Confucius Institutes: China’s Soft Power?

The first Confucius Institute (CI) opened its doors in Seoul, South Korea on November 24, 2004. Since then, the number of these Chinese cultural outposts has increased rapidly, with the Chinese government opening approximately two CIs per week throughout the world. To date, over 500 CIs operate in 87 countries across the globe. In the United States and other countries where CIs operate, the explosive growth of CIs gives rise to questions regarding their purpose and function. Experts are debating the problems encountered by CIs and ask whether CIs represent the expansion of China’s soft power. In this Commentary, I examine the function and purpose of CIs and argue that, despite their rapid worldwide growth and popularity, CIs suffer from a host of international obstacles as well as from criticism within China. Furthermore, CIs play a limited role as extensions of China’s soft power because they fail to account for contemporary aspects of Chinese culture.

What is a Confucius Institute?
According the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), which serves as the CI headquarters, a CI acts as a non-profit educational organization satisfying the growing international demand to learn Chinese, and enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture abroad. Chinese universities, their partner organizations in foreign countries, and Hanban, which is composed of representatives from 12 ministries and commissions within the central government, administer the CIs. The Chinese offer teaching materials and instructors for the CIs, while partner organizations provide space and facilities. Though the Chinese government allocates funds for the expenditures of all CIs, the exact amount remains unclear. Xu Jialu, former Vice Chairman of the National People’s Congress, estimates that each CI needs approximately $100,000 per year. However, my research in Japan found that several CIs had annual budgets of over $200,000. With massive government financial support and the rising demand for Chinese language education around the world, the growth of CIs has surpassed government projections. Their rapid growth has not been without problems.

Key Points
- There are 500 plus Confucius Institutes in over 87 countries
- Estimated budgets for each CI annually is $100,000 with some as high as $200,000 a year
- Many Institutes have only set up nominal programs and remain shells
- CIs all over the world, especially in Japan and the US, are having trouble getting approval from top tier institutions
- There is domestic criticism that the government is not allocating funds appropriately, leaving the domestic education inadequately funded
- The CIs do not strengthen Chinese soft power because the popular culture aspect is missing.
Problems Encountered Internationally

Confusion and uncertainty about the CI’s purpose, ideology, and connection with the Chinese government constitute a hindrance to their expansion in top universities. Of the more than 17 CIs launched in Japan since 2005, all were at private colleges. The Imperial universities, as Japan’s national universities are known, declined to open CIs despite pressure from their Chinese counterparts. Chinese culture traditionally holds significant influence in Japan, but people remain concerned by the potential ideological and cultural threat of Chinese government-run projects such as CIs.

In the U.S., over 60 CIs have opened. Like Japan however, the majority of top institutions have hesitated to open CIs, with the exception of the University of Michigan and the University of California, Los Angeles.

The program also suffers from a shortage of professional language teachers as a result of its rapid growth. Of the 5,000 Chinese language teachers in China, only half possess Teaching Chinese as a Second Language licenses. Assuming each CI needs at least two professional teachers, the CI project will quickly deplete the number of language teachers in China. To solve this problem, the Chinese government has launched a volunteer project to train language teachers quickly, but it remains very difficult to send qualified teachers to every CI.

Finally, the number of CIs may give a false impression of the extent of their activities. Some CIs consist of a one-room office with a sign but no programming. For example, my interviews at Waseda University in Japan revealed that many people are familiar with the existence of the CI, but no one (including the faculty) knew of its physical location or any activities it might sponsor.

Domestic Uncertainty

Confucius Institutes also face domestic criticism within China. Although critics have a limited voice, their concerns are substantial. Some worry that the government’s support for the CIs’ budgets detracts from domestic spending. There is widespread acknowledgement that the budget for domestic compulsory education remains inadequate. Matriculation rate disparities between urban areas and the countryside remain high. Critics argue that these and numerous other problems require priority financial support from the government over the CI program.

Another area some observers comment on is the appearance of corruption or at least a conflict of interest within the Hanban itself. Although defined as a Non-Profit Organization (NPO), Hanban operates companies related to the CI project for profit. For instance, in November 2009, Hanban launched a new company, which won the bid for over five million U.S. dollars from the Ministry of Finance to operate the CI’s website; the person in charge of this company is also the deputy director of Hanban. Some critics also point to a potential Hanban monopoly in the supply of teaching materials for the CIs. Both of these issues point to the potential for corruption within the Hanban.

Are CIs Instruments of China’s Soft Power?

Joseph Nye argues that CIs play an important role in the rise of China’s soft power projection. He is only partially correct. If we examine the CI programs, the content focuses largely on the traditional aspects of China’s culture, but ignores the contemporary dimensions. Culture has two faces: one is the traditional aspect inherited and passed down through the generations, the other is the more modern version produced by the newer generation. The modern aspect, or current popular culture is more accessible to the outside than traditional culture, which is multi-layered and complex. Japan and South Korea have traditional cultures closely related to China’s, but both countries have their own distinct popular cultures, which are represented abroad by such phenomena as *manga* and *anime* in Japan and *hanryu* or the Korean Wave in South Korea.

*Manga* has a huge international market. With its wide range of content including popular culture as well as reproduced traditional influences, *manga* is able to reach large audiences and helps them...
understand Japan better. Popular media forms such as manga or anime serve as many young peoples’ introductions to Japanese culture, and often lead to further study of Japanese language and culture. Therefore, manga serves as a point of identification and introduction for Japanese pop culture that strengthens Japan’s soft power. However, China has no such readily accessible point of identification within the Confucius Institutes, with their focus on traditional culture, which holds less attraction for young people. Without such a popular draw, the CIs cannot serve their intended purpose, and do little to increase China’s soft power. If China truly wants to dramatically increase its soft power, it needs to find a point of convergence between its culture and the rest of the world—something that will draw outsiders in beyond a general interest in language study. This is a difficult task for Chinese intellectuals and government officials. They are still searching for this “key concept” and have yet to find it. Coining a “key concept” for Chinese culture is crucial to popularizing Chinese language and culture abroad. Without it, China’s soft power will remain limited.

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