



Confucius Institutes

NATIONS INVOLVED: People's Republic of China;
involving 146 countries around the world

TIME PERIOD: 2004 – present

THEMATIC AREA: GONGOs; Academic Groups

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Confucius Institutes (CIs) are non-profit educational institutions funded by the Chinese government, with the stated purpose of promoting Chinese language and culture. Since the launch of the Confucius Institutes programme in 2004, the large-scale initiative has been described as a Chinese “soft power” success. The Confucius Institutes have secured a number of partnerships with universities in 146 countries around the world, including in NATO member states. In 2017, there were 525 Confucius Institutes at colleges and universities, as well as 1,113 Confucius classrooms at primary and secondary schools. The CI initiative takes on a number of measures that differentiate it from other cultural institutions, particularly in the way the CIs become a structural unit of a host university and employ a double directorship system.

However, the motives behind this large-scale initiative and the procedures of installation in host countries have attracted criticism, in particular the lack of transparency concerning the university contracts, hiring policies and financial aspects. Moreover, reports of self-censorship on sensitive political and historical topics (such as Tibet, Taiwan, or the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989) by both Chinese teachers and local university professors have raised concerns about intellectual freedom. Several scandals in 2014 involving instances on censorship cast light on the hard-line approach applied by the previous Director General, and the tight control exerted by the CI’s governing body Hanban and the Chinese Ministry of Education. The controversy resulted in the non-renewal of CI contracts in several universities in the US and Europe and greatly contributed to the perception of CIs as an instrument of Chinese influence.

KEY POINTS

- Institutions like these should not automatically be viewed as hostile. At the same time, attention should be paid to instances where **national security interests could be impacted** – including when local populations are being subjected to a world view at odds with democratic values. The Confucius Institutes should be viewed as **acting in accordance with the official Chinese position** and in line with larger Chinese strategies of “soft power.”
- **Domestic context matters:** the domestic goals of the Confucius Institutes are equally as important as the external ones. China’s government is trying to spin the “World Welcomes China” narrative in order to legitimise its rule through the image of acceptance and sympathy abroad.
- Such organisations must be **treated solely as sources for language and cultural exchange**; the lack of academic freedom precludes any claims to wider expertise. A **stricter administrative and financial division** within the host universities should be applied in order to ensure academic freedom. **Sources of funding**, as well as underlying political objectives, should be made **transparent** to the public, media, academia and other influencers.

SUMMARY

Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms are non-profit educational institutions managed by the Confucius Institute Headquarters (“Hanban”), which in turn is affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. The first Confucius Institute was established in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea,¹ although the first pilot project was launched earlier that year in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.² In the following 13 years, the number of Confucius Institutes globally reached 525 Confucius Institutes at colleges and universities, as well as 1,113 Confucius classrooms at primary and secondary schools in 146 countries (2017). 173 of the Institutes are located in Europe and 110 in the United States of America.³

The CI initiative resembles other cultural institutes like the United Kingdom’s British Council or the German Goethe Institut in the ways it provides language training and promotes culture (e.g. through cooking courses or calligraphy classes, and celebrating Chinese holidays).⁴ Unlike these other cultural associations, however, the CIs are set up as a structural unit within the host university, and employ a system of double directorship.

Since the launch of the Confucius Institutes programme, controversy has surrounded the PRC’s initiative. Deemed a ‘soft power’ success story for China, the underlying motives behind the CIs and the procedures of installation in host countries have raised questions. A highly critical article in the *Taipei Times* described how “both Taiwan and Tibet have become taboos at these institutes, [the same applies to] sensitive issues such as the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, the Falun Gong movement, the neglect of human rights, China’s exchange rate manipulation, environmental hazards, its military expansion and the imprisonment of Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo.”⁵ Several scandals in



Confucius Institute in Kazan city in Russia.
IMAGE – SHUTTERSTOCK.



Confucius Institute building on the Troy University campus in the US / WIKIMEDIA:
Kreeder13

