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Chinese Government’s Push for Masculinity Targets Boy Bands, Online Influencers

By John S. Van Oudenaren

In early September, China’s National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) issued a new regulatory notice on “Further Strengthening Management of Cultural Programs and their Staff.” The regulation directs media outlets to “resolutely reject persons who violate laws and morality” including those who exhibit “abnormal aesthetics” (畸形审美, *jixing shenmei*) ([NRTA](#), September 2; [China Law Translate](#), September 2). The notice offers only one example of “abnormal aesthetics”-“niangpao” (娘炮) literally “girlie gun”, derogatory cyberslang for men who do not display a traditional masculine aesthetic (sometimes translated as “sissy” or “girlie man”, see [UPenn Language Log](#)). Chinese broadcasters, online media outlets and individual performers quickly conformed to the NRTA’s guidance. For example, singer songwriter Cai Xukun (蔡徐坤) commonly known as

“KUN” did a photoshoot where he swapped his trademark eyeliner and dyed hair for a manbun and a muscle shirt. The style change earned KUN praise in online media for looking “more masculine” and working to change his “negative image” as someone with a “girly” (娘, *niang*) style ([Netease](#), September 16).

The crackdown on “abnormal aesthetics” is part of a push by the state to reshape the values of Chinese youth. In re-emphasizing traditional gender roles, China’s leaders are seeking to increase young people’s desire to marry and increase the birth rate to address domestic economic and demographic challenges; they also seek to instill a “heroic spirit” to defend the nation against geopolitical threats from abroad ([University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences \(UCASS\)](#), March 11). The promotion of masculinity and physical culture has also informed efforts to lighten students’ academic burdens and increase time allocated to physical fitness in schools. For example, on October 19 the National People’s Congress issued a draft version of a forthcoming Sports Law, which will require schools to incorporate physical education into their curriculum, and strongly stipulates that these classes not to be used simply for additional study or tutoring time ([Global Times](#), October 21).

There is also an element of political control in the crackdown on media figures deemed insufficiently masculine. Many of the performers who have been targeted for criticism or banned from social or broadcast media are popular and have huge online “fandoms” (饭圈, *fanquan*). At a time when the party is increasingly uncomfortable with alternative centers of cultural and social influence, the state has sought both to exercise greater control over media stars’ personal behavior and to root out the “chaotic influence” of online fandom culture. For example, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) has sought to promote a clean internet by eliminating online fan rankings on Weibo and other sites ([People’s Daily](#), August 28).

Cleaning Up Cyberspace

The tightening of China’s online media environment accelerated in May, when CAC launched Operation Qinglang (“clear and bright”) (“**清朗**” 系列专项行动, *qinglang xilie zhuanxiang xingdong*)- a series of regulatory actions to “clean up” (大扫除, *dasaochu*) the internet ([CAC](#), May 8). CAC Vice Minister Sheng Ronghua (盛荣华) said “Operation Qinglang” strives to align internet governance with General Secretary Xi Jinping’s vision of cyberspace as “the common spiritual home of hundreds of millions of people.” Sheng stressed the need to follow Xi’s directive that if “Cyberspace has a clear sky and a good ecology it is in the interests of the people, but if cyberspace is smoggy and ecologically deteriorating, this is not in the interests of the people.” Measures undertaken through Operation Qinglang include “controlling abuse of algorithms, purifying the online media environment for youth, and rectifying the “chaos of online entertainment and “hotspot [i.e. popularity] rankings” and “eliminating unhealthy Fandoms” ([CAC](#), May 8). Authorities’ determination to shield minors from ostensibly impure online influences foreshadowed steps such as CAC’s July decision to ban users under the age of sixteen from appearing on streaming services, and the National Press and Publication

Administration's determination to limit minors' access to electronic games to 8:00-9:00 PM on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and on legal holidays ([CAC](#), July 21; [NPAA](#), August 30).

Boy Band Battles



(Members of Uniq attend a fan sign event in Shanghai, 2015, source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

A wide variety of personal styles exist in China's popular music scene. Some established stars like Jay Chou have a more traditionally masculine appearance, but boy bands like R1SE and TFBOYS with more gender neutral styles have also attracted devoted followings ([Tencent Youtube](#), September 23, 2019; [TFBOYS Youtube Channel](#)). Chinese boy bands have been doubly struck by the recent blacklisting of feminine-looking men in media, and the crackdown on celebrity fan clubs. State media is full of stories of young people who get caught up in online fan groups and are led astray by misplaced attraction to stars. For example, a *China Youth Daily* report details how Wang Yibo (王一博), frontman for the Chinese-Korean boy band, Uniq, seduced and swindled his young female fans ([China Youth Daily](#), October 13).

The current media crackdown not only targets fan clubs of Chinese stars, but has also shut down groups dedicated to hugely popular K-pop groups like BTS ([SCMP](#), September 6). This has generated so much concern in South Korea that the Chinese Embassy in Seoul issued a clarification that Operation Qinglang does not target Korea's "Hallyu" culture industry. Per the Embassy, the crackdown addresses the domestic problem of "fandoms" using "abusive language, slander and malicious marketing" and is "in no way meant to influence China's relations with other countries." ([Korea JoongAng Daily](#), September 9).

A New Scapegoat?

Last month a caustic blog post entitled “Can you still be a Niangpao Vlogger?” attracted 31.2 million hits. The post cheers Douyin’s (Tik Tok) ban of an influencer named Kang Yaya (康雅雅) who often dressed as a woman on the popular video-sharing platform ([Sohu](#), October 11). The post notes Kang has apologized for his “negative social impact” in promoting “men pretending to be women” (男扮女, *nan ban nu*). It also lauds the removal of another performer Feng Xiaoyi (风小逸) for providing “no content value” and even “more disgustingly, guiding underage users to give him rewards.”

In addition to banning “niang pao” from media platforms, state public morality propaganda has also charged “effeminate men” with weakening the nation. In a March 2021 interview with *Beijing Youth Daily*, Zhang Shuhua, an expert of at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference lamented that popular entertainment is filled with men wearing makeup or “小鲜肉”(*xiao yangrou*)-internet slang for handsome but effeminate men, which damages the “national spirit” ([UCASS](#), March 11) Zhang asserts that as the international environment is increasingly dominated by competition between civilizations and nations, China must produce young people who are “sober, firm-willed, physically strong, and full of masculine vigor.” Zhang expressed support for the Ministry of Education’s proposal to “Prevent the Feminization of Male Adolescents,” stating “boys must be masculine” (男孩子就要阳刚, *nanhaizi jiu yao yanggang*). Zhang raises three concerns over the “feminizing” influence of contemporary culture: 1) it conveys the wrong aesthetics and values; 2) it leads to “degeneration of the socialist spirit” and saps willingness of Chinese youth to defend the motherland; and 3) it could foster a “deformed view of marriage and love, which will lower the birthrate, alter the population structure, and cast a shadow over the country’s future.”

Chinese state media also promotes the conspiracy theory that feminine styles catching on among Chinese males is actually a product of influence operations undertaken by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency ([The Times](#), October 23, 2019). Nationalist outlets like *Global Times* have extrapolated this conspiracy theory, claiming that the US introduced “feminine style” (阴柔风, *yinrou feng*) to transform Japan and South Korea’s societies in to pliant dependencies ([Global Times](#), September 22).

The official turn to chauvinistic rhetoric and actions is seemingly a throwback to campaigns orchestrated by conservative hardliners such as Chen Yun, Deng Liqun and Hu Qiaomu against “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeoisie liberalization” in the 1980s. However, unlike at that time, under Xi Jinping, the current actions have the full support of party and state machinery. This may signal a longer-term embrace of a more retrograde approach to both gender relations and presentation, particularly as the party grapples with demographic challenges at home, and geopolitical challenges abroad.

