guy there called Frank. He does all our visas because we are trying and go there once a year. I just called. I don't know anyone. So I phoned him and I said: "Is there a place or do you know somebody who could teach me" and he said that there is a school. Anyway that's how I found out there was a school and he gave me the number of Helen and I phoned her and she said that they have been going for 22 years already.

(Marlize ‘interview’ June 1, 2016)

Additionally it was rather pronounced that people would hear about the school through word-of-mouth. This is comparable to the way people found out about the CI.

But then again if you have never paid any attention to anything you wouldn't know, that there are things like that. I was shocked when she said that they are there for 22 years and I didn't even know that there was a place like that. Anyway... I went. She gave me the options, I could go to the character classes or I could go to... I had three options. Pronunciation class or conversation and I thought ‘gosh, I need to go to conversation because that is what I want to do; I want to learn how to speak it.’

(Marlize ‘interview’ June 1, 2016)

This line of argumentation is clear in Marlize's narrative, wherein she acknowledges the fact that you need to have a specific intention to look for these places, otherwise you would never be able to find out about them.

In Daniela's case her friend suggested it to her, after he found out that she is also interested in Chinese and that she had lived in China before.

And then how did you find the Chinese School here?

Oh that was with [my friend.]

So he told you about that?

Yeah. We were at a party and he was very funny and he just started Chinese and I think he was very impressed and I was very excited to have someone to talk Chinese to. But he is very interested in the characters not really in the words and I am like [him] you need to learn everything when we go to China!

So he told you about it and you just went oh ok.

He told me about it. At that time I was so restricted with the money. I had the feeling I was not going to make it in Cape Town for a year without being paid. Because Cape Town is more expensive than [my home city]. [There] [...] for a month I spent less than here. And here it's not like... India was so cheap. I was six months with 300 euros, insanely cheap. I learned a lot from my previous boyfriend he was a scrooge. The guy had money he worked for Google he had money... He just didn't spend. So I learnt from him how to buy cheap tickets. And I told him I prefer to spend less on stuff I don't care about which is how I get to India. As long as I get there its fine. I don't care how. So yeah in Cape Town... it was — I wasn't sure if I was going to go to the Chinese School because at the moment I am still living in Gardens, how to get there is by train... that's fine but it was mainly money... And I knew I could learn Chinese by myself. So I guess part of it was because of the food they have there [laughing]. Because it's Chinese food and I missed it a lot.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

However, in her case it further becomes obvious that she is less interested in attending a school because she already has extensive knowledge about the language and is satisfied by learning on her own, if she has time to do so.

All the above-mentioned presuppositions are combined in Karen's case. Not only was she already engaging in credit-bearing Chinese classes at the UCT, she was further open to take extra-curricular lessons outside campus to improve her conversational skills. A friend then referred her to the Chinese conversational class at the Chinese School.

[...] So a friend, who is one of our class mates [at the Chinese School], yeah [um] 'cuz she... she had been looking for extra-curricular lessons for Mandarin and she found out about the Chinese School, the one that we are going to, and also about the Confucius Institute classes,

which are after hours. [Um] yeah and since she couldn't do after hours she signed up for the Chinese School instead.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Julia was also referred to the Chinese School, which is sometimes considered a Taiwanese school as well, by an acquaintance of hers.

Actually I tutored a Chinese student; she was in grade 6 at the time and I knew her through my Chinese doctor. I go to a Chinese doctor [...] [um] and he told me that there was a new student who is — her dad is Chinese and runs a Chinese restaurant and she is struggling with English. So he said please tutor her, and then I found out through her that there is a Taiwanese school.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Nevertheless, some of my participants, who attended only the Chinese classes from the CI, initially have not heard about the Chinese School. Especially Richard, with whom I had my first interview, was very unaware of the existence of the Chinese School.

This Taiwanese school came up. Did you see that in the beginning?

No, no, no idea.

Oh I was wondering because [two of our other classmates] are going there, too.

Uhm... yes... No, I had no idea [...]

So you only had the choice of attending Chinese classes at the Confucius Institute?

Yeah. Well I think it popped up for me first on Google [...].

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

However, not only through engaging in dialogic conversations with me but also through conversations with our classmates at the CI he learnt about the existence of the Chinese School, as I observed after having the interview with him. But, as we will see in the following section, there are several reasons why Richard, and other participants, only engaged with the CI at the time I was interacting with him.

6.4. Why do they engage with the Chinese School?

This next section will focus on reasons why some of the participants decided to engage with the Chinese School while additionally highlighting the way in which they engage with this particular school.

Julia's incentive to join the Chinese School was connected with a rather chaotic experience with the credit-bearing Chinese classes at the UCT. Moreover, she did not enjoy the main focus being grammar at the credit-bearing Chinese classes at the UCT. Because she could not engage properly in conversations, she decided to attend the Chinese School, simply because it suited her own agenda better. And as previously addressed, because of the chaotic experience at the UCT Chinese department, which in her understanding is interlinked with the CI, prevented her from taking non-credit bearing Chinese classes after hours at the CI.

And which department is that [offering credit bearing Chinese classes]?

That was the Chinese department. They go together with the Confucius Institute. But it's difficult to ask them if they are related or not. It is all very complicated because they keep changing directors and all of that.

Is the department changing directors?

Yes or that is what they told us. They said we don't know because this director is new or we don't know this because the new person is coming and so on and so forth. Its a huge — as we say here in Afrikaans a big 'gemors' a big problem or confusion — [laughing]. I decided I rather go to the Saturday school because then it's also more talking, its less writing and less grammar. I don't know they always teach languages, I was taught like this in German, they like to do less talking and more grammar or more literature without actually saying lets talk, lets ask them how to ask for a cup of tea or how to ask for a glass of water. I didn't know that by the end of my first year at UCT. I knew how to ask what painting that was. It was a Chinese painting, what kind of type of a Chinese painting was it... I could describe opera but I couldn't ask for a cup of tea. So it was very advanced compared to normal conversational Chinese. So I wanted to find that conversation so yeah.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Karen also focused on being able to have conversations instead of being exposed to highly academic Chinese, since her interest is in learning yet another language instead of pursuing an academic pathway using Chinese.

Oh! So classes at the Taiwanese School! [Um] why I signed up is because... the university classes are very academically structured which is great, because you do tend to have a large vocabulary, you learn a lot of characters, though one of the key things that is lacking is learning how to speak the language, which was probably the most essential if you want to be able to travel there. Or live there.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Besides focusing on conversational Chinese, Karen further highlights the fact that she does not have a set preference where she learns Chinese as long as it is convenient for her or fits into her schedule.

So about Confucius Institute in terms of teaching language so [Julia] one of our class mates [at the Chinese School], [...] she had been looking for extra-curricular lessons for Mandarin and she found out about the Chinese School, the one that we are going to, and also about the Confucius Institute classes, which are after hours. Yeah and since she couldn't do after hours she signed up for the Chinese School instead.

And you joined her for that?