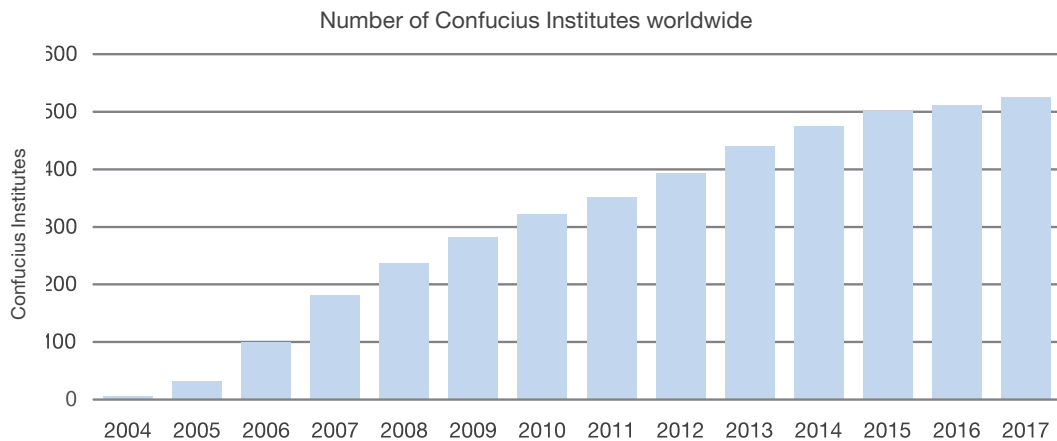
¹ 首尔孔子学院. Hanban official website, http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_6848.htm

² Don Starr, “Chinese Language Education in Europe: The Confucius Institutes,” *European Journal of Education* 44, No. 1 (2009): 65-82.

³ 关于孔子学院/课堂, Hanban official website, http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_10961.htm

⁴ Eleanor Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

⁵ Peng Ming-min, “China Picks Pockets of Academics Worldwide,” *Taipei Times*, 31 May 2011, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2011/05/31/2003504575>

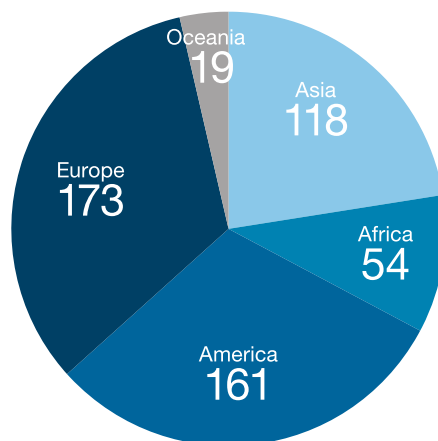


Source: Hanban.org (April 2018)

2014 involving incidents of censorship exposed the hard-line approach applied by the previous Director General, and resulted in protests and the non-renewal of CI contracts in several universities in the US and Europe. These controversies greatly contributed to the perception of CIs as a “soft power” tool.

Both the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) called for the closure of all Confucius Institutes, with the AAUP stating in 2013 that the CIs “function as an arm of the Chinese state” and “advance a state agenda in the recruitment and control of academic staff, the choice of curriculum, and in the restriction of debate.”⁶ In a 187-page report analysing the work of the CIs in the US, the National Association of Scholars also recommended an immediate closure of all Confucius Institutes in 2017.⁷ This case study does not see the grounds for such measures, arguing that a stricter administrative and financial division within the host universities should be applied in order to ensure academic freedom.

Although efforts of Confucius Institutes relate to different national security interests of the host countries, the main critical functions affected are those related to the sovereignty of foreign policy making, including public opinion and academic thinking that could influence policy making in favour of the PRC.



Global distribution of CIs (December 2017)

Source: Hanban.org (April 2018)

⁶ Quoted in: John Sudworth, “Confucius Institute: The Hard Side of China’s Soft Power,” *BBC News*, 22 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30567743>

⁷ Rachelle Peterson, *Outsourced To China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2017), https://www.nas.org/images/documents/confucius_institutes/NAS_confuciusInstitutes.pdf

CONTEXT

China and Soft Power

“Soft Power,” as defined by American political scholar Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, “occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants [...] in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants.”⁸ According to Nye, soft power resources include cultural attraction, ideology, international institutions, and multinational corporations.

Chinese officials and academics emphasised the importance of Chinese culture since the 1990s, with President Hu Jintao stating at the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007 that “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture.”⁹

President Xi Jinping said in 2014: “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world.”¹⁰ However, it is unclear whether the Chinese government refers to Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power” or if they have their own definition. Experts have estimated that China spends approximately USD 10 billion a year “aimed at enhancing its soft power in media, publishing, education, the arts, sports, and other domain.”¹¹ According to the Council on Foreign Relations, China’s soft power tools include infrastructure and aid programmes, but also more traditional tools like educational exchanges and international media outlets such as *China Daily* or *CCTV*, as well as the Confucius Institutes.¹²

President Hu's Legacy

Under former President Hu Jintao, China lacked a popular comprehensive unifying story - the ideological underpinnings did not offer any PR-friendly slogans, especially in terms of international applicability. The Confucius Institutes initiative was brought forward in 2004 as means to tell China’s story to the world, but it also served to demonstrate to the domestic population how China is welcomed and respected globally. Controversy aside, CIs are the biggest international legacy of Hu’s rule.