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Power of the Weak: Taiwan's Strategy in Countering China's Economic Coercion

By Christina Lai

Introduction

In September, China's General Administration of Customs (海关总署通知, *Haiguan zong shu tongzhi*) imposed bans on Taiwan's sugar apples and wax apples, claiming that harmful pests were found in produce imports on multiple occasions ([SCMP](#), September 19; [PRC Customs Notice](#), September 18). In response to China's suspensions, Taiwan considered filing a formal complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO) ([Taipei Times](#) September 20; [PRC Customs Notice](#), February 26). In fact, this is not the first time that Taiwan's tropical fruits have suffered from Chinese import restrictions. In February, Beijing also suspended the importation of Taiwanese pineapples using similar justifications ([Reuters](#), February 26). Meanwhile, at the beginning of October, China greatly increased its military probing of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) including the largest single-day incursion to date on October 4 involving 56 warplanes. ([Taiwan News](#), October 4, 2021). The intensity and frequency of PLA Air Force incursions indicate that Beijing is flexing its muscles, and ability to project force around Taiwan's airspace and maritime borders.

These recent incidents, amidst ongoing China-Taiwan tensions, reveal a clear pattern in Beijing's coercive measures, which employ a combination of economic sanctions and military provocations [1]. China's increasing economic capabilities and frequent use of coercive measures have led to the following questions: how effective are Beijing's economic sanctions against Taiwan in achieving its desired outcomes and how can the Taiwanese government respond to China's coercive measures? As China becomes more powerful in Asia, it has gradually learned how to achieve its foreign policy goals through a diverse set of policy tools. China's shift from economic incentives to economic coercion to Taiwan, specifically from the Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016) to the Tsai Ing-wen (2016-) administration, deserves careful investigation. Furthermore, Taiwan's strategy to respond to this shift demonstrates the agency that medium-sized countries can employ in response to China's coercion.

This article highlights Taiwan's diversification strategy to overcome economic and political challenges from China. Concerns over economic reliance on China and Taiwan's geostrategic location are the main drivers for this strategy ([Taiwan News](#), September 17, 2020). It concludes with initial thoughts on establishing a trade pact in the Asia-Pacific region to counter China's unilateral economic sanctions.

Taiwan's Diversification Strategies: Challenges and Opportunities

Over the last few years, Taiwan has been at the forefront of China's economic sanctions and military provocations, as Beijing has consistently sought to assert sovereignty over the self-ruled island. Although the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) refuses to accept the 1992 consensus of "One China," President Tsai Ing-wen has cautiously adopted a moderate approach in China-Taiwan relations. The DPP has focused on maintaining Taiwan's autonomy, while not making any provocative moves such as declaring *de jure* independence. Nevertheless, under President Xi Jinping, China has responded harshly to the DPP's moderate approach, applying coercive measures against Taiwan to increase pressure on Taipei to negotiate its political status.

The Tourism Industry

In 2016, when Tsai became Taiwan's president, Beijing imposed limits on the number of Chinese tourists allowed to travel to Taiwan. Official data from 2017 showed a decline of 22 percent in visitors from Mainland China in 2016.[2] The economic losses suffered by Taiwan's tourism industry led to street protests, as business owners who were heavily dependent on Chinese tourists urged President Tsai to mend relations with Beijing ([Taipei Times](#), September 13, 2016). In 2016-2017, Taiwan opted not to make concessions in response to China's tourism ban, even though the DPP experienced protests and domestic pressures from pro-China travel industry groups. China's tourists ban may have partially contributed to the DPP's setbacks in 2018 local elections, along with other domestic economic issues, particularly Tsai's policies on pension reform, increasing the minimum wage, marriage equality, and social housing ([Brookings](#), December 5, 2018). These issues contributed to a drop in Tsai's approval rating and contributed to the DPP's significant defeats in the 2018 local elections.

To address the tourism sector's dependence on China, the Tsai administration adopted diversification strategies to attract new visitors from Southeast Asian countries. Tsai succinctly captured the essence of Taiwan's diversification strategy, indicating: "Would you put all your eggs in one basket? If not, let's make Taiwan's tourism stronger and better" ([Liberty Times Net](#), August 22, 2019).

To pursue this diversification strategy, Taipei took steps including lowering the visa requirements for Brunei and Thailand so that citizens from these countries can enjoy visa-free entry to Taiwan ([SCMP](#), February 21, 2018). It also provided a set of incentives to encourage domestic travel by supporting local businesses. Taiwanese citizens who stayed at local hotels or dined at nearby restaurants could receive vouchers for their trips ([Taipei Times](#), September 16, 2017). Although these measures did not completely offset the losses resulting from China's tourism curbs, Taiwan's tourism industry has gradually lessened its dependence on Chinese tourists and expanded its clientele to become more diverse.

Agriculture Sector

The Taiwanese government took immediate measures following China's announcement that it had stopped pineapple imports from Taiwan. President Tsai encouraged the public to eat more pineapples, including issuing

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an “All You can Eat Taiwanese Pineapple Challenge” (吃爆台灣鳳梨) and allocated \$36 million in funds to subsidize financial losses incurred by Taiwanese pineapple farmers ([Liberty Times Net](#), March 2, 2021; [Bloomberg](#), February 26, 2021).

Recent trade data shows that China’s import ban has had limited impact, as sympathetic Japanese buyers have stepped in to provide timely support ([Bloomberg](#), August 6). Surging domestic demand and shipments to Japan have helped pineapple growers overcome Beijing’s economic sanctions in the short term. However, Taiwan’s fruit exports remain heavily reliant on China, and the import bans have caused losses for farmers. It is certainly quite difficult for the Taiwanese government and farmers to diversify tropical fruit exports immediately, which would incur significant costs from logistics and storage to identifying new business partners. In response to Beijing imposing trade restrictions on pineapple imports, Taiwanese fruit growers are struck both with anxiety of financial loss and with a wake-up call. For example, one farmer in Tainan, said: “we were all spoiled by China’s market, as it always has loose requirements for fruit imports. As a result, farmers in Taiwan were eager to earn quick cash ([BBC Chinese News](#), March 5).” Another farmer expressed gratitude for the timely support of Taiwan’s government and consumers, and is now fully aware of the risks of over-reliance on China’s market ([BBC Chinese News](#), September 20). Taiwan’s Council of Agriculture and the local government of Taitung, the county where most tropical fruits are grown, is helping farmers promote exports of their produce to other countries like Japan, Australia, and those in the Middle East ([Taipei Times](#), September 20, 2021).



(Pineapple Farmers in Taiwan; Source: [AmCham Taiwan](#))

It is unclear how long China’s ban on tropical fruits and tourists will last, but Taiwan’s diversification strategies for its agricultural and tourism industries will certainly continue. It might take several years for Taiwan’s farmers

and tourism industry leaders to make needed structural adjustments and sector reforms. The “new southbound policy” is a crucial policy initiative put forward by President Tsai, and it aims to advance economic ties with Southeast Asian countries in order to diversify Taiwan’s economic interests and relationships ([New Southbound Policy Portal - MOFA Taiwan](#)). More importantly, this “going south” approach represents DPP efforts to find a better balance between Taiwan’s trade and security interests.

This diversification strategy serves to overcome Taiwan’s dilemma that China is both its largest trade partner and predominant security threat. Challenges certainly remain as to how the Taiwanese government might employ strong incentives for business owners to divert their investment from China to Southeast Asian countries ([Chatham House](#), April 2019). Taiwan’s geostrategic considerations have propelled this island to seek an increased security commitment from the United States, but the Taiwanese government has also come to realize its vulnerability to China’s economic sanctions. Nevertheless, it would take a long-term commitment from different successive ruling parties- the DPP and the KMT- to effectively implement this diversification strategy. In this sense, Taiwan’s diversification strategy is a state-level policy for Taipei, that requires other Asian partners to buy in to a collective economic pact to push back against China’s economic coercion.