Well she told me about it during the semester and I was like okay if I don't have... So, last year I had a course on Saturdays, so I couldn't do it. So I was okay, if things clear up the following year then I'll sign up for Chinese there.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Similarly to the CI, the Chinese School offers some cultural activities — not only for their foreign Chinese learners, but also for the established Chinese community — like celebrating Chinese New Year, or Lantern festival.

Luca mentioned that aside from the cultural event he visited (which was organized by the CI), he further attended the celebration of lantern festival at the Chinese School.

I went recently to... there was a Chinese market... from the Chinese School it was in February I think. It was for the lantern festival. Yeah... it was nice. Yeah you meet people.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Further listening to Marlize it became clear that although she was willing to engage with the Chinese School to be able to speak Chinese, the fact that the class takes place only once a week, and with her being quite busy with other things, she acknowledges that she is not putting a lot of effort into learning outside class.

And... what is nice for me is, because, you know I can write the Chinese and I can read it, but I am doing the same thing that I did with my Greek lessons. I did Greek for a year. I could read it and write it but I couldn't speak it. I couldn't speak it... Like I always said that I don't

understand it but I know certain phrases but because I wasn't with Greek people, I wasn't using it. So yes give me the paper and tell me to read that and I can tell you what its about, but I can't anymore because I haven't don't it for 13 years now. I only did the Greek because we used to visit the Greek Isles every two years and after so many years I said to my husband one of us must at least learn how to speak Greek. So I went to an old lady in town. She was so strict Monique [laughing]. She frightened me so badly. I hated going to her [laughing]; a real Greek granny with no patience and no tolerance

[Laughing] I can imagine her.

NO tolerance for idiots. You know I remember her saying to me. 'ochi ochi' every time I had to do something and I thought why is she making this terrible sound. In the mean time 'ochi' meant no! Did she tell me that? NO! So I just continued telling her the wrong thing. Please help yourself to a biscuit. So I am a bit nervous, because I am at the same stage now. Not as bad as I was back then. I can read it and I can writing it, only the pinyin, we didn't do characters last year. And I like it that [Yang] Laoshi is giving us characters but honestly, once I have done the homework I put it away and I forget about it. Because I really don't have space in my head, or even time... to know what the characters are. Unless we use the same characters over and over, then I recognize it. I think I remember it. But I am not going to remember it from a sheet.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Although Daniela did not continue to join the Chinese classes at the Chinese School after a couple of times, she acknowledged the fact that she had agreed to take classes in the first place because of the freshly prepared food they offer during lunch breaks, which she missed dearly from her experience in China and Taiwan.

So I guess part of [engaging with it] was because of the food they have there [laughing].

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

And finally, as previously mentioned, Marlize — and also Daniela to some extent — were concerned with safety issues in regards to learning.

Summarizing these insights on how my participants have come across those institutions and why they engage with them, we can identify some comparisons. Both of the institutions are, if putting a strict focus on non-credit bearing Chinese classes, either subject to personal research in order to find out about them, or dependent on word-of-mouth in order to attract new students, which actually does not seem to be a priority in either case. Furthermore, my participants expressed several preferences that caused them to choose one or

the other of these institutions, some of these being related to a financial aspect, others being part of safety concerns, or simply a matter of disliking the way things are organized. It is therefore possible to argue that the choice of institution is strictly based on individual preferences, preferences that are likely connected to previous experiences of my participants. Neither of these institutions seems to be more ‘powerful’ than the other and in the case of the CI I can draw a preliminary conclusion that it does not possess more influence — especially in terms of soft power — within Cape Town’s society than the Chinese School does. Especially when it comes to shaping the opinions of people who decide to engage with these institutions, I could not find clear evidence about this in either of the cases. But how this opinion in particular is formed will be presented through the individual voices of my participants, referring to both institutions respectively within the following sections of this last chapter. This ethnographic data will then ultimately point towards a final conclusion regarding the standing of the CI in comparison with the Chinese School for individuals who want to learn Chinese in Cape Town.

6.5. What do they think about the Confucius Institute

“If there’s one part of the world where CIs have the potential to shape public opinion, it’s Africa.”⁴⁴⁴

In the previous chapters of this thesis I tried to outline the contentions of the existing debate surrounding the CIs with special focus on the debate concerning CIs in Africa and in South Africa in particular. I provided an extensive auto-ethnographic description of my own experiences in these settings and subsequently uncovered how some individual Chinese learners started to engage with either the CI or the Chinese School, in some cases with both institutions at the same time. Following this I will now provide the most important insights within this context; the self-reflexive opinions about the discussed institutions. However, although this chapter specifically focuses on opinions, I would like to state that throughout the presentation of the data

⁴⁴⁴ (Van den Heever, 2017 referring to Hartig, 2014.)

chapters within this thesis opinions are intertwined with the presentation of the participant's ideas, perceptions and motivations.

To begin with, it is necessary to state that the following opinions are neither 'black nor white'. As with many things that opened up during this research, the participants further underlined the need to get away from stereotypical dichotomies that are present not only within this debate but of many others as well; especially in research strictly focusing on the macro-level. Opinions can be expressed in multiple ways; in a manner that describes positive attributes while further being able to address problematic features. This is the case with the participants' opinions towards the CI. Although they can clearly identify positive attributes in this context they are not afraid from pointing out the features that, according to their preferences, could be improved.

There is a pronounced opinion that the CI is worthwhile attending, especially as Luca points out in his liking towards the videos that the teacher showed at the beginning of each class. Luca almost always showed extreme attentiveness towards the content of these videos by scribbling down cultural attributes introduced therein or by trying to copy the Chinese characters for some of the concepts addressed.

It did contribute to my knowledge of China. About the culture yes... Mostly the short videos we have [in class]. I am so bad with time management. Sometimes I arrive too late and miss part of the first video but it's very nice to have these small videos. It's very, very nice. And I think that we talk more... It's very good to start a class with that and she talks a little bit through it. We don't have that in the Chinese school. The Confucius Institute contributed to my knowledge about China also when we talked about the lantern or the spring festival, what you eat blabla. It's very good to have these short presentations.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Luca further expressed his appreciation about having a relatively small class at the CI with classmates that he perceives as being quite knowledgeable about China, the language and its culture. Although this is a positive thing in regards to the classes at the CI, it is based on his own preference rather than what the CI is providing.

What I like in this class is that we are only a few people and all of us are a bit focused. And we... like you have a strong

background. The guy who was with me today at the level 1 HSK test. Also he has one year of study at least behind him. I only have half a year... and we are all grown up. It's not like the Chinese School where they have kids who are not focused. And [this other woman], as well; she is also with you at the advanced communication class. She doesn't pay attention to the tones though. [...] I think... the group is nice. A small group, there is some kind of uniformity. Sometimes the [other] girl asked a question... And I am surprised she asked basic questions because apparently she has been studying a lot. I don't know I think she was here last time for the whole year. And some of the students the first year students I mean the students who are in the first level. They are only interested in the summer camp.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

By addressing that a lot of people in the beginner's class are simply interested in having a cheap chance to go to China further implies that a lot of people are not really interested in extensively learning Chinese but just rather see it as an opportunity to travel.