Since Xi Jinping assumed power, becoming the General Secretary of the General Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and the President of PRC in 2013, he has been invested in shaping China’s story both for internal and external markets in a different manner than his predecessor. Regarding the work of the Confucius Institutes, however, his position has been in line with that of Hu. The fact that the CI movement not only continues

⁸ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* 80 (Autumn 1990): 153-171.

⁹ Hu Jintao, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All,” *Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on Oct. 15, 2007*, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm#7>

¹⁰ Xi Jinping quoted in: Eleanor Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

¹¹ David Shambaugh, “China’s Soft-Power Push,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015 Issue, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push>

¹² Eleanor Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

to be on the forefront of China's cultural diplomacy, but is also actively being incorporated into the new initiatives of Xi's time, such as Belt and Road initiative¹³ and China's cooperation with the CEE countries ("16+1"), points towards its utility in the eyes of China's current leadership.

According to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes,¹⁴ the main task of the Institutes is Chinese language and cultural education, but the mission goes beyond education, presented as "contributing to the development of multiculturalism and the building of a harmonious world."¹⁵ The phrase "building of a harmonious world" (goujian hexie shijie 构建和谐世) is a political slogan actively used by former Chinese President Hu Jintao, who was in power during the launch of the initiative and as such is intrinsic to the Chinese political discourse of multilateralism and the increase of the Chinese global role.¹⁶ It is therefore reasonable to assume that the task of the Confucius Institutes, even on the discursive level, goes beyond culture and education.

The Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes includes the following main principles:

- Confucius Institutes devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples, to strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to promoting the development of multi-culturalism, and to construct a harmonious world.
- The Confucius Institutes are non-profit educational institutions.
- Adhering to the principles of mutual respect, friendly negotiations, and mutual benefit, the Confucius Institutes shall develop and facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language overseas and promote educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other international communities.
- The 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.
- The Confucius Institutes shall not involve or participate in any activities that are not consistent with the missions of Confucius Institutes.
- Any corporate entity outside of China capable of facilitating language instruction, conducting educational and cultural exchange activities, and meeting the requirements for application as stated in this Constitution and By-Laws may apply to the Confucius Institute Headquarters for the permission to establish a Confucius Institute.

¹³ "Joint Conference of Asian Confucius Institutes along the Belt and Road Held in Bangkok," *Hanban official website*, 12 September 2017, http://english.hanban.org/article/2017-09/12/content_698528.htm

¹⁴ "Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes," *Hanban official website*, http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm

¹⁵ "About Us," *Hanban official website*, http://english.hanban.org/node_7719.htm

¹⁶ 构建和谐世界主张的基本内容, *Official news website of the Communist Party of China*, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/1028/c350806-19413176.html>

Timeline of Key Events



¹⁷ 孔子学院全球分布图. 中国干部学习网, CCLN, <http://study.ccln.gov.cn/uploadImage/danganziliao/laozhaopian/271437524467201.jpg>

¹⁸ James Bradshaw and Colin Freeze, "McMaster Closing Confucius Institute over Hiring Issues," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 February 2013, <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/mcmaster-closing-confucius-institute-over-hiring-issues/article8372894/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>

¹⁹ "Statement on the Confucius Institute at the University of Chicago," *UChicago News*, 25 September 2014, <https://news.uchicago.edu/article/2014/09/25/statement-confucius-institute-university-chicago>

Chinese Narrative of Confucius Institutes

An article entitled “The World Welcomes China” presents the success of the cultural and educational outreach of China since the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China. It originally appeared in “People’s Daily” and was republished on the Ministry of Education of the PRC’s website, attributing the increase of the CI’s worldwide to the phenomenon of “Chinese fever” – a phrase used to describe the enthusiasm of Chinese learning abroad.²⁰ The Chinese information space portrays the foreign side as the primary initiator in setting up the Institutes, stating that the Institutes are “much welcomed across the globe.”²¹ It can be argued that the Confucius Institutes initiative is as important a legitimisation strategy internally as it is externally.

Confucius Institute Headquarters (“Hanban”)

Hanban everyday work centres on intra-institutional contact building by guiding Chinese educational, cultural and, in some cases, medical institutions through the process of establishing institutional cooperation with foreign counterparts via the CI programme. Hanban is a corporate body affiliated to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China and located in Beijing. Hanban is governed by the CI Headquarters Council.²² Interestingly, the Director General position has been empty since the scandals concerning the former Director General Madam Xu Lin.