Envisioning a Regional Trade Pact that Incorporates Taiwan

Countries in East Asia and beyond, such as Japan, the Philippines, and Norway, have all suffered from Beijing’s economic sanctions. [4] From a long-term perspective, policymakers in these countries should consider a collective, coherent and credible strategy to address China’s challenges, as they have each fallen victim to China’s use of punitive economic measures.

For example, members of the UK parliament proposed a trade alliance to counter China’s “weaponization of policy tools.” Specifically, they offered examples of how a Democracies Alliance Treaty Organization (DATO) might work in practice. For example, were Beijing to withdraw Chinese students from a targeted country or threaten to do so, then the other countries in this alliance could impose restrictions on Chinese students in response ([SCMP](#), June 28, 2021). Such an economic pact could also involve an agreement to refrain from taking advantage of any coercive measures imposed by China (for example, Taiwan would refuse to fill the shortfall created by the import restrictions on bananas from the Philippines, or American beef imports would not make up for China’s demand for banned Australian beef). In addition, Matthew Pottinger, former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor, has advocated for an “economic NATO” that allows member states to deploy similar measures in response to Beijing’s economic sanctions ([UPI](#), April 15, 2021). Pottinger suggests the time is ripe for such an agreement due to increased worries among China’s neighbors, Taiwan, Australia, and the Philippines over Beijing’s import restrictions.

This trade pact might begin with Japan, Australia, and Taiwan discussing mechanisms of information sharing and potential response measures, and then expand to other like-minded countries in the Asia Pacific region. Countries that are vulnerable to China’s economic sanctions could build resilience by deepening ties with each other, offering an important alternative market in Asia. Japan’s timely purchases of Taiwanese produce is a

good example to explore possible ways of expediting remedies for the challenges resulting from China's economic coercion.

There are still challenges to be overcome for such a trade pact to succeed, such as how to address collective action problems and mediate competing commercial interests among the member states. Nevertheless, the economic and security benefits of this kind of trade initiative outweigh the financial losses resulting from China's frequent use of economic coercion against any specific industry in one country over the long run.

So far this kind of countering strategy has received no official backing from the U.S. or the UK. However, merely having discussions on procedures of policy coordination, risk assessment, and joint statements to counteract China's economic coercion against Taiwan and other states can help deter China's possible future use of economic sanctions ([ASPI Policy Brief](#), 2020). As China's economic importance increases, the United States, along with its Asian allies, must find credible ways to counter Beijing's coercive measures. Collaboration between governments and with the private sector is a positive first step in developing a protocol to address China's sanctions in Asia and beyond.

Conclusion

Beginning in 2016, Taiwan's economic statecraft to counter China's economic coercion has focused on raising public awareness of China's leverage, reducing trade reliance on China's markets, and diversifying Taiwan's trade partners in Asia and beyond. Therefore, putting China's economic sanctions in perspective is one of the most crucial tasks for Asian countries, and Taiwan's experience has lessons to offer to the rest of the world regarding how to address the challenges presented by China's economic coercion.

In the short run, Beijing's travel bans on Chinese tourists and import restrictions on Taiwan's fruit generated significant economic losses, but China's use of economic sanctions has not spurred sustained political progress toward eventual unification. More importantly, as China's economic heft continues to grow, Beijing is likely to explore more ways to use economic sanctions to further its interests. A possible way for Asian countries to build greater resilience, in the long run, would be to construct a trade pact, including the U.S., Japan, Australia, and Taiwan. This might reduce the economic vulnerabilities of the respective member states, and can also send a strong signal in deterring China's sanctions and increasing confidence among Asian countries, allowing them to engage Beijing from a position of strength.

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Notes

[1] Christina Lai, “More than Carrots and Sticks: Economic Statecraft and Coercion in China–Taiwan Relations from 2000 to 2019.” *Politics*, (February 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720962654>.

[2] Taiwan Tourism Bureau, “Visitor Arrivals by Residence, 2017,” <https://admin.taiwan.net.tw/English/FileUploadCategoryListE003130.aspx?CategoryID=b54db814-c958-4618-9392-03a00f709e7a&appname=FileUploadCategoryListE003130>

[3] President Tsai succinctly captured the essence of Taiwan’s diversification strategy, indicating: “Would you put all your eggs in one basket? If not, let’s make Taiwan’s tourism stronger and better.” President Tsai’s Facebook post from 22 August 2019.

[4] Christina Lai, “Acting one way and talking another: China’s coercive economic diplomacy in East Asia and beyond,” *The Pacific Review* 31.2 (2018): 169-187.

China’s Vocational Education Workshops Seek to Strengthen Relations with Africa

By Conor McCutcheon, Savannah Billman, Johnsen Romero, Merle Kartscher.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, China has continuously increased its presence in, and cooperation with, countries across the African continent. The magnitude of increase in Chinese aid, can be seen by tracking the increase in China’s total Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitments to Africa, which jumped from \$2.6 billion in 2000 to \$37.3 billion in 2014 ([AidData](#), 2019). At the 2018 Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech which stressed the importance of complementary development for China and Africa, stating: “China believes that the sure way to boost China-Africa cooperation is for both sides to leverage its respective strength; it is for China to complement Africa’s development through its own growth, and it is for both China and Africa to pursue win-win cooperation and common development” ([Xinhua](#), September 3, 2018). In particular, China’s investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) efforts in Africa has steadily increased since 2000. Falling under the broad geopolitical agenda of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s TVET programs in Africa seek to promote “win-win” cooperation that align Chinese business interests with individual African countries’ respective development conditions and goals.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese TVET efforts in Africa continued apace with the establishment of ten Luban Workshops from 2019 to 2021. Often described as the vocational and technical equivalent of Confucius Institutes, the Luban Workshops seek to train young African professionals with Chinese funding and cooperation ([Global Times](#), September 3, 2018). Along with other TVET-focused education assistance, the Luban Workshops are a sign that disorganized Chinese training and education in support of its investment into Africa is becoming more targeted and organized. China's growing presence in Africa has not escaped controversy, but perceptions of Chinese influence among citizens of African countries remain mostly favourable, with a continent-wide survey by indicating that 59% of respondents judged China's influence to be "somewhat" or "very" positive, narrowly giving it the highest score of all external influencers ([Afrobarometer](#), September 3, 2020). However, other studies have noted that there are complex variables which inform African perceptions of China; perceptions vary by country and are impacted by a range of factors such as relative national wealth of the target country, and the nature of Chinese projects in question [1].



(Launch Ceremony for the opening of China's Luban Workshop in Ethiopia, source: [Xinhua](#))

Sino-African Cooperation and Skills Transfer

Historically, Sino-African collaboration has focused mostly on infrastructure, with railway, highway and energy projects attracting the most media attention. However, skills and education training is also a crucial area of Sino-African collaboration to monitor in terms of analyzing long-term benefits for China's African partners. A fundamental assumption attached to foreign investment in Africa is it entails some kind of technological transfer opportunity for local citizens to be exposed to worthwhile labor opportunities, which generally happens in two

ways. The first way to facilitate skills and technological transfers is by hiring local employees, and providing on the job guidance that allows them to learn from their colleagues.

Skills and knowledge can also be imparted through engagement with local communities' educational institutions facilities through the provision of facilities, technical support, assistive technology, study-abroad opportunities, and so on. Some evidence indicates that China-funded projects in Africa countries have not generated adequate opportunities for work force development. African workers are mainly hired as low-skill, manual laborers, while managerial positions are disproportionately occupied by Chinese citizens [2]. The availability of local human capital to meet the technical demands of certain positions can certainly be called into question, but experts have also noted poor training practices, which have hindered the ability of locals to occupy higher-level positions in Chinese projects [3].

In an effort to develop local human capital in Africa, Sino-African educational and skills cooperation has become a more important area of collaboration over the past several decades, but has not received the same attention accorded to other areas of the relationship. There are a variety of frequently applied approaches to Sino-African collaboration on education and skills training, ranging from the provision of scholarships for African students to study in Chinese universities to building schools in African partner countries.