For Richard, although he is enjoying what the CI offers, it seems it does not go beyond being a stepping stone towards something else.

I guess I see the Confucius Institute as the gateway to anything else Chinese that I probably come across.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Although perceiving the CI generally as beneficial there are some shared critiques my participants individually addressed throughout the course of my field research. The first being the teaching quality; an opinion which concurs with the generally addressed criticisms connected to the broader debate (section 2.4.).

The English language abilities of the Chinese teachers in particular posed some challenges for my participants.

Mthembi pointed out the difficulties she had with Sunny's English in the beginning but acknowledges in this context, that her vernacular English is probably also difficult to understand for someone who is struggling with intermediate English.

Trust me she is way better now! She is... trust me!! It was bad!!! We had a good end of things. I mean obviously then and there but trust me last year was bad, because it was her first year so obviously like... that's what I am saying. I mean when I convert things from English, obviously I use English concord. It is so hard in Mandarin but it doesn't

even make sense when [she] say[s] it in English. So obviously some words she wouldn't know but I mean like I think living here for a while has really helped in terms of vocabulary.

(Mthembi 'interview' June 3, 2016)

Richard addressed this in combination with pointing out that the teachers he experienced at the CI lacked exposure and experiences themselves with handling classes and additionally with engaging and interacting in English. However, he is still able to identify a positive side effect for himself. In particular the fact that the CI is relatively cheap, helps him to overlook the obvious lack of English of the teachers.

And were the [...] teachers you were talking about, [...] all 'fresh' out of university?

I think so, they all seem quite young, I think limited experience in handling a class and limited hearing levels of English so I think *by far* [Sunny's] English is the best from what I have experienced, which sometimes does make it tricky when you are trying to ask: "What is the slight difference between this and that?" And it takes a long time to get through [to her] and... but you know then the upside is you are listening to her and when they speak you are getting proper, proper exposure. I mean for what you are paying the exposure is amazing, what you are getting is amazing. And they help you with HSK and I see for the first time these events and maybe its just up to the students to push, its easier with a smaller class, a class of 25-30 its... chaos. Our class is a really good size. I'd say probably not more than eight in a class. Eight max.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Seeing Richard's interaction with our teacher in class but also outside during our end of term dinner together helped me additionally realize how his experience as an English teacher most likely influenced his perception towards Sunny, who after all was another young individual trying to gain her first experiences abroad — and by doing so, as Mthembi also addressed, had the chance to improve her English as well.

In order to abide by this thesis' intention to highlight the social layer within this debate I will take the chance to briefly introduce our teacher in order to overcome the marginalized portrayal of not only people who engage with the institutes but further insights on experiences of the volunteers. This will equip the reader with the ability to reconstruct the interaction between teacher and students as pointed out by my participants.

Sunny was from Guangzhou originally and 24 when she started volunteering at the CI in Cape Town.

You know the Confucius Institute is the project from Hanban and eh every year we can apply on the website and it is my first year at the masters and the first time I finished the half first year and then there is a notice that we can apply. Yeah I am starting my master degree and eh the first time I finished the half first year and then there is a notice that we can apply. Yeah and then I apply... I... actually [um] at that time there is [um] three different choices. One is at Mexico the other is at Philippines and the last one is South Africa. And [um] I... **I'd loved to go abroad** [emphasis added by the researcher].

Is that your first time abroad?

Yeah and I searched the Internet and [um]... actually the three countries are very beautiful. The... the one in Philippines is also beautiful and the one in Mexico is at Yucatan, Yucatan province or something like that and its very beautiful. It's the... the original Maya.

Yeah!

It's... it's very beautiful and then I search the Internet of South Africa, of Cape Town... [...] it's adorable I like the sea and the mountain, it's... it's very nice I liked it... and then I... decided because I searched the Internet and it said... here its not that safe, many crimes. I hesitated for a while but at last I came here. I applied [...].

(Sunny 'interview' June 13, 2016)

Throughout my conversation with her I was certain that a big part of making the decision to apply for this volunteer position was the chance for her to see more of the world. Especially because when telling me about her choice to come to South Africa, this was immediately mirrored in her facial expression, which lit up tremendously as if she would want to tell me that this was the most beautiful place she found online.

For Sunny, volunteering at the CI represented an opportunity not only to live abroad, but also to improve her English. The influence of human agency in this process is often overlooked within academia. While Sunny represents just one voice among many, it provides fruitful insights and some more human features of the CI project in general.

However, not having skilled teachers in this context can further be connected to the fact that this CI simply does not care enough to equip the students with substantial Chinese. It further points once again in a direction in which the

unstructured Chinese learners at the CI or the local non-Chinese community do not appear to be the main focus of the CI.

In the course of having Chinese classes at the CI, Richard further addressed the problems he had with the material provided. In this context he further points out that not only he was having troubles with the context of this book but also the teacher additionally agreed that the material is ‘terrible’.

[...] What is your experience so far?

I was a little frustrated I guess with what we have covered in the class, but I mean always felt to learn something and I have had a good time. I think from a materials perspective we had a book that was difficult to use and you know like we cover words, but the words are like: ‘in front, behind, east, west, house, cupboard, chair, next to the sides.’ There is no context in learning it. I found it quite tricky to just using the material and the teachers also said the book is terrible.

The teachers actually say that?

Yeah. Sunny said that about this new book of ours... She said the same thing. She said its quite old and they use old phrases it doesn’t give you much confidence in what you actually study.

(Richard ‘interview’ April 6, 2016)

Richard pointing out that not only did he dislike the material provided, but also his teacher agreed with this opinion. This additionally underlines the need to include individual voices from inside these institutes, not only from individuals in power who structure the output of the CI, but also from those who are simply volunteers. The current debate often represents teachers and volunteers in these institutions as ‘puppets’ of the Chinese government who cannot address negative features concerning CIs or concepts like the ‘One-China-Policy’ etc., which the government is not comfortable discussing. I have previously outlined this in chapter 2.4.

Issues concerning the structure of the Chinese classes were an additional point made by Richard.

I think the class was called conversation something, if I remember correctly but we didn’t speak.

In the beginner’s class or ours?