Ma Jianfei, Secretary of the Party Committee (Director General Level) of Hanban

Secretary of the Communist Party Committee and Deputy Director-General of Hanban; Deputy Chief Executive of Confucius Institute Headquarters; and Vice Chairman and Secretary-General of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching. Responsible for Hanban policies to be in accordance with the Communist Party of China.

Xu Lin, Former Director General of Hanban

Left the Hanban position (dismissal plausible) after her ideological hard-line through a conference material censorship attempt and a conflict with the University of Chicago regarding its reluctance of renewal of the contract with Hanban resulted in an international scandal and a PR catastrophe for Hanban in 2014, currently serves as Councilor of the State Council of the PRC, speaking mostly on matters concerning education cooperation.²³

Western Narrative of Confucius Institutes

Suspicion or “better safe than sorry” approach. In a widely quoted 2017 report on Confucius Institutes in the US published by the National Association of Scholars, causes for concern include intellectual freedom, transparency, entanglement, and soft power. The report states that “no smoking guns” have been found, however, still advising caution and, ultimately, recommending that “all universities close their Confucius Institutes.”²⁴ This coincides with Western suspicion towards Chinese initiatives, deliberately pushing the conversation into the realm of conflict topics, such as Tiananmen Square events, Tibet issues and territorial disputes, and subsequently concluding that institutions should distance themselves from China.

²⁰ 中国教育, 把答卷写在人民的心上, China Ministry of Education, 9 September 2017, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201709/t20170909_314031.html

²¹ “About Confucius Institute/Classroom,” Hanban official website, http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm

²² “Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes,” Hanban official website, http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm#no2

²³ “COSC Held the 2017 BRICS Think Tank Symposium,” Councillors’ Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 4 July 2017, <http://english.counsellor.gov.cn/html/2017-07/234.html>

²⁴ Rachelle Peterson, 2017. *Outsourced To China – Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2017), 10, https://www.nas.org/images/documents/confucius_institutes/NAS_confuciusInstitutes.pdf

MEASURES

Strategic Logic

In order to establish a Confucius Institute, Hanban requires the host institution to establish a partnership with an educational institution in China, making it appear more as a local initiative than an organisation established by an outside actor. Once the partner institution is approved by Hanban, both organisations appoint a director of the soon-to-be established Confucius Institute, thus abiding by the principle of double directorship stipulated by China. It was stated in interviews that the Chinese side initially viewed the cooperation between the universities and the principle of double directorship as a means of reassuring the partners abroad.²⁵ Ironically, this policy resulted in almost instant suspicion from the Western partners. Drawing on the image of universities as the beacons of freedom of expression and academic thought, the partner institutions may risk becoming a point of entry for Chinese political agenda in the West.

Diplomatic. The establishment of an institute requires an official application from the potential host institution. The approaches of local educational institutions range from reluctant to highly engaging. When the host institution is reluctant the initiative of the establishment is unofficially expressed by the Chinese side, lobbying for the institution to apply for the CI status. In more strategic cases, the Ministry makes use of diplomatic channels to convey the message that an application for establishment coming from a local entity would be highly appreciated.²⁶ The pressure to ensure higher engagement and then attributing the result to the partner's own initiative serves the purpose of contributing to the "world welcomes China" narrative and demonstrates that organised distribution of the Confucius Institutes in the implementation stage relies on diplomatic resources.

The work of CIs is intertwined with that of the diplomatic corps, especially the Cultural Affairs Office. Almost every event organised by CIs (festivals, concerts, language competitions) is attended by representatives from the Chinese Embassy at the Ambassador or Consul General level.

Information. The CI programme has contributed greatly to China's presence in the host countries - therefore, the initiative can be branded as quite successful in terms of informational impact. The visibility of the CI is based not only on teaching, but also on opportunity marketing – the generous scholarships and prizes within the Chinese Bridge competition motivate citizens of host countries to take part in the CI's activities.²⁷ Also, the expansion strategy of opening classrooms and providing volunteer teachers is efficient in terms of impact outside capitals, as it impacts areas with scarce opportunities for continuing education.²⁸ These channels are being used for information outreach increase on China's current events from the official PRC perspective, China's "excellent traditional culture," and other Hanban vetted agendas. The criticism of the CI policy largely stems from this aspect – the space for China-related discussion is very narrow. Not allowing any meaningful exchange

²⁵ Interview conducted by author on 17 September 2017, data anonymised to avoid compromising the respondent.

²⁶ Interview conducted by author on 15 September 2017, data anonymised to avoid compromising the respondent.