A variety of Chinese agencies play a significant role in Sino-African education cooperation. Figure 1 demonstrates the traditional decentralization of power within the bureaucracy, with different lines denoting ministries taking charge of various international portfolios. For much of the lifetime of Chinese TVET cooperation and the development of programming as a whole, the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) was the most powerful stakeholder that controlled aid projects [4]. MOFCOM has its own Department of Foreign Aid and MOFCOM staffers that were transferred to staff Beijing's new aid organ, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) [5]. Launched in 2018, CIDCA is still in the process of absorbing the responsibilities of other bureaucracies. As all this unfolds, Chinese TVET implementation will begin to reflect a more institutionalized aid bureaucracy.

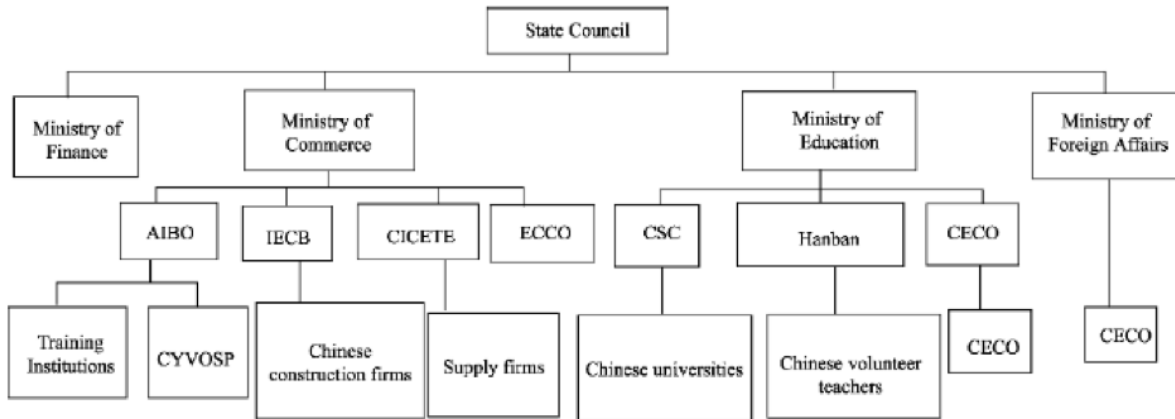


Figure 1: Sino-African Cooperation Management Bureaucracy Taken from Ehizuelen (2018) [6].

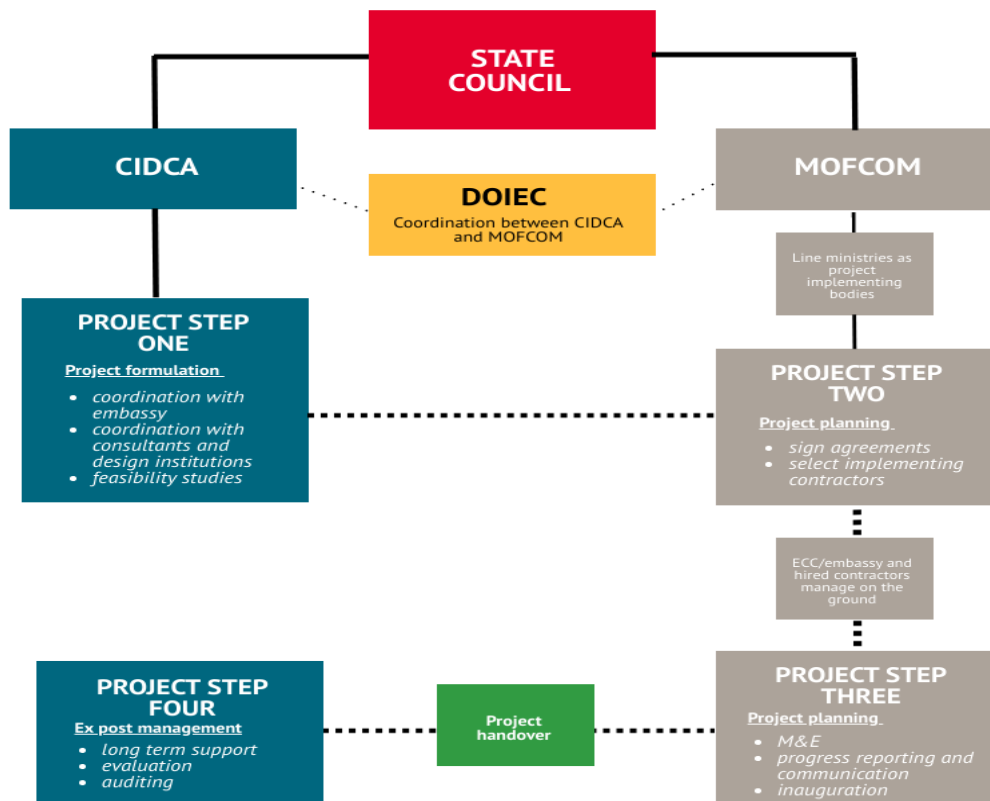


Figure 2: Relationship between MOFCOM and CIDCA. Taken from Lynch, Andersen, & Zhu (2020) [7]

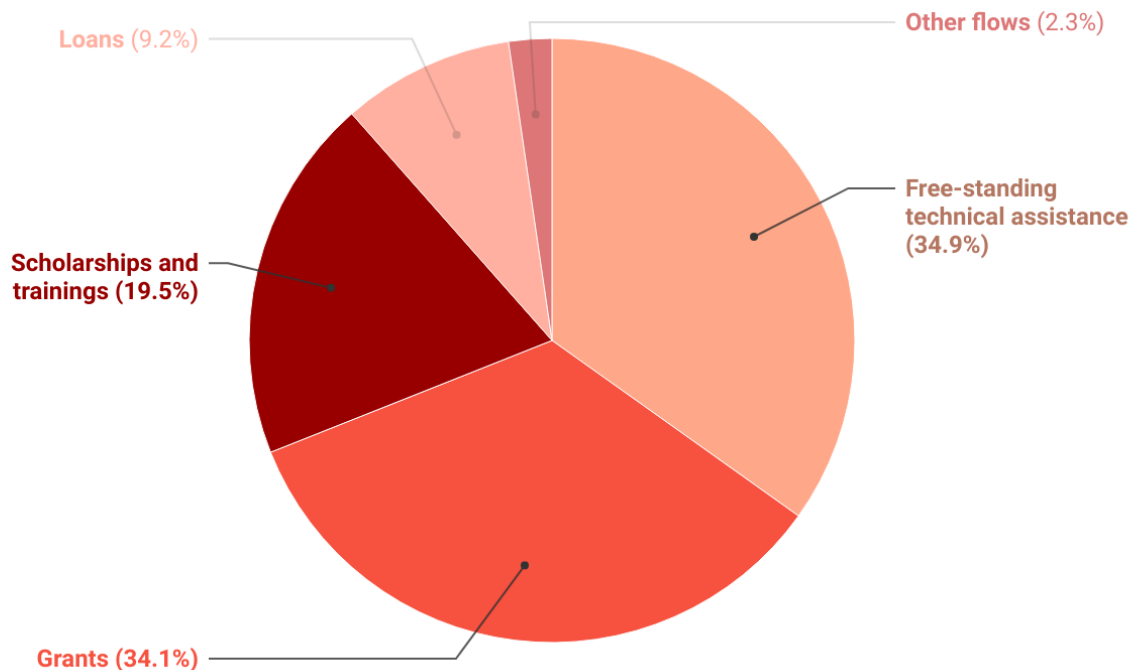
Increasing Investment in TVET Skills and Education

China's provision of scholarships to African students to study in China is perhaps the most well-known form of Sino-African educational cooperation. However, China has also made considerable efforts to improve in-country TVET initiatives within Africa as well. This is a part of the broader aim of 'human resources development' in Africa, which began around the year 2000 with the establishment of the African Human Resources Development Foundation and has since been strengthened through a range of training commitments made through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). From 2010 to 2012, 27,318 trainees from 54 different African nations were given training sessions. During this time, countries such as Kenya were the target of considerable TVET investment and assistance from China [8]. In Kenya alone, this has involved over \$30 million in investment in activities such as equipping TVET institutions with adequate technology, providing training in how to install and use such technology, and providing instructor training for 15,000 Kenyan TVET personnel. Evidence derived from observing this kind of collaboration suggests that while it is not without flaws, the broad benefits of TVET cooperation significantly contributed to increased Kenyan capacity to work on key Chinese projects and benefited the reputation of Chinese investment among the Kenyan population [9].