Yeah the beginners. And we didn’t do much speaking at all. I felt we lost quite a bit of ground stalling with things when new class members would start. We backtracked to catch

everybody up and then we had university holidays and came back and kind of start again. If you did homework or not, no one checked. So I didn't feel I guess if there was... or the class was being aligned to an outcome. Whether its a speaking outcome or a writing outcome a bit of everything outcome... so a little bit frustrating from that perspective but I still feel it's the most feasible way for me to learn Chinese.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

While this problem is clearly linked to the beginner's class it seems that there is not a lot of focus laid upon progressing at a decent speed within class. This could point towards teachers being ill-equipped for handling large classes in general or simply to a lack of interest in providing the Chinese learners with comprehensive Chinese. Nevertheless, Richard summarized this in his usual self-reflexive manner implying that it is difficult to address structural difficulties in class:

I think as beginners we are so susceptible to anything. So you could literally give us a bad or a good book so that we wouldn't actually know until little time into the course but maybe I want to do a bit more on this paper or I want to focus more on that and if there is opportunity to engage with the students then, lets say for the first semester, that would be great. And they would actively seek out inquiries from students. I am not always one who naturally would go and slot into a system and then say: "Hey lets do it differently." I kind of feel like I am there, the Confucius Institute must surely know what it's doing. And I must restructure, I must fit in, or not and go. But you know in having the conversations with [Libby]⁴⁴⁵ previously, I mean she wasn't animatedly saying yes or no but I think it probably came down to: "this is the book that we are using and not..." So yeah I think it was some level of understanding. Everything saying yes we can do that but it comes back to: "We are in this book now and the next chapter is this so we just work through it." And then one quickly forgets because you have to move through these chapters and what you discuss is going partly outside of the structure. So yeah but [um] the teacher are quite, or from what I understand, they are quite young [...].

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Finally he points out, that although he likes the classes there is, at least in his opinion, a need for a different structure in order to achieve solid learning progress. He is further aware that there is no strong commitment and that in the end it is simply dependent on each individual how he or she approaches it because the CI will not provide extensive help on that.

⁴⁴⁵ A pseudonym has been used in order to maintain the participant's anonymity.

I think... one big draw card was the fact that there is no commitment, like you just go and see is it something I can do, do I have the time, is it a lot of homework, is it a lot of class time. But I mean [...] [um] I think the fact that it is connected to the university gives you confidence in the quality of their work or the course. Yeah I think I am still getting value out of it. What I find — it's really up to you, cuz they are not gonna check your homework, making sure you do everything properly. There is probably not enough time or maybe it just needs to be structured differently, but I still feel I enjoy the courses — I just think their needs to be more structure. So like: “We are gonna end here or the first two months we going to finish these chapters, you going to be able to talk about these things, or we will work towards this goal.” And... or to prepare us towards HSK maybe have conversations that half class is HSK prep other half is... just so you know where you are heading.

So it's a lot of self-study?

Yeah, yeah, which is difficult. I mean if you really want to you should be able to do it.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Regarding these structural issues, which Richard in particular expressed rather extensively, my participants offered some additional suggestions on how to improve the quality of the Chinese classes at this particular CI.

Although Luca enjoyed the cultural input through the videos shown during class he further acknowledged that the integration of the information within those videos could be better.

Maybe we should write... just after [the video] we should write the characters. You know it's always like... we had one... 'shuzi', that emperor. You always have two characters; last time we had the son... Maybe at the end she should just leave the last frame of the video where you have the picture so we can write those last characters as an additional practice, linked to that video. No I am very happy with these videos and also about the fact that the Chinese teacher talks about these traditions etc., in that sense, I am very happy with the classes at the CI. It complements with what I have from... what I get from that Chinese School.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

This is a constructive criticism that further points towards Luca's personal preferences. While Luca showed extreme interest in Chinese characters, the other class members were not extremely bothered with learning characters as quickly as possible.

Although the CI project in general vouches to train local teachers of Chinese, there was no such evidence observable within this particular institute. Richard however believed that this possibility would be beneficial for foreign Chinese language students, since those teachers might be more understanding towards the struggles of local students.

It probably does make it more accessible to locals and you have got people who are, I guess, guiding the course with a perspective of students to know how hard it is you know what worked in terms of motivation. One of the things I find interesting and frustrating, it would be very different I think, if more South Africans would be involved.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Richard seems to be a very positive person in general. He further underlined the need to look beyond dichotomies — although being beneficial for him in general he argues that he would, based on his personal preference, like to see changes in teaching wards including additional facts about China in general in order to go beyond the abstractness of what they are learning in class.

Would you say the Confucius Institute helps you with general knowledge about China?

Definitely!

Do you learn a lot from the classes?

Not enough I think. I don't know yet exactly what I like. Actually I do know [jokingly]. I'd like progress into the language that I can track and I understand and if one could do that efficiently in the class to use say 15 minutes of an hour and a half. To learn something cultural I think that would be quite fun, or half an hour if you know that you expect all the students to have done their homework and you efficiently go through the homework and you check things, you talk. You dedicate the next half an hour to speaking and conversation the next half hour to do something cultural, whether you are writing or watching a movie or learning about some festival I would love to learn more about those things. All we do come across is interesting, if there is more I think it would be quite cool, because as I said it is quite different, the language is so different but the culture and everything about it is so different too. I mean she can show me anything else and I would be like: 'wow' and... even if its like stats on the country on how many people live in urban areas and how many don't, the rundown on Shanghai, Beijing what are the top things that people do and see. Like the financial center...

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Finally, the concluding questions Richards asked me during the interview became essential to my thought process. Especially — as I have been arguing throughout this thesis — the insights of individuals provide more nuanced

opinions and additionally add a social layer to the existing debate, which is so heavily influenced by the soft power discussion. Having dialogic exchange with Richard proved once again the value of this undertaking.

So you aim just to help the Confucius Institute in the end?

Well, my aim is to represent the voices of the people who take part in the Confucius Institute in comparison to the voices from above, directors etc.

So you can say to any... anybody who is looking... to any of the existing structures out there... You can say: "By the way grassroots research shows that this is what students of China are looking for... And it might clash with some of the things you do or might agree with."

Yeah that's it.

I think its really, really valuable. Because there is obviously or especially through the Confucius Institutes there is this spider web of infrastructure that has been put out there that is not meeting the aim of students that want to engage. It should be improved.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

By making this statement he not only agreed with the value of this research, he once again pointed out that the structures of the CI in regards to its Chinese classes needs improvement if they want to actually please the people on the ground engaging with it.

In order to provide a comparison, this next section will provide opinions on the Chinese classes at the Chinese School.

6.6. What do they think about the Chinese School?

To provide a point of comparison concerning the opinions and perceptions of the participants towards the Chinese classes at the CI, this section will consequently present those opinions directed towards the Chinese School.

Starting with some positive attributes of the Chinese School in general, Luca provided his opinion on Chinese learning at the Chinese School on the basis of his academic and political interest by clearly drawing the lines between the Chinese-run and Taiwanese-run facility. He points out the example of different spelling systems that he was required to get used to, but sees this as compelling aspect.

It's very Taiwanese, it's clearly... they work more with 'bopomofo' some teachers, I had a very good teacher, she

was young and born in South Africa and she was used to and knew very well 'pinyin'. Now I have a new teacher since last week, she doesn't know pinyin and she makes mistakes when she writes in pinyin for us. So she is used to write in characters and otherwise she is learnt with the 'bopomofo', so the — basically the basic strokes that you combine, its very different. So that school is very Taiwanese — it's really the Taiwanese viewpoint. It's interesting!