²⁷ See, e.g., "2017 Confucius Institute Scholarship Open for Application," *University of Delaware*, 6 January 2017, sites.udel.edu/ci/2017/01/06/2017-ci-scholarship/

²⁸ E.g., Confucius Institute provided a volunteer Mandarin teacher for Smiltene, Latvia – a city of 5603 inhabitants.



UK Foreign Secretary William Hague and Mr Li Changchun signing an agreement between Bangor University and the Confucius Institute Headquarters in 2012 / WIKIMEDIA: Foreign and Commonwealth Office

on China's interior and international problematic issues, but only focusing on the realm of pre-packaged culture sets points towards agenda pushing.

Economic. The establishment of Confucius Institutes is often presented as a positive example of cooperation in speeches during Chinese state visits. Connections are made between the acceptance of Confucius Institutes and a favourable investment message – e.g. representatives from China's top technology companies took part in the establishing of the Confucius Institute in Germany²⁹ – Audi Konfuzius Institut Ingolstadt – which aims at promoting “China-German collaboration with regard to technology, innovation, sustainability and management.”³⁰ During the 2016 Summit of Prime Ministers of China Central and Eastern European Countries (“16+1”) in Latvia, Premier Li Keqiang attended a meeting with the Heads of Confucius Institutes of the represented countries, stating that economic cooperation is driven by deepening knowledge about each other, and that is the input provided by the CIs.³¹ Although no direct link between economic input from China and the CI in the country was established, the presence of the CI signals a PRC government-backed environment to investors.

Financial. CIs typically receive a minimum of USD 100,000 in annual support for programming.³² The CI constitution states: “A newly established Confucius Institute will receive aid to its initial operation in the form of a set amount of funds provided by the Chinese Parties. The funds for its annual projects shall be raised by individual Confucius Institutes and the Chinese Parties together in a ratio of approximately 1:1 commitment in general.” The CIs are obliged to report their annual projects and accounts to Hanban for approval.

It can be further deduced that the Institute is not financially self-sustainable, and that the most part of its operation

²⁹ 全球首家由跨国企业参与投资的孔子学院在德国揭牌, *China Daily Online*, 24 May 2017, http://caijing.chinadaily.com.cn/finance/2017-05/24/content_29470974.htm

³⁰ The Audi Konfuzius-Institut Ingolstadt, “About Us,” <http://audi-konfuzius-institut-i1ngolstadt.de/en/institut/ueber-uns.html>

³¹ “Li Keqiang Meets with CEEC Sinologists, Hoping Them to Be Bridge Builders for Civilisation Exchanges and Mutual Learning Between China and CEEC,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 11 November 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/lkqfwjejssthskskstitwyelsbcxlgjhy/t1413725.shtml

³² Eleanor Albert, “China's Big Bet on Soft Power,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

is ensured by the input from the Chinese side. This aspect of CI operation has not gone unnoticed among China's netizens as well, expressing unease over "paying the bills for Chinese learners" worldwide and rhetorically asking if "language schools" established by other countries operate this way, including pictures of impoverished Chinese schoolchildren studying without so much as a classroom or basic furniture to emphasise the argument.³³

Although the host institution input varies by country, in many cases the host provides non-liquid assets such as office space, representational and public venues. Confucius Institutes heavily rely on Chinese state subsidies and only view any generated income as a plus, but not as a prerequisite for successful operation.

Intelligence. Speculation over industrial espionage have been made in the US. Universities with cutting-edge technology were encouraged to exercise caution when cooperating with Hanban as the upper management of Chinese hi-tech companies are affiliated with the CI system. An interviewee mentioned these claims as an example of "misinformation stemming from a negative PR campaign," explicitly denying these accusations.³⁴

Legal / Law Enforcement. The degree of integration of the Confucius Institutes into the everyday academic work of the universities is determined by contracts signed between the involved institutions. In some cases, the legal framework gives the Institutes influence over the academic goal-setting, potentially endangering academic freedom. The Head of the Asian studies programme at the University of Latvia – the host institution of the CI – spoke in favour of a complete administrative division between the Asian/China studies programmes at the host school and the Confucius Institute, stating that his department does not feel any significant pressure from the CI and continues an independent academic policy due to administrative separation: "We believe the education provided by the CI falls more to the field of interest education than academic education. If our students successfully graduate from a Chinese language course at the CI, their credit points can be transferred into the programme – this decision, however, is made on case basis and is not exclusive to the CI – we practice the same approach with students who have studied other Chinese courses."³⁵

³³ See, e.g., one of the multiple reposts of the original: 美帝审计署撕下了孔子学院的画皮, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_89e4075f-0101cm1s.html

³⁴ Interview conducted by author on 17 September 2017, data anonymised to avoid compromising the respondent.