An examination of a geocoded database on overseas Chinese finance from AidData reveals much about the scale and nature of Sino-African TVET cooperation. Just over 10 percent of all Chinese projects assessed by AidData include or are exclusively TVET initiatives. Of the nearly 400 instances of China's international TVET cooperation since 2000, the lion's share of projects - 70 percent - have taken place in Africa. Government-to-government grants, technical assistance, and ad hoc training or scholarships have been the main vehicles for TVET funding. In contrast, loans have been in the minority.

Chinese TVET funding in Africa, 2000-2014

By type of financial flow



Adapted from 2000-2014 data. 'Other flows' denotes unidentified and miscellaneous funding schemes such as export credits.

Chart: Oxford China International Consultancy • Source: AidData's Geocoded Global Chinese Official Finance • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3: Chinese TVET Funding in Africa

Luban Workshops Link Chinese Universities and Businesses with African Universities

In 2015, as part of the '10 major plans' to boost Sino-Africa cooperation, Xi Jinping announced an initiative to establish local vocational education hubs to promote skills development in Africa. At the 2018 FOCAC, Xi called for the launch of eight China-Africa collaborative initiatives, among them sharing China's "development practices with Africa and [supporting] cooperation with Africa on economic and social development planning" ([Xinhua](#), September 3, 2018). These collaborative initiatives include the establishment of ten Luban Workshops, vocational education centers that have been set up across the African continent since Xi's speech. The Luban Workshops seek to advance Xi's stated goal of fostering "win-win" investment from China through specialized TVET workshops.

Luban Workshops not only are in line with China's history of TVET funding in Africa, but also support China's broader diplomatic and economic engagement with Africa. Indeed, Chinese and African politicians alike are

heavily involved in the promotion of the workshops, lending legitimacy and diplomatic importance to the venture through the presence of African government officials and Chinese ambassadors to the nation. The 14th Five Year Plan, passed by China’s National People’s Congress in 2021, calls for the country to “deepen humanistic cooperation...between parliaments, political parties, and private organizations” from other countries ([Xinhua](#), March 13). Under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative, educational and developmental projects such as the Luban Workshops and other TVET investments will remain crucial elements of China’s aid outreach overseas. In each case, the Luban Workshops are the result of partnerships between universities in the city of Tianjin--noted in China as the “birthplace of vocational education” and home to some of the country’s earliest vocational universities ([Exploring Tianjin](#)). Additionally, the Luban Workshops occur in partnership with the Tianjin municipal government, local African universities, and in some cases, Chinese firms.

Table 1: List of Current Luban Workshops in Africa

Country	Established	Local University Location	Chinese Partners	Curriculum Focus
Djibouti	March 2019	Djibouti Industrial and Commercial School	China Civil Engineering Construction Group, Tianjin First School of Commerce, and Tianjin Railway Technical and Vocational College	Train railway managers and operators to help Djibouti expand its rail network
Kenya	December 2019	Machakos University	Tianjin City Vocational College, Huawei	Cloud computing, information security
South Africa	December 2019	Durban University of Technology	Tianjin Vocational Institute	3D printing, the internet of things
Mali	December 2019	Bamako University of Science and Technology, and the University of Arts and	Tianjin Medical College, Tianjin Red Star Vocational School	Traditional Chinese Medicine

		Humanities of Bamako		
Egypt	November 2020	Ain Shams University and Cairo Advanced Maintenance Technical School	Tianjin Light Industry Vocational Technical College and Tianjin Transportation Technical College	Computer numerical control equipment application and maintenance, new energy application technology, and automobile application and maintenance technology, Chinese language
Nigeria	November 2020	University of Abuja	Tianjin Sino-German University of Applied Sciences and Tianjin Railway Vocation and Technical College	Urban Rail Transit Traffic Management, Urban Rail Transit Vehicles, and Railway Bridges and Tunnels, electronics, power mechanisms, and telecommunications
Cote d'Ivoire	December 2020	Institut National Polytechnique Felix Houphouet Boigny	Tianjin University of Technology	Mechanical and electrical engineering, automation
Uganda	December 2020	Uganda Technical College-Elgon	Mbale Sino Uganda Industrial Park, the Tian Tang Group, Tianjin Polytechnic University	Urban Rail Transit Traffic Management, Urban Rail Transit Vehicles, and Railway Bridges and Tunnels
Madagascar	December 2020	Higher Polytechnic Institute of Madagascar in Antananarivo	China Railway 18th Bureau Group, as well as Tianjin Vocational College of Mechanics and Electricity, Tianjin Machinery and	electrical engineering and automotive engineering

			Electric Industry School, and the University of Antananarivo	
Ethiopia	April 2021	Ethiopian Technical University	the Chinese Tianjin University of Technology and Education	industrial sensor technology, mechatronics technology, industrial control technology and industrial robotics technology

Table data from: Tianjin.Chinadaily.com.cn, Beltandroad.news

China has moved forward with the Luban workshops despite COVID-19 related disruptions. In addition to fulfilling China’s goals of closer China-Africa ties through people-to-people links, each country’s workshop focuses on different technical skills in line with the host government’s respective development goals. Djibouti’s workshop will host Chinese professionals to train railway managers and operators through both in-class and practical on-site training as Djibouti expands its national railway network ([China Daily](#), March 28, 2019). Ethiopia’s workshop, which teaches industrial sensor technology, mechatronics technology, industrial control technology and industrial robotics technology, is part of Ethiopia’s national goal to become an African manufacturing hub by 2025 ([Xinhua](#), April 28, 2021). However, not every workshop focuses exclusively on hard technical skills: the Luban Workshop in Bamako, Mali focuses on Chinese medical training as an additional healthcare skill set for Malians. ([China Africa Project](#), December 16, 2020).

The Luban Workshops are presented by Beijing as a good-faith effort, and have generally been received positively by China’s African partners. Muhammad Mujahid, Egypt’s Deputy Minister of Education for Technical Education Affairs, reported that these projects with China “will increase employment opportunities, open a new market to the graduates and provide jobs in modern fields” ([Al-Monitor](#), May 26, 2021). Uganda’s Minister of Science, Technology and Innovations, Dr Elioda Tumwesigye, announced his belief that the Uganda workshop will enhance local and Africa-wide economies and enhance Ugandan technical talent ([Daily Monitor](#), December 11 2020). Indeed, highly ranked African officials along with officials from the Luban Workshops’ Chinese partners usually preside over Luban Workshop opening ceremonies, indicating their importance to both parties. Nevertheless, the long-term impact of these programs remains to be seen. Since they are relatively new, collecting data on graduate employability and the longevity of the Africa-Tianjin relationship will be a task for the next few years as China’s TVET development model evolves.

In English language publications from the Chinese government and Chinese media outlets, the Luban Workshop Initiative is generally described as an altruistic policy to advance the infrastructural development of African nations and strengthen the diplomatic ties between China and Africa ([Ministry of Education](#), May 31, 2019; [China Daily](#), August 12, 2021). In articles outlining the Luban Workshops’ accomplishments since their

establishment, the focus is often on the personal experiences, achievements and improved future perspectives of individual students at the workshops and how this impacts their country's development ([Ministry of Commerce](#), July 2). In addition to official news outlets, Chinese officials, organizations and embassies also use social media to inform the international public about the Luban workshops, usually emphasizing their role in increasing youth employment ([Wu Peng](#), June 5,; [Chinese Embassy in Uganda](#), December 11, 2020; [Huawei Kenya](#), December 14, 2020). In a message congratulating the launch of the Luban Workshop in Ethiopia, Director-General Wu Peng from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that China "will further promote vocational education and boost youth employment in Africa" ([Wu Peng](#), April 28). These overwhelmingly positive portrayals of the Luban Workshops in traditional and social media, therefore, indicate the initiative also includes an element of public diplomacy.