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Although Daniela decided to stop joining the Chinese classes at the Chinese School after a couple of lessons, she still got some value out of it; emotional value in particular, since it obviously reminded her strongly of her time living in a Chinese speaking environment.

I enjoyed the first few times, it was nice to hear again you know the mistakes Chinese make when they speak English and making mistakes, like when they use 'too' instead of 'very'.

(Daniela 'interview' June 12, 2016)

Julia's enjoyment of the Chinese classes is rather focused on the fact that she receives a lot of her cultural knowledge from the Chinese School and people she meets there. Because she already took extensively grammar-oriented Chinese at the UCT, she often expressed that she enjoys the strong focus of the conversational Chinese at this school, as I have addressed previously above.

I get culture from the Chinese classes quite a lot and the people I interact with.

(Julia 'interview' June 28, 2016)

Karen, having been in a similar situation to Julia in taking heavily academic Chinese at the UCT, was also looking for a more practical approach to Chinese language.

I got to realize that I would — probably had to take a separate conversation class, like while I was still doing university class during the second semester uhm to be able to make up for that. And that is why the Chinese school classes uhm. They are not just more interesting but they feel more practical because of that. There is a goal attached to that.

(Karen 'interview' June 23, 2016)

Although the participants clearly liked the content and the practical orientation of this Chinese class, there were, similar to the complaints about the CI Chinese class, some concerns about teaching methods.

I do feel though that, not our group now, but I do feel that the school could be run more efficiently and that the teachers could be more... well it's my... well it was our

teacher last year. Nobody ever checked on what she was doing, we do for example have a textbook, we never touched it, we never opened it. She did [um] she said she preferred to do her own thing off the cuff. But nothing ever flowed. Like we didn't do what we are doing now. You know.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize pointed out that she was rather upset that their previous teacher could not live up with the (very specific but comprehensible) expectations she had. According to Marlize the teacher progressed rapidly through content without giving the students time to internalize the given information. Furthermore, Marlize described that the teacher neither used the available material, nor tried to cater to the students needs in general.

We get lesson sheets and we know what is on that lesson sheet and we know what the vocabulary is and I know when I go next week she is going to be asking us on Saturday about the clothes and about the colors... I know that. But I used to be in such a state thinking what are we going to do now, because I still don't know... I don't understand the previous weeks work yet, but then we would go on to something new. And trust me, a little thing like this drove me nuts, if that's your board [gesturing to imagine a board], that teacher always wrote from that side [gesturing from right to left] to that side and then go back to the middle. Ha ha. This is a personal thing. When I was teaching, we had black boards, you would write from left to right, because that is how we read, so by the time you get to that side the children who were slower can still write down what's here [gesturing again] 'cuz it makes sense. But when things are mixed... it was such a mixed up model, it was like taking your clothes, your white and dark clothes and putting it in the washing machine together and mixing it up. And I just say to her: "Please can you start there or please can you just finish here... and then go there..." and then she is already wiping that out but we haven't... even put that down on our notes yet... [chuckling] And I did, this is very important, when I was there for a few weeks, I felt like I... I wanted to say to her: 'Don't treat me as an adult learning Chinese, pretend I am the grade 1 learning Chinese. That is how I want to learn it.' And I am going to say the same thing to you, I would prefer to have been, to have started at the beginning, basic level. No matter how long it takes me. So that I know if my foundation was strong I could build the walls, I could put on the roofs and put in the windows and the doors. But I didn't want to start walls and then putting on a roof and going back to the foundation... it made no sense to me. So my whole year last year was mixed up.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Marlize voiced an additional complaint concerning the spelling system her previous teacher used, but did not properly explain to newly arriving students.

[...] She didn't even say that the bopomofo was the alphabet. She just spoke about this bopomofo, bopomofo... and I was thinking: "What is... what is bopomofo...?" Until she wrote on the board... in fact at the end of the lesson she said, if I brought her a little stick, now please keep bearing in mind, that it was the first time that I am in that class but a lot of those kids, it was their third year, so they knew what bopomofo was and those Chinese people knew what bopomofo was. Anyway then I learnt... I went to her... and I thought: "Oh my gosh... its the..." Anyway I don't want to talk about that crusade I would just be grumping about that class... I would really be grumping about this... And I kept thinking the parents... those children that have been sitting here for three years. Why haven't they come to inquire? How come the child is back yet, cuz they weren't even making 30%.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

In Marlize's case it became quickly obvious that she is not unhappy with the actual spelling system but rather with the way her first Chinese teacher at this school was using it.

However, this complaint seems to be targeted towards a specific teacher. Marlize had a much more positive opinion towards her current teacher, whose teaching method she deeply appreciated for its practicality.

I love this year! It's going smooth... I didn't know... I never say that to her because I didn't want to offend, I just wanted to say, please teach us, give us a foundation first and then put up these walls and then come up with this very advance language sentences that we have to translate. That's not what's the conversation was about. [Um] [Yang] Laoshi teaches us how to speak, how to greet. I can go outside now and I can go order a 'danbing' in Chinese. I can go to the... 'Fenglishu man' and ask him and he gets so happy. He claps for me every time I come [claps].

[...] You weren't there in the beginning. She has written something for everybody... you could either go to the Principal or you could go to the librarian or go to another teacher or you had to go outside. But we had to go and ask them something in Chinese. And we had to write their answer, that they said and come back and tell them. It was an epiphany for me. Thank this!! I want to do this!!! Because I go there all the time and I kind of want to say something but I am so scared that I am going to say it the wrong way... No I think this class... **I am going to keep moving up with her... long after you are gone we will just keep moving up with [Yang] Laoshi** [emphasis added by the researcher]. And I am sure she is going to get us to a stage where we are actually going to be quite confident. [...] We are very lucky that we got her. I don't know where... I don't think she was there before. Or I just didn't notice her. The reason why we are stuck in that little kitchen is because they don't have a classroom for us. They were only expecting there to be five of us. Look at us now. We can barely fit into that room.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

Given this specific insight provided by Marlize, it is possible to argue that these kinds of classes always rise and fall with the individual teachers. While some are not properly prepared, others seem to be extraordinarily able to cater to the needs of the students. This argument is surely applicable towards the teaching situation at the CI, as we have seen in the complaints in the previous section. The Chinese School has a strong focus in integrating the Chinese/Taiwanese community — in fact, this school was created for providing Chinese-language education for second or third generation Chinese-born South Africans with parents from mainly Taiwan and Hong Kong (but also from Mainland China as we established above in chapter 4). It is therefore inferable that foreign Chinese learners are, similar to the undertakings of the CI, secondary to this particular school.

Luca stated in his opinion on the CI that he prefers small classes with classmates who show interest in what they are doing. It is therefore no surprise that his opinion towards the large Chinese School classes is rather negative.