³⁵ Jānis Priede, Head of the Asian Studies programme, University of Latvia. Interview conducted by author on 20 September 2017.

NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS

Critical Functions

The critical functions that are affected the most are those related to the sovereignty of foreign policy making of the “target countries,” including public opinion (how the society at large perceives PRC, Chinese language and culture) and academic thinking that in turn could influence the policy making in favour of PRC:

1. Sovereignty of foreign policy and internal mechanisms making the foreign policy decisions.
2. Integrity and consistency of internal public opinion of external actors (countries).
3. Integrity and consistency of academic thinking related to the research on PRC.

The following provides a generalised assessment (given the wide scope of geography) of national interests of the countries where the Confucius Institutes operate:

Political. The agenda of Hanban through Confucius Institutes, if not analysed critically, has the potential to influence public opinion on China’s sensitive political issues in the host countries, by recruiting sympathetic opinions voiced by CI affiliated local scholars.

Military. Although CIs pose no military threat, public opinion influencing capabilities (see above) can contribute to tipping of the information scales regarding China’s conflicts in the region, leading to more sympathetic sentiment towards China’s military operations. The Confucius Institutes conduct conferences about China’s peacekeeping role within the UN, stressing China’s positive input.^{36,37} The interest of China’s military in the work of Confucius Institutes can be further demonstrated by the news of the rising number of Confucius Institutes worldwide, republished on the China Military website – an online English language media outlet of the People’s Liberation Army.³⁸

Economic. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Europe is viewed primarily as an opportunity for economic engagement with China. However, the BRI narrative in China stems from “the Silk Road spirit” propagated by the Chinese government, and the role of Confucius Institutes is being emphasised in building this spirit: “The Confucius Institutes have promoted amity among people as well as mutual learning, respect, inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence among different cultures through language and cultural exchanges. Co-built, co-managed and shared by both the Chinese and foreign sides, Confucius Institutes are a model of exploring an international cooperation mode and a pioneer of practicing the Silk Road spirit.”³⁹ The CIs are the ideological component and, arguably, a prerequisite for the economic cooperation within the BRI, therefore, the initially declared mutual interest based economic cooperation transitions into the realm of ideology.

³⁶ “Confucius Institute of Pisa, Italy Hosted High-End International Forum Entitled ‘China and Italy’s Participation in Peacekeeping Operations: Integration between Harmonious Culture of Confucianism and Machiavelli Thought’.” *Hanban official website*, 13 July 2012. http://english.hanban.org/article/2012-07/13/content_448140.htm

³⁷ “China’s Soft Power Status and its Implications for Africa,” *University of Johannesburg Confucius Institute*, August 2017, <https://confucius-institute.joburg/2017/07/chinas-soft-power-status-and-its-implications-for-the-african-union/>

³⁸ “500 Confucius Institutes Worldwide,” *China Military*, 4 December 2015, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2015-12/04/content_6799439.htm

³⁹ “Joint Conference of Asian Confucius Institutes along the Belt and Road Held in Bangkok,” *Hanban official website*, 12 September 2017, http://english.hanban.org/article/2017-09/12/content_698528.htm

Social. The asymmetry of resources invested by the CIs in the popularisation of China's official world view decreases the outreach of competing narratives, for example those of Taiwan or other ethnic or religious groups with positions conflicting with those of the PRC.

Information. The impact of the CIs on the local media and the scope of cooperation is to be determined with further research. Currently, the risk stems from the practice of the CIs to hire respected members of the local community (well-known researchers in the fields of Chinese language, history, politics, archaeology etc.) as directors, thus aiming to legitimise the CI initiative in the eyes of the local communities.⁴⁰ It has to be noted, however, that the most media impact is directed towards domestic China's audience through such broadcasters as *China Daily*, *Xinhua News agency*, and *CCTV*. The main goal under such circumstances is not to change the perception of China abroad, but rather to contribute to the "the world welcomes China" narrative.⁴¹

Vulnerabilities

The policy of establishing a Confucius Institute within an existing university and injecting the funds and the management into the hosting university is assessed to be one of the most concerning aspects of the CI operation, as the university may become more vulnerable towards a Chinese political agenda. The double Hanban-host university directorship system inhibits the host university director's freedom of academic expression. The official description of the initiative states: "Benefiting from the UK, France, Germany and Spain's experience in promoting their national languages, China began its own exploration through establishing non-profit public institutions which aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries in 2004: these were given the name the Confucius Institute."⁴² Still, none of the countries mentioned has a policy of establishing its official cultural and educational centres (Centre Cultural of France, Goethe-Institut of Germany, the British Council of the UK, Instituto Cervantes of Spain) within local universities and employing the double directorship system. By becoming a structural unit of the university, an institution affiliated to the Chinese government gains access to personal data of academics working within the host institutions. More importantly, this policy makes the universities vulnerable to becoming mirrors for Chinese political agenda.