Conclusion

The Luban Workshop initiative provides a clear insight into what China would like Sino-African development cooperation to look like moving forward. China is fighting a challenging public relations battle on two fronts; winning the approval and trust of the African people and countering a growing narrative that Chinese intentions in Africa are not wholly positive. While some may argue that China may have little control over the latter, the former is certainly an area which China could benefit from making a priority. The poor perception of Chinese investment projects and their intentions are clearly something that impact Beijing's ambitions in Africa. China has pulled out of investment projects in the past because of protests, a disconcerting issue for Beijing when one factors in the correlation between Chinese investment and popular protests in Africa and elsewhere ([The Conversation](#), June 15; [Reuters](#), February 18, 2020). Whether these protests were the product of poor practice or bad optics, it is clear that Chinese projects could benefit from a better perception. Visible projects like the Luban Workshops, which educate and train African students and raise the level of their involvement in Sino-African cooperation projects, could thus provide a positive boost to China's image in African countries.

A third battle the Chinese government also faces in their ambitions on the African continent, which may present the greatest challenge of all, is a war of words over foreign investment and aid at home. Domestically, there are many who question the government's commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative and do not share their optimism for creating a long-term, mutually beneficial trade relationship with their African partners. As Chinese businesses face crackdowns and growth continues to slow down, exorbitant foreign investment projects could draw more and more attention, and bad investments such as the infamous Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka will be criticized even further. The clock may be ticking on China's window to succeed in Africa, and in order to do so it must be proactive about investing in African people and the sustainability of their projects.

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Western Sanctions on Belarus's Potash Industry Test Beijing-Minsk Partnership

By Bartosz Kowalski and Michał Słowikowski

Introduction

At the beginning of September 2021, the Belarusian news outlet *Nasha Niva* revealed that due to Western sanctions on Belarusbank, China had not paid another tranche of credit (\$103 million) for the construction of the \$2 billion Slavkaliy potash mining and processing plant in Lyuban, Belarus. The project has been stalled since June and subsequently, subcontractors have begun to leave the construction site ([Nasha Niva](#), September 1). The investment is being carried out with China's active financial support. In 2015, during Xi Jinping's visit to Belarus, the Chinese Development Bank agreed to provide \$1.4 billion credit, guaranteed by the Belarusian government ([Mofcom.gov.cn](#), May 12, 2015). Importantly, the Slavkaliy project is owned by the Russian oligarch Mikhail Gutseriyev, who was also sanctioned due to his close business and political ties with Belarus's President Alyaksandr Lukashenka; Gutseriyev provided \$600 million for the project ([Official Journal of the European Union](#), June 21).

So far, neither China nor Belarus have commented on the Slavkaliy credit holdup. Despite the China-Belarus "strategic partnership", China views the looming political crisis in Belarus with growing concern, especially given the latter's escalation of tensions with European Union (EU) member states and the resulting disruptions in potash supply chains. The credit freeze indicates that China responds to Western sanctions, and that Beijing is increasingly concerned with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's conflict with the West, and has given Minsk a signal of its reassessment of the "strategic partnership".

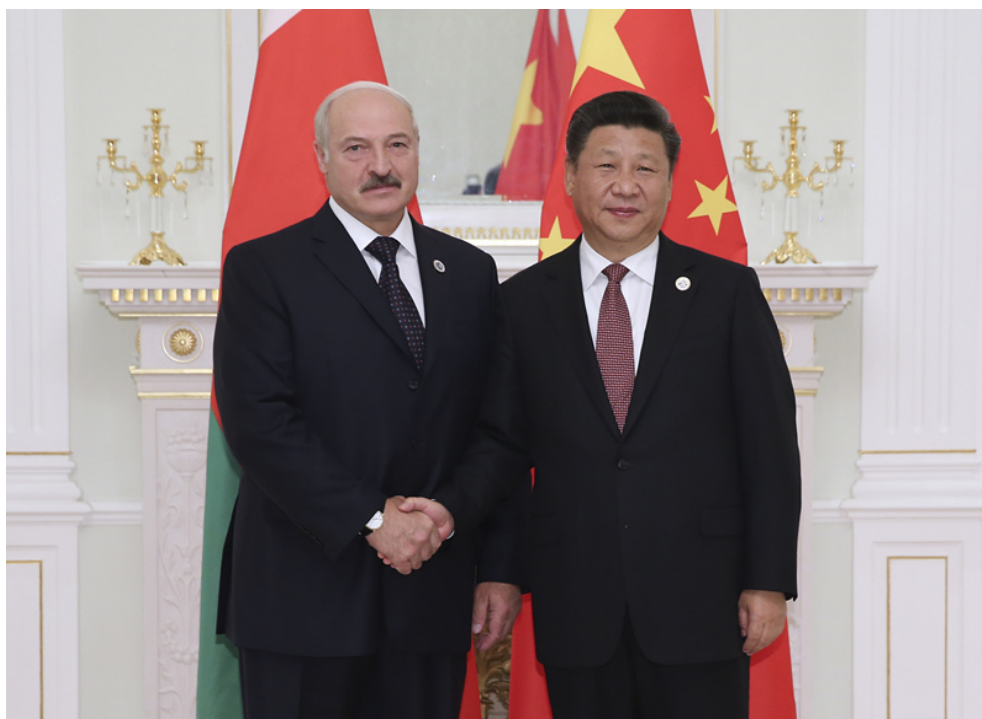
Western Sanctions on Belarus: Implications for China's Potash Industry

The Belarusian potash mining and processing industry has faced serious problems due to international sanctions imposed on the regime following fraudulent presidential elections in summer 2020. The sanctions were further expanded in June due to human rights violations in Belarus and the forcing of a Ryanair plane to land in Minsk in order to arrest an opposition blogger, which was considered an act of air piracy in the West ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), June 15). The restrictions imposed by the E.U., Great Britain, Canada and the US, affected two key sectors of the Belarusian economy: the petrochemical industry (which accounts for 8 percent of GDP), potash fertilizers (Belarus accounts for nearly 20 percent of global exports), and the financial sector ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), June 30). Sanctions on the potash industry are potentially harmful to Belarus as the Belaruskaliy plant is the second-biggest producer of potash globally, and one of the main sources of foreign exchange for Alexander Lukashenka's regime ([Belrynok.by](#), July 18, 2019).

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In practical terms, EU sanctions on potash exports have large loopholes, and last year's sanctions did not disrupt Belaruskaliy's supplies to China ([China Agricultural Holdings](#), August 21, 2020). However, given the expected tightening of EU measures, the sanctions may pose a significant challenge to China's agricultural industry. According to data from the PRC customs office, in 2020 Belarus sent 1.38 million tons of potassium chloride to China: 16 percent of total Chinese potassium chloride imports ([Zhonglun](#), September 6). Therefore, China's credit freeze on Belarus appears only temporary. China's domestic potassium resources are small, and production costs are uncompetitive. Furthermore, modernization of the domestic potash industry and foreign investment in this area are in line with the assumptions of the 14th Five-Year Plan, and are relevant to China's food security ([Sinochem](#), January 28). An important element of this policy is investment in Slavkaliy. The 2015 agreement provides that, once Slavkaliy starts operating, its entire production will be transferred to China over 25 years. Moreover, already in 2020, the Slavkaliy complex reported a successful extraction, and production was set to start in 2022 ([OfficeLife](#), April 20, 2020).