So in that class it's very mixed. In terms of we have school children; we have people in these classes who don't really have a genuine interest in learning Chinese. Like I have a kid in my class. He is ten years or something like that. They are not very focused and they are there because the parents say you are going to go to those classes on Saturday. So poor kids they... I understand that they are sometimes not genuinely interested and then so... They cannot focus for a long time or be just serious about it. So sometimes it's just random questions coming up in the middle of an explanation about talking about his own experience and we have very young kids, too. Now, this year we have a very young girl coming with her mum. The mum speaks Chinese and the young girl is very timid and she is like six something like that. You cannot expect them to go at the same pace. So I was slightly frustrated.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

Especially the fact that these classes are not structured towards specific needs of specific ages, caused frustration. Also Marlize addressed the fact of the heterogeneous composition of these classes.

And I told [the director] how old I was and I told her that I was a grandmother so I presumed... well I took it for granted... I thought it would be an adult class, and my goodness and I arrived there and I am in this class with all these children. Fortunately, for me there were two young guys, one from New Zealand and one from Australia. They were both Engineers, young guys; they were in their early 30s. And there was another boy; He was South African, a

Muslim boy [...]. His girlfriend was Taiwanese and she would come to the pronunciation class. She was an adult but she was with all the five and six year olds [laughing]. And there was another lady who joined us but she didn't stay. And then we had all of these younger children up until... I think from about age nine to age 12. And then we had a high school student and his brother who was already at university but they were all Chinese. Their parents just wanted them to do a better job on their Chinese. It was difficult. It was very difficult.

(Marlize 'interview' June 1, 2016)

In summary, we can see that although the opinions about the Chinese School are slightly more positive, the complaints are pointing in a similar direction. The opinions voiced by the participants are highlighting that these classes are on the one hand very useful because instead of focusing on grammar, they are structured on very practical things. On the other hand, however, my informants voiced disagreement with some of the teaching styles as well as the composition of the classes, combining beginners of different ages in one class, which does not fit well with personal learning preferences. We have to keep in mind that these opinions are intertwined with individual preferences; if these preferences are not met, I further realized that my participants turn to yet other methods in order to achieve their specific goals and therefore also away from institutional Chinese learning. This aspect will be the focus of the next section.

6.7. Practice of learning Chinese

I decided to include this last section in order to highlight the fact that the opinions expressed by the participants show that neither the CI nor the Chinese School meet their expectations entirely.

While some are satisfied with slower progress, others decide to engage in a combination of different Chinese classes, independent of the origin of those institutions (as visible throughout the data chapters 4 to 6 of this thesis). However, a large group of my participants frequently addressed their use of additional material for self-study in order to overcome shortages, which further restricts the importance of the existing institutions.

There are several online services my participants are using for their self-studies.

One of these services, referred to by Marlize, referred to is “Chinese with Mike”⁴⁴⁶ which is an online platform with a rather sketchy looking American public figure called ‘Mike Laoshi’ who provides short, purchasable instructional videos.

I only did well because I did a lot of work on my own. I tell you what I did. I went strolling on the net and I found Mike laoshi [...] it’s a program called ‘Chinese with Mike’. It’s an American guy, who teaches Chinese. He doesn’t do it as well as [Yang] Laoshi does it... He has little blocks... he will for example do [um]... he’ll deal with ‘hen’ and then he’ll deal with ‘hao’ and he takes little bits but he makes you familiar with all the things and then gives you little sentences and very short passages and you must choose the right words.

(Marlize ‘interview’ June 1, 2016)

A second online tool for learning Chinese that was mentioned not only by Marlize but also Daniela is “ChinesePod”⁴⁴⁷. This second platform however seemed to be less effective for her, which is why she quit using it once the teacher of the Chinese School improved.

While this service claims to be the longest-running Chinese learning online platform, with 3500+ instructional videos and lessons,⁴⁴⁸ it is not entirely transparent from their website who the founder is or if it is connected to other facilities.

However, Marlize seemed to have been using it upon the suggestion of a classmate and was generally satisfied with it. Nevertheless she decided to continue using ‘Chinese with Mike’ instead of ‘ChinesePod’ because it appeared to be more effective for her in combination with having a new teacher.

And then I found ‘ChinesePod’ thanks to... [Anneke]. Hell [Anneke] knows everything, but she is doing it for quite a while. ‘ChinesePod’ was very good as well, but I cancelled ‘ChinesePod’ when I started with [Yang] Laoshi, cuz I don’t have time to do ‘ChinesePod’...

(Marlize ‘interview’ June 1, 2016)

Marlize further implies here that she could only keep up with the classes of her initial teacher, because she invested a lot of time in self-studying. Also Daniela made frequent use of ‘ChinesePod’, because it proved easy to improve her

⁴⁴⁶ (Chinese with Mike, 2010)

⁴⁴⁷ (ChinesePod Ltd., 2015-2018)

⁴⁴⁸ (ChinesePod Ltd., 2015-2018)

listening skills without having a teacher or attending a class. She makes additionally use of CCTV and the ‘New Practical Reader’, which is a much-liked Chinese workbook series.

‘ChinesePod’. The first level, they have so much English in it you get tired of how much they are speaking but from level 2 upper intermediate they only speak Chinese, which is nice. So even if I don’t understand I listen to them, because it’s the tones. So its just you know good if you listen to that sound. And then I use the new practical ones, YouTube videos, and the CCTV, I’m using the growing up with Chinese, do you know that one?

(Daniela ‘interview’ June 12, 2016)

Daniela additionally suggested an app called “Memrise”⁴⁴⁹ which helps her in repeating vocabulary and which is also connected to the ‘ChinesePod’ platform. This app has been founded in London, UK,⁴⁵⁰ in comparison to the other two Chinese learning platforms, which were founded in the United States and China. This platform further offers various other online language courses apart from Chinese.

They give you a little bit of cultural context. The American lady speaks very good Chinese because she is half Chinese or something. So I am using that one a lot. The course is on that ‘Memrise’.

So it’s like ‘Duolingo’ and all these websites. But I like ‘Memrise’ and it has this very cute approach you can create courses. [...] And you create courses — but its all in pinyin — you start one lesson – but I was interested in characters. And you start one lesson you learn the words and you are prompted to write the translation in Chinese — in pinyin. And at the end of it, if you go through all the new words it’s like if you plant a small seed and then the program memorizes the words you don’t know very well or the time that you take to answer or the words you don’t remember and they give you the answer, so next time you log in, it gives you the words you did not remember. The more you practice them the seed goes bigger and you have the flowers at the end which you have to water its really cute.

How did you find out about it?

[Laughing] I don’t know when you don’t have... You know how to learn Chinese without a teacher and stuff like that. So that is very good for vocabulary. And I still do that.

(Daniela ‘interview’ June 12, 2016)

It becomes obvious from Daniela’s example that Chinese learners are not dependent on institutes like the CIs anymore. A global network of information

⁴⁴⁹ (Memrise, 2010)

⁴⁵⁰ (Crunchbase, 2018)

exchange simplifies the search for Chinese online learning platforms and therefore takes away, according to preference, the necessity to even engage with institutions.