Another vulnerability lies in the fact that academic institutions often face severe financial constraints. Universities will therefore often welcome the generous funding from Hanban to provide educational training which they would otherwise not be able to offer. An Australian MP, Jamie Parker, raised this point in the parliament in 2011, stating: "I'm concerned this is acting as an arm of propaganda from the Chinese perspective and trying to extend that into our education system here in Australia. One of the problems is that schools are always so desperate for funding that people that are supposed to be providing funds are often welcomed with open arms without the kind of analysis and critical eye that's required."⁴³

Threats

While Confucius Institutes differ in terms of specialisation, there are operational guidelines that are applied in all the institutions affiliated with Hanban. Guidelines include references to "promoting China's Excellent Traditional

⁴⁰ See e.g. the director of the CI at the University of Latvia presenting his translation – Chinese-Latvian dictionary – to China's Premier, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016/11/06/content_27285941.htm

⁴¹ See 各地孔子学院喜迎新春佳节, *Xinhua official website*, 21 February 2015. http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-02/21/c_1114413750.htm

⁴² "About Confucius Institute/Classroom," Hanban official website, http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm

⁴³ Jamie Parker quoted in: Louisa Lim and Anders Furze, "Confucius Institute in NSW Education Department Unacceptable' – Analyst," *The Guardian*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/08/confucius-institute-in-nsw-education-department-unacceptable-analyst>



Concerned community members, students, and parents, protest the establishment of Confucius Institutes in the Toronto School District in October 2014. Photo: Students for a Free Tibet.

Culture” – a corpus of pre-Republican heritage deemed in accordance with today’s development. Therefore, the boundaries of what should and should not be promoted in terms of Chinese culture abroad are rigorously predetermined and politically non-neutral. The policy of injection of the Institute or Classroom into the local educational institution has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, intra-institutional cooperation is thus promoted and, as stipulated by the academics involved with the CI’s, the problem of the under-financing of the Chinese language and culture programmes is solved.⁴⁴ The negative aspects include the self-censorship on the host side towards sensitive political topics⁴⁵ and decreasing involvement in the academic cooperation with the partners opposed by the PRC, for example, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange of Taiwan.⁴⁶

A widely discussed case of self-censorship and possible successful political pressure via a Confucius Institute occurred at Sydney University, Australia, when the university cancelled a lecture by Dalai Lama and “warned organisers not to use its logo, allow media coverage or entry to the event by Tibet activists,” reportedly “to avoid damaging its ties with China, including funding for its cultural Confucius Institute”⁴⁷ in 2013.

Hanban invests in ensuring long-term support and sympathies. Training and visits for young sinologists are organised through the CIs’ “Culture and language learning trips to China” programmes,⁴⁸ and the content is biased

⁴⁴ Sophie Beach, “Confucius Institutes and Academic Freedom,” *China Digital Times*, 1 May 2017, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/05/nas-confucius-institutes-jeopardize-academic-freedom/>

⁴⁵ Interview conducted by author on 25 September 2017, data anonymised to avoid compromising the respondent.

⁴⁶ Interview conducted by author on 17 September 2017, data anonymised to avoid compromising the respondent.

⁴⁷ “Sydney University Criticised for Blocking Dalai Lama Visit,” *The Guardian*, 18 April 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/sydney-university-dalai-lama>

⁴⁸ 中国推进孔子新汉学计划 培养新一代汉学家, *Hanban official website*, http://www.hanban.edu.cn/article/2015-12/07/content_626353.htm

in China's favour.⁴⁹ Confucius Institutes are of strategic importance to the Central government – this information is explicitly stated on the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China training website for cadres.⁵⁰

Effects

Since the establishment of the CI initiative, the People's Republic of China has minimised the cultural impact of opposing organisations by monopolising the narrative on Chinese culture. The multi-layered and, at times, even mutually exclusive traditional Chinese cultural heritage is being taught in accordance with the selective official guidelines of the CPC and the central government. Here some parts of Chinese heritage are deemed “excellent,” whereas others are not suitable, resulting in a biased and politicised take on Chinese culture. Meanwhile, the CI initiative and its reported positive perception abroad is used as a means of legitimising the government and party in the eyes of the Chinese population. The general aim of the popularisation of the Chinese culture and, especially, language has been achieved. According to Hanban's official statistics, in 2009 – i.e. five years into the initiative – 260,000 people had already enrolled in CI courses worldwide. This implies a significant cultural impact, and although some statistics show a decline in enrolment figures in the following years, the CIs still reach several hundred thousand students. In the eyes of many of these students, China successfully changed the perception of underdevelopment to an image of a dynamic, technically advanced country with a showcase cultural heritage.