Currently, China is struggling with a shortage of potash fertilizers, resulting from the limited capacity of its domestic industry, rising prices of raw materials on world markets, and pandemic-related supply chain disruptions. Although EU sanctions do not cover pre-signed contracts, shipment of supplies to China will pose an increasing challenge because most Belarusian potassium is exported through Klaipeda port in Lithuania. As a result, sanctions will likely bring about redirection of potash transport routes from Lithuania to Ukraine or Russia ([China Phosphorus Fertilizers Network](#), July 12).



(Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Chinese President Xi Jinping shake hands at their 2016 meeting at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, source: FMPRC)

The Sino-Belarusan Potash Trade and the Limits of the Lithuanian Transit Corridor

Unsurprisingly, recent Western actions have provoked a nervous reaction in Belarus. Prime Minister Roman Golovochenko, who threatened to retaliate against Western companies operating in Belarus, announced that his government was also ready to push out Western technologies in favor of Chinese alternatives ([Sb.by](#), June 5; [Xinhua](#), June 7). Lukashenka sought to leverage Belarus's strategic position along the EU-China land transportation routes, when he first warned in March and again in July that he would stop the transit of goods between Belarus and the EU. Over 90% of rail freight traffic between China and Europe goes through Belarus ([Belta.by](#), March 4; [RFE](#), July 6). Of course, blockade of transit is possible and detrimental for third countries, but Belarus would primarily harm itself with this action.

In securing China's potash supply interests, an important aspect of the dispute is the fact that a huge part of Belaruskaliy's exports are transported through Lithuania. Political relations between the PRC and Lithuania reached a nadir after the latter opted to leave the 17+1 (now 16+1) format, and agreed to the opening of Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius using the name "Taiwan" as opposed to "Taipei" ([Taipei Times](#), August 11). In response, China recalled its ambassador from Vilnius, and has signaled possible economic retaliation by suspending the EU-bound cargo trains transiting Lithuania ([Fmprc.gov.cn](#), August 10; [Sina](#), August 18). However, these threats have so far not materialized. On the contrary, the diplomatic rupture with Lithuania may additionally complicate China's potash imports from Belarus.

Although in June, Lithuanian railways declared that Western sanctions will not affect the contracts signed already with Belaruskaliy until the end of 2023. Yet, in the light of the new U.S. sanctions imposed in August, the Lithuanian Minister of Transport stated the Belaruskaliy products will stop moving through Lithuania by December of this year ([LRT](#), August 12). This was met with a blunt reaction from China's Ministry of Trade spokesman, who urged Lithuania to "create favorable conditions for neutral economic and trade cooperation" ([Mofcom.gov.cn](#), August 26).

The potential problems for China to secure imports of Belarusian potash through Lithuania will also seriously affect the Lithuanian transport and logistic sectors. The main beneficiary of Belarus's exports in Lithuania is Klaipeda port, for which one-third of cargo serviced in 2020 came from Belaruskaliy ([Thebell.io](#), May 27).

The sanctions mean revenue losses for Lithuania's transport services, but also constrict Belarus and China's access to the Baltic region. The Russian route to Ust-Luga or Murmansk ports could function as an alternative. Still, both Russian railways and ports are not fully capable of the logistics and transport technology required to take over the shipment of a much larger volume of potash products. Unlike Belarusian oil and petroleum products, exports, which have already been redirected to Russian ports (at a cost for Lithuania) potash fertilizers would require an infrastructural upgrade. Moreover, the redirection of fertilizer exports would make Belarus completely dependent on transit through Russia and would significantly increase the final cost of sales ([Gazeta.ru](#), August 12).

What is Behind the Credit Freeze?

Although Mikhail Gutseriyev and the Belarusian government have tried to convince China to unfreeze credit, and sanctions imposed on Belarusbank as the credit operator are a key obstacle; the payment can be potentially bypassed and transferred through Eurasian Development Bank. The other reason for the credit freeze is most likely the political crisis in Belarus and the tense atmosphere around Gutseriyev. The Russian oligarch has tried to save the project at all costs: he handed control of Slavkaliy's main shareholder, the British GCM Global Energy, over to his brother ([Kommersant.ru](https://kommersant.ru), July 20). Gutseriyev is also suspected of plotting with Lukashenka to take over the control of the Russian potash giant Uralkaliy ([Telegram](https://t.me), June 9). From China's perspective, this would mean being drawn into the conflict between Belarus and Russia, a scenario which Beijing has tried to avoid at all costs when investing in Belarus.

China has a vested interest in the exploitation of a new, promising potash deposit and constructing its processing plant. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that China will drop the project, which is set to increase its supplies of fertilizers for a period of 25 years. From China's perspective, an increased supply of raw materials on the market means a lower purchase price. The credit freeze could have been China attempting to exert additional leverage over Belarus in order to drive down costs.

What is Next for the Slavkaliy Project and Sino-Belarus relations?

The suspension of Slavkaliy's financing should be seen through the prism of the changing political and economic situation underway in Belarus since at least mid-2020. The sanctions targeting Lukashenka's regime are an important factor that impede Beijing's plans in terms of potash imports and economic activities in Belarus, and complicate its trade exchanges with the EU.

Although for the Chinese side, Belarus has traditionally been more important for its role in relations with Russia than with the EU, good relations between Belarus and the EU (particularly after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the eruption of the Donbas conflict) are conducive to China's activities and interests in Belarus. Currently, the tables seem to be turning: China sees the increasing isolation of Belarus as an ever-growing burden in its relations with the EU ([Nasha Niva](https://nasha-niva.com), July 25).

Some Chinese experts think that a political crisis in Belarus resulting in uncertainty and internal instability will have a long-lasting impact on relations and may negatively affect Chinese investments in Belarus and joint Belt and Road projects [1]. Belarusian experts confirm that now Chinese partners look at Belarus even more cautiously, and that the role of the EU is definitely a growing driver of this concern. Thus, the suspension of China's payment of another tranche of the credit for Slavkaliy set off alarm bell to Belarus against further escalation of relations with the EU.

China officially supports the hardline policies of Lukashenka, whom Xi Jinping – even before Vladimir Putin – personally congratulated for his victory in the fraudulent 2020 presidential election ([Xinhua](#), August 10, 2020). However, the growing distance in bilateral relations is best reflected in the significant slowdown of China's economic engagement in Belarus. Since last year, China has provided no new investments and credit lines to Belarus, and the implementation of already-started projects is progressing far below expectations. Between January and April 2021, Belarus managed to attract a mere \$8.3 million loan from China's Exim Bank ([Aif.by](#), June 26), an economically insignificant amount of money, streamlined to save face and bolster the “strategic partnership”.

Conclusion

Western sanctions jeopardize China's future imports from Slavkalyi, where production is meant to begin in two to three years. Yet, the suspension of further lending to the Slavkalyi project seems to be only temporary. Although in the past, there were cases of unsuccessful China funded projects in Belarus, e.g., Pulp and Board Mill in Svetlogorsk, which failed because of the technical flaws and underperformance of Chinese subcontractors ([Gomel-Region.by](#), February 2, 2020). However, this is an unlikely scenario for the Slavkalyi project, which is strategically important for China's agricultural production, has the “personal seal” of approval from the leaders of China and Belarus, and is being implemented with German technological expertise. Nevertheless, the resumption of further Chinese lending to the Slavkalyi project will require overcoming two major obstacles propelled by Western sanctions on Lukashenka's regime and Gutseriyev.

China will need to use alternative transportation routes to import Belarus's potash products. The main shipment channel through Klaipeda Port is currently not a viable prospect due to the Western sanctions and Lithuania's consistent policy in terms of national security against both Belarus and China, respectively.

However, if China wants to keep the Slavkalyi project afloat, transportation channels are of secondary importance. The most challenging issue will be to bypass sanctions on Belarus financial institutions and to find other ways to streamline the credit without involving big state banks; it highly unlikely that Beijing will put its banks at risk, even for the sake of this strategically important potash project. In this way, the controversies surrounding Slavkalyi are further proof that China adheres to sanctions on Belarus (which was also often the case in relations with Russia), and is increasingly cautious in its relations with Lukashenka's regime, adopting a wait-and-see strategy when it comes to Western sanctions on Belarus.