Richard, on the other hand, highlighted the fact that he is not always interested in studying outside the classes because he does not have much time. However, if connected to a goal like taking the HSK test, he would study periodically.

Do you study a lot of Chinese or do you mainly just go to the class?

I go through phases, as all students do, I think. I think now the HSK is coming up, it gives me a bit of purpose and structure. My girlfriend is doing her Masters' part time. So after work but she is studying so it gives me also a bit of focus in times she studies. And I really like having found this HSK and having signed up it really does give me purpose so — but now I am obviously studying and I think once you get into the rhythm of this new class and this new book without Easter and public holidays I actually will probably do — probably an hour outside of class, which isn't much but I think its enough to review what we have done in class.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

Nonetheless, he, too would like to find additional material that would help him to improve his listening skills, while driving to work for example.

I would actually like to find a good audio resource to listen to in the car. There must be something. Because I spend a lot of time in the car and if you just have these sounds permeating into your brain I think it will be quite useful.

Didn't you get a CD with the book [we use in class]?

Yes. I would love to [listen to this one], I have listened to the CD as part of the book previously but without the book they don't really have much context. So something that is purely designed for audio instead of introducing the chapter properly, the guy speaking it, it says what you doing and what's happening. A self-study, all on audio.

(Richard 'interview' April 6, 2016)

In his case it is evident that he has not spent much time in actually finding supporting material outside class, which once again underlines individual preferences with regards to learning Chinese.

Lastly, Luca, apart from listening to CCTV and reading many different books to broaden his background knowledge, as I have outlined in the previous sections, enjoys practicing mainly characters, if he has time to do so. By

somewhat crafting his own flash cards he is repeating the meanings and practicing the writing of each character.

My problem is that I have so much work these days because I am lecturing and I am also trying to do my research. No I am lecturing full-time this year. I have two groups for the lectures so I repeat myself twice or three times a week and I have... I give a couple of research lectures a week so for me it's six times one hour for lectures etc., it's crazy and not very healthy. Next year I will not teach lectures as much. So I would like to spend more time at home. I mean I read this book about Chinese characters... I did some calligraphy and flashcards. I love that. But initially my project was to do... I have cut 150 flashcards in cardboard paper. But before I write the character on the paper I wanted to make sure I practice it before. I want to stick to the proper order. So it's very time consuming, it is not very reasonable... I wouldn't have been able but I would have like to write those 150 flashcards before the [HSK] test today. Its something I wanted to do.

(Luca 'interview' April 16, 2016)

In this final section I have highlighted the creativity of Chinese students in finding additional learning materials. This behavior relates to the fact that, in this specific case, neither the CI nor the Chinese School offer an all-encompassing, satisfactory experience for these Chinese learners, which is why the majority of them search for supporting measures. This proved yet again that the institutional necessity of especially the CI in Cape Town becomes somewhat obsolete. It further highlights the fact that the provision of these Chinese classes, as taken by my participants, cannot really be the main focus of either of these institutions.

6.8. Summary

We have established that people in Cape Town need a specific incentive to engage with Chinese in order to motivate them to find an appropriate language school. We have further seen that an immense part of getting to know about these facilities in the first place is through word-of-mouth. Once the decision has been made to engage with Chinese, the institution they learn at does not seem important to the participants; their personal preferences are more decisive factors.

We have further observed that my participants expressed the need for improvement in both Chinese classes. Although the Chinese School was met with a slightly better reception in general, the participants expressed shortcomings with regards especially to teaching and structural issues in regards to both institutes. However, these shortcomings gave incentive to the participants to engage in self-study behavior and hence show, that they have a great deal of self-reflexive comprehension regarding to their individual preferences. The effect of soft power was cancelled out through the self-reflexive agency of the participants. The usual soft power claims further appeared redundant in regards to the micro-level, since these individuals chose according to their preferences. These preferences were specifically designed by each individual and depending on their previous experiences. This becomes obvious in particular when considering that people did not favor any of these two institutions in question based on their portrayal of China or Taiwan but on the individual inclinations towards teaching styles, time the classes were offered or convenience in terms of safety.

Finally it became pronounced that both institutions somewhat favor the local Chinese community, instead of advertising the classes to more people who are not obviously connected to this community. It appears that although teaching Chinese to locals that are not involved generally in the Chinese-speaking community is not completely incidental, it is also not given great importance in the day-to-day running of these institutes.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation has offered a strictly qualitative study on the perceptions and experiences of unstructured Chinese learners attending Chinese classes at the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School in Cape Town. The focus of this effort was to address participating individuals' motivations for learning Chinese, their current perceptions of China/Taiwan, and their future intentions with regards to this, as well as attempting to understand their opinions towards the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School Cape Town and the specific reasons why they engage with either of these institutions. The overarching aim of this thesis has been to challenge pre-existing literature on the debate surrounding Confucius Institutes in Africa, and in South Africa particular, in order to oppose the overwhelming focus on macro-level accounts. And furthermore to counter the static discourse of CIs as a means to question the soft power argumentations by highlighting personalized narratives. To confront this unbalanced presentation, a theoretical and methodological framework based on phenomenological aspirations combined with dialogic comprehension, specifically tailored towards unraveling the so often marginalized micro-narratives within this debate, has been utilized for this undertaking. This is why this research aspired to specifically present and highlight the social component within the debate by considering the role of individual life-worlds and the ability to self-reflexively create meaning on the basis of previous experiences, as opposed to the mainstream reports that are oftentimes monopolized by institutional structures and political generalizations. By doing so, this study's contribution to academia lies within the facilitation of local — but unstructured — Chinese learners in Cape Town to use their own voices in order to describe their experiences, perceptions and motivations with regards to engaging with the Confucius Institute and the Chinese School in Cape Town.

Although this thesis set out to challenge the dominant manner of approaching the role of Confucius Institutes, it does not wish to refute these pre-existing concepts that are used on the macro-level. It is necessary to state that the Confucius Institutes are connected the PRC's soft power intentions as visible

by official statements. However, and that is what this research is proving, on the micro-level concept like soft power that are usually so heavily used without questioning their actual outreach, seem redundant. With this outcome it becomes even clearer that macro-level research is often too generalized and refrains from considering how generally accepted concepts — especially within International Relations (IR) research — like soft power are not traceable on the micro-level. This research therefore wishes to guide the importance of this thesis away from a framework that is strictly based on IR theories towards the anthropological layer that is hidden within these institutions, in order to open up a more nuanced presentation of the Confucius Institutes.