⁴⁹ E.g., a programme for young sinologists contains a visit to towns inhabited by ethnic minorities, where a performance of their “traditional lifestyles” is presented centring on the notion that “ethnic minorities are thriving in China.”

⁵⁰ 孔子学院 中国干部学习网, CCLN, 27 July 2015, <http://study.ccln.gov.cn/danganziliao/laozhaopian/209416.shtml>

CONCLUSIONS

The immediate international aims of the CI programme include the popularisation of China's political worldview through culture impact, visibility increase, and intra-institutional contact building. The leading domestic policy goal is government legitimisation through the perception of acceptance and sympathy abroad. Embedding the institution into the local community provides the Chinese side with a wider impact on students interested in Chinese language, eliminating nonstandard or low-quality language teaching services. CIs offer Mandarin Chinese language testing according to the HSK standards – for example, prior to the launch of the initiative in Latvia in 2011, Chinese language instruction outside of university programmes was primarily carried out by non-native speakers with the A2-B1 (in some cases – even A1) levels of proficiency in Mandarin Chinese and without proper teaching qualification. The courses at the CI provide an opportunity for locals interested in Chinese learning to obtain standardised, professional, and methodologically advantageous training, contributing to daily people-to-people exchanges with China – an important positive aspect, as these interactions can overcome political and ideological frameworks, resulting in meaningful exchanges between individuals not involved in or even opposed to the immediate political agendas.



Confucius Institute in Bretagne, France / WIKIMEDIA by Florian B35.



Confucius Institute in Vancouver, Canada / FLICKR by Tom Magliery.



Confucius Institute at Seneca College, Canada / WIKIMEDIA by Raysonho.

Currently, the CIs do not establish themselves as reliable expertise providers on political matters; therefore, they do not possess the pull to influence local China policy-related discourses. Supporting this argument, Hanban is facing massive public relations challenges following suspicious attitudes towards CIs that have dominated both the Western media as well as academia since the scandals concerning the CI programme in Europe and the US; and this trend has only increased.

Still, the Confucius Institutes should be viewed as acting in accordance with the official Chinese position and in line with larger Chinese strategies of soft power, as they “promote China’s excellent culture, spread China’s good voice, and show harmonious Chinese soft power.”⁵¹ This stems both from the upper management of Hanban being involved in Communist Party work, as well as from the supervision of the Ministry of Education of the PRC. The

⁵¹ 新媒: 孔子学院代表中国软实力 [A quote from an article originally printed in 《联合早报》, Singapore] *China Radio International Online*, 17 December 2013, <http://gb.cri.cn/42071/2013/12/17/5931s4360021.htm>

students involved in the projects and scholarships provided by Hanban are provided with a travel and culture programme aiming to show China in a favourable light – activities involve demonstrating the harmony and coexistence of different ethnic groups in China, the positive examples of integration of traditional Chinese values into contemporary Chinese society, and current political slogans brought forward by the leadership of the Party-State, such as the “Chinese Dream” of the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” and the “Two Centenary Goals.” Problematically, there is specific funding available from the Confucius Institute Headquarters for “providing information and consultative services on Chinese education and culture,”⁵² imbalancing an objective discussion.

Recommendations

In order to avoid the CI network becoming a plausible threat to the objectivity of China-related research and public opinion, nations hosting or planning to host a Confucius Institute should consider the following points:

1. As an institutionalised soft power tool exercised by the People’s Republic of China, and in the light of the censorship and persuasion scandals in 2014, Confucius Institutes should not be regarded as expertise-providing institutions, but rather as promotion centres for Chinese culture abiding by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and, ultimately, the Communist Party of China. Therefore, objectivity in sensitive topics assessment is not to be expected from the Institutes.
2. The current financial model of the Institutes should be reassessed in favour of direct unit budget input rather than financing through the host institution central budget in order to increase independence of the host institution.
3. Academic Chinese studies programmes should be completely separate from the work of Confucius Institutes, and in no way, partially or otherwise, affiliated to them. Existing joint programmes should be revised. Inner audits are recommended to monitor academic freedom and the risks of self-censorship in such programmes.

⁵² “Regulations for the Administration of Confucius Institute Headquarters Funds,” *Hanban official website*, http://english.hanban.org/node_7878.htm