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How Confucius Institutes in the Arab World Shape Positive Perceptions of China

By Roie Yellinek

Introduction

Much has been written about Confucius Institutes (CI) in the West, but this tool of Chinese influence does not receive much attention for its activities in the Arab world. This article aims to fill this gap. CIs, which operate in universities worldwide, are managed by the Hanban (汉办), the Office of Chinese Language Council International, which is a branch of the Chinese Ministry of Education. As of 2006, CI centers began to appear in Arabic speaking countries, and by 2021, China had established 550 CIs around the globe including 15 institutes operating in the Middle East. Although it should be noted that in 2006 the Hanban planned to run 1000 institutes by 2020, this goal has not been met ([PRC Embassy Egypt](#), September 29, 2006). In 2007, the global head of CIs, Xu Lin, remarked that the CIs were “the ‘brightest brand’ in China’s soft power repertoire” [1].

West versus East

The reception of Confucius Institutes (CIs) is an essential lens to gauge local public opinion towards China’s presence and to develop a clear picture of the general attitude towards China. In recent years, many CIs in Western oriented countries, have shut down due to local criticism. For example, earlier this year, Confucius Institutes at Alabama A&M University, and the University of Southern Maine were shut down. ([Al.com](#), April 22; [Bangor Daily News](#), April 13). By contrast, Confucius Institutes have expanded their presence in the Arab world. The local reception to CIs in the Middle East and North Africa can be understood through three dimensions: supply and demand, reception from local media and leadership, and the levels of identification by locals with CIs and Chinese values and culture.

Gauging the Local Response

Based on Arabic newspapers, CIs have been positively received in the Arab world in all three dimensions. The first CI in an Arab country was [established](#) in Beirut. Speaking at the launch of the Beirut CI, the Deputy President of the host university in Lebanon at Saint Joseph University, stated: “Traditionally, our researchers and students tend to select study and research areas pertaining to France, Britain, Germany and the USA. It is unreasonable that nowadays we wouldn’t care about China, which is quickly becoming a leading global presence” ([Arabic China.org.cn](#), March 12, 2009). At the Beirut institute’s ten-year anniversary celebrations, one of the guests of honor, Adnan Kassar, Chairman of the Lebanese bank Fransabank, [said](#) that: “The fact that one of every six people in the world speaks Chinese illustrates very clearly why it is so important to study this language and get to know these wonderful people” ([Xinhua](#), October 1, 2016).

In Egypt, which hosts two CIs in Cairo and Ismailia, there is similar positive receptivity. In March 2017, the Confucius Institute at the Suez Canal University and the British University in Egypt signed a memorandum of understanding regarding the establishment of a Chinese language training unit at the British university ([El Watan News](#), March 21, 2017) According to the leaders of both universities, this step was intended to enable more students to acquire knowledge in Chinese, and to prepare them to apply to scholarships for language studies in China itself. Haled Abdul Jafar, Egyptian Minister of Education and Science, said that the inauguration of the new building is an example of positive and fruitful collaboration between Egypt and China, adding that this is the beginning of a new era in the relationship between the two countries and that he hopes that future collaboration expanded in many further areas ([Ahram Online](#), April 21, 2018).



Egyptians try traditional Chinese calligraphy at China Culture Week at the Confucius Institute at the Suez Canal University in Ismailia, Egypt (Source: [China Daily](#))

In Morocco, three CIs were opened between 2008 and 2016. As with the Egyptian model, one CI in Morocco operates branches of its institute in other universities because of high national demand for Chinese language instruction ([China Today](#), October 26, 2018). There is also a similar approach in Sudan, which hosts a CI in the capital, Khartoum. The Sudanese institute serves not only the Sudanese population, but also students from about twenty other nationalities (mostly from African states) in order to meet the demand in these countries. Some of the students at the Khartoum CI expressed appreciation for the Chinese narrative and drew a clear line between [studying Chinese](#) and success in business, “I’m learning Chinese so as to improve and further establish his commercial ties in China” ([Arabic China.org.cn](#), November 3, 2016).

At the two CIs, which have been established in in the United Arab Emirates a similar attitude is evident. For example, the President of the University of Dubai , said at the 2010 Dubai CI launch- “It is important that when there are commercial ties with a foreign country, institutions that expose each side to the culture of the other would also be established in parallel ([Gulf News](#), August 22, 2010). This is why we believed it is the right time to open the Institute.” A unique service offered by the institutes in the United Arab Emirates is to provide Chinese lessons tailored to the needs of local police officers These classes address the need of local law enforcement to communicate with the large Chinese community in the country, which numbers over 200,000 people ([The National](#), November 2, 2012).

Chinese Success in the Arab World

As a tool of Chinese Soft-Power, CIs have effectively penetrated the Arab world and have been welcomed among Arabs elites including policymakers, university faculty and students, without significant criticism. The local elites see China as a model to look up to, businessmen wish to establish and strengthen trade and financial relationships with the world’s second largest economy, while politicians and academics see China as an alternative ally to the USA that offers what is in their view a well-functioning political system and philosophy, that may better suit Arab culture than the liberal democratic institutions promoted by the West. By leveraging China’s generally positive image in the region, Beijing is able to achieve maximum engagement with Arab elites with minimal investment.

Under President Xi Jinping, Chinese diplomacy tends to claim that China’s operations in the global arena are focused on financial and commercial areas, and that Beijing harbors no political or other aspiration in the global arena, such as replacing the USA in its role as “Global Policeman.” For instance, under Xi, China stresses “win-win” cooperation in China’s international relations by promoting a peaceful coexistence and building a world of cooperation in which both sides, China and the other country, benefit. In this case, the Chinese “win” influence over Arab society at a relatively low cost and the Arab side “wins” access to the second-largest economy in the world. Consequently, it is not surprising that CIs direct their students to study language and culture and promote these areas, rather than dealing with other topics which may be less acceptable to the Chinese government, particularly political issues such as the Hong Kong democracy protests, concentration/ reeducation camps for Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the political status of Taiwan. As with their counterparts elsewhere, CIs in the Arab world block any discussion or research on these subjects.

The Arab countries mentioned above are all non-democratic in their political structures and in this aspect are closer to the Chinese political system than they are to Western democracies. China presents for them a new non-democratic model of governance that has nevertheless achieved geopolitical and economic success. The “Chinese model” of a non-democratic country which still operates a thriving economy is appealing to Arab countries, in comparison to Western countries and the USA in particular, which for years preached that financial success will only follow the adoption of a democratic political system. Likewise, both China and Arab countries have bonded over their shared postcolonial narratives. As far back as the 1955 Bandung Conference, many

Arab countries identified China as a world power that presents an alternative to the West, even though in those years China was immeasurably weaker in comparison to its current position. This helps explain Arab countries' relative receptivity to Chinese influence and CIs.

In addition, many Arab countries, excluding the more affluent Gulf States, are hungry for investment and attention that can enhance the quality and diversity of their local higher education systems. As a result, it is easy to understand why Arab leaders welcome the establishment of these institutes, and promote the spread of a new "Chinese model". As a result, CIs have been generally positively welcomed in the Middle East and North Africa. Clearly, CIs are crucial to promote a positive image of China in the Arab world, but they are just one means for influence in the CCP's toolbox. In addition, China has leveraged media (such as the China Radio International, News agencies and cooperation with the local media outlets) and other elements of education and culture (such as cultural centers, festivals and workshops) to bolster its influence in the region. [2].

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[1] Kingsley Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda: International Power and Domestic Political Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), p. 110.

[2] More about these efforts can be found at: Roie Yellinek, Yossi Mann & Udi Lebel, "Chinese 'Soft Power Pipelines Diffusion' (SPPD) to the Middle Eastern Arab Countries 2000-2018: A Discursive-Institutional Study", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2020.1732870.