What this thesis is presenting in-depth is an insight into the participants' life-worlds. By combining an auto-ethnographic approach with an ethnographic research frame, I was able to get first hand insights into how people engage with not only the Confucius Institute in question but also the Taiwanese-funded Chinese School of Cape Town. In going through the same processes at these Chinese language and culture promotional associations, I was able to create — by measuring my participants experiences against my own — an in-depth understanding of my participants which was consequently transformed into an anthropological narrative capturing their voices and opinions. Through detailed elucidation of the auto-ethnographic and ethnographic research narratives I was then able to extrapolate the following results:

- i. In order to wield soft power effectively the Confucius Institute would either need to occupy the monopoly on providing Chinese language and cultural classes in order to effectively convey a particular image or the Confucius Institute would need to perform exceptionally well among the competition. However, neither of these prerequisites is given. Instead, there is a local Chinese School located in Cape Town, which partly benefits from money that has been given by a Taiwanese government body. Additionally, there is no obvious competition between these institutions detectable; they rather ignore each other largely and operate on their own terms.

- ii. The soft power debate presumes that the individuals who engage with the Confucius Institute are attentive and receptive, instead these unstructured Chinese learners proved to be independent from the Confucius Institute. They make decisions based on a diverse range of past experiences. They are self-reflexive enough to be critical of any propaganda efforts of the Confucius Institute and follow personal reasons and motivations to study Chinese based on previously gained experiences.
- iii. Soft power presumes an unconditionally receptive audience. However, it became obvious that Chinese learners in Cape Town have choices and are willing to exercise them based on personal preferences. They do not follow ideological reasons when deciding on the respective institute/ school to attend. They attend classes according to their preferences in — for example — accessibility, class and teaching styles. These preferences result in identifications of shortcomings at both institutions. This in turn results in information exchange between these Chinese learners in terms of self-study material and ultimately also takes away from the institutional importance of either of the two examples.
- iv. Soft power entails the conveyance of a clear message. However neither the Confucius Institute nor the Chinese School in Cape Town portray particular effort to invest in large-scale advertisement about their Chinese classes outside their respective spheres. It is therefore largely depending on the individuals to make the decision to engage with the Chinese language first, which than limits the community of Chinese learners in general.
- v. Lastly, soft power requires a specific focus on the target audience, but both Confucius Institute and Chinese School are more focused on engaging the local Chinese speaking communities in their cultural activities rather than on providing services across Cape Town. It is therefore obvious that although the goal of Chinese teaching to locals who are not involved in the Chinese speaking community is not incidental at these institutions, there is also a lack of evidence attesting

to any great importance being attached to this aspect of the institutions' agenda.

Thus, it is identifiable that the Confucius Institute itself does not play a principal role among the unstructured, self-inflicted Chinese learners in Cape Town, especially since there are other opportunities available that are connected to competing state-entities. The concept of soft power seems of ambiguous relevance at best in regards to the micro-level, as people who engage with these institutions are not only aware of the concept itself, but further are self-reflexive enough to draw a line between learning a new language and favoring a foreign government. Additionally, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact influence and functioning of the soft power agenda because of the tendency of individuals to access information from multiple sites — not only the Confucius Institute but also the Chinese School and, of course, the Internet.

7.1. Implications

Existing frames within the debate on this research topic were analyzed in chapter 2 of this thesis. As previously mentioned, these frames too often represent the agency of African countries as inferior — or simply non-existent — when discussing China's economic and financial involvement on the African continent. This thesis does not aim to present China (PRC) as a strictly benevolent actor within this context, especially with regards to the debate surrounding the CIs, but rather to encourage more interdisciplinary research in order to provide a more polyphonic representation in academia and the media. I deem this especially important with regard to the people on the ground. In particular, accounts like Shishuwa's, who mentions: “[f]or African cultures, [which are] already beleaguered by centuries of Western domination and operating within the imperial supremacist economic and social structures [that it would] make Africa [a] fertile ground for neo-colonialism, the rise of Chinese Confucius schools [thus] poses several threats.”⁴⁵¹ By joining the accusation of neo-colonialism in regards to the CIs the author implies a significant impact on African culture, thus effectively ignoring the agency of

⁴⁵¹ (Shishuwa, 2015)

the local people engaging with these institutions and their reflective abilities. This, ironically, simply reinforces the very neo-colonialist narratives that he argues against, by implying that local people can be influenced just by learning a new language.

Secondly, during the extensive dialogic interactions and conversations with not only my participants but with many different types of people in Cape Town, I arrived at the opinion that there is a considerable difference between ‘anti-China’, ‘pro-China’ and ‘not-anti China’. The way that individuals who had decided to learn Chinese or to learn about Chinese culture perceived China was not strictly black and white. It therefore is of utmost importance that research, especially that which concerns international relations or political economy, provides and considers more of the existing facets of a given debate — which, ultimately, can only be included within research that is open to interdisciplinary conceptualizations and methodologies.

Lastly, this thesis does not wish to refute critiques expressed with regards to the CI, as I have proven that, for example, the teaching quality and the material is of inferior standard within this CI.⁴⁵² But I further need to address that concepts such as “south-south cooperation”⁴⁵³ that are frequently used in IR research are of lesser concern within this thesis, since these concepts do not really concern the individuals on the ground engaging with the Confucius Institute or the Chinese School.

7.2. Limitations and scope of research

When conducting Internet searches on Chinese language learning institutions in Cape Town after completing my fieldwork, I also came across the possibility to learn Chinese at “Huang Laoshi Chinese Center.”⁴⁵⁴ I learned that this center has been operational since 2014, which is surprising, as I did not encounter it — or any reference to it — during my stay in Cape Town. None of my

⁴⁵² (Hartig, 2014; Starr, 2009; Van den Heever, 2017)

⁴⁵³ (King, 2010, 2013; Kragelund, 2014; Van den Heever, 2017)

⁴⁵⁴ (Huang Laoshi Mandarin Centre, 2018a)

participant's ever-made mention of it, implying they also were unaware of it. According to its website, this center provides: "3 categories of services, being Chinese Courses (online and physical), Cultural Events and Merchandise." It also states: "Our goal is to introduce the beautiful language and culture of China to the whole world."⁴⁵⁵ Interestingly, Huang Laoshi states on his website that he gained extensive teaching experience at the Chinese School in Cape Town.⁴⁵⁶ Since I was not able to include this in my research, it would be interesting to consider for future research projects.

Due to a lack of more audience-related research in regards to this debate, the findings of this research can only relate to the ethnographic studies undertaken by Jennifer Hubbert.⁴⁵⁷ However, as her research focuses solely on the context of how CIs are perceived in the United States, it is not completely relatable to this research. In order to provide more ethnographic insights in regards to the perception of CIs on the African continent, it would be interesting to apply these methodologies used in this thesis to other African countries to corroborate the findings.

Lastly, I have addressed the fact that both the CI and the Chinese School actively engaged with the local Chinese speaking community in the form of organizing cultural activities that seemed to mainly be addressed to this community. Future research could focus additionally on understanding the extent of the specific nature of this relationship especially in the case of the CI, as this is one of the frequently expressed assumptions in regards to their agenda.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ (Huang Laoshi Mandarin Centre, 2018b)

⁴⁵⁶ (Huang Laoshi Mandarin Centre, 2018b)

⁴⁵⁷ (Hubbert, 2014a, 2014b)

⁴⁵⁸ (Ding, 2008)

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