

The Current State of Soft Power Development in China: The Confucius Institute as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Taking Confucius Institutes (CIs) as an example, this paper examines and describes the current development of China's soft power, analyses the positive impact of CIs on China in terms of culture, economy and foreign policy through concrete data and examples, identifies the problems CIs are currently facing, and makes brief recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of "soft power", which he further elaborated in 2005 as comprising three components: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004). As one of the most critical components, culture plays an essential role in expanding national influence. Initially, the most apparent manifestation of "soft power" in expanding the country's influence was the widespread global distribution of Hollywood movies and the significant increase in the international box office (Nelson, 2022). While US soft power remains the most influential in the world, East Asian countries have increasingly focused on the role of soft power in increasing their international influence. Whether it is the spread of Japanese anime, the popularity of Korean K-pop culture or the large-scale construction of Confucius Institutes in China (Weissmann, 2020), all of them reflect the great efforts made by East Asian countries to improve their soft power. In the author's view, East Asian soft power is undoubtedly successful in terms of its influence and the scope of its dissemination. This essay will study and describe the current state of soft power in China using the Confucius Institutes (CIs) as an example. This paper will take CIs referred to as an example to illustrate the current development of China's soft power, analyze the positive impact CIs have brought to China in terms of culture, economy and foreign policy, and point out the current problems CIs face and make brief suggestions.

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THE CURRENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT OF CIS

At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese academics introduced the concept of soft power, and officials began to realize the strategic importance of soft power. The Chinese government has developed several cultural diplomacy policies dedicated to improving China's soft power, the most notable example of which is the establishment of several CIs worldwide to promote the spread of the Chinese language worldwide. The number of Confucius Institutes has dramatically increased since 2004. China's rising international significance has sped up this expansion. The Confucius Institute's statute was formed by the Ministry of Education in 2006. The Chinese government also hopes to use the CIs program to build harmonious foreign relations, strengthen the intrinsic appeal of Chinese culture, and globalize Chinese culture, thereby promoting cooperation with foreign countries. The Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China even included it in its "resolution" (Xinhuanet, 2014). Chinese Party leaders and government representatives attended CIs hundreds of times and focused their activities there by the end of 2014. Additionally, President Xi Jinping has made multiple trips to CIs and has stated that everything possible should be done to promote them because the advancement of soft power and the realization of the Chinese dream go hand in hand (Xinhuanet, 2014).

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF CIS

According to the Global Soft Power Index rankings released by Brand Finance, a global brand valuation consultancy, China has jumped from 30th place in 2015 to fourth place in 2022. According to the world. BBC World Service (May 2012), in a survey of more than 20,000 people in 22 countries around the world, respondents' favorable opinion of Europe has declined, and their opinion of China has shown a marked improvement. China's positive impact has surpassed that of the EU and the US, as shown in Figure 1 (Xiao, 2017). As the most obvious example of China's soft power objectives, the positive impact of the rapid development of CIs over the past two decades has been seen in three main areas: culturally, economically, and in foreign policy.

In terms of function, to strengthen cultural relations between China and other nations, CIs strongly emphasized teaching the Chinese language and culture and encouraging encounters between Chinese and people from other countries. Chinese institutions and their overseas partner universities and organizations jointly run CIs. The Chinese institution supplies the course materials, teachers, and initial funding, while the international partner offers the physical space and amenities. The Chinese government anticipates that such a relationship between Chinese and foreign universities will encourage more foreign academics into China and improve the country's higher education and scientific research capacity by training foreign human resources. CIs provide a variety of services to overseas people who love Chinese culture. In addition to providing basic Chinese language instruction, they train international Chinese teachers and encourage students to take exams to obtain teacher certification (Ministry of Education, 2006). Through various teaching activities, CIs enhances the fun of learning

Chinese. For example, in cooperation with local communities, they organized calligraphy and Chinese painting exhibitions and promoted Chinese food, Chinese medicine and Chinese kung fu. In particular, CIs in Russia and Spain organized more than 600 cultural events during the "Year of the Chinese Language", attracting more than 300,000 foreigners (Pan, 2013). Their unique mode of operation has also attracted many foreigners interested in Chinese culture to participate. In addition, foreign CIs partners are often invited to China to visit international cultural events and sports competitions. For example, in 2010, the Shanghai World Expo invited 2,000 CI directors, teachers, and 300 university presidents. Many Asian university presidents were invited to participate in the Guangzhou Asian Games (Pan, 2013). These international cultural events promote intercultural and interfaith exchanges between countries and foster intercultural reconciliation. Confucius Institutes are now crucial locations for foreigners to learn about Chinese culture and support the development of public interest in and knowledge of contemporary China. Its unique mode of operation has also attracted the participation of many foreigners interested in Chinese culture. Confucius Institutes have become essential for countries to learn about Chinese culture. Most importantly, as more and more foreigners begin to learn Chinese culture, they will eventually appreciate the Chinese people's love of peace and comprehend how they look for common ground while retaining differences, thus believing in China's firm choice of the road to peaceful development, overcoming their hostility toward the Chinese government and slowly eliminating their fear of the "Chinese threat", making China's image of insisting on win-win cooperation and peaceful development prevalent.

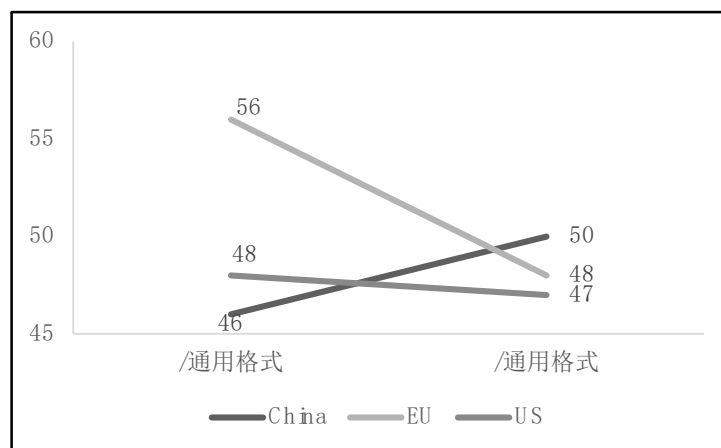


Figure 1. Views of Country's Positive Influence: China vs US vs EU.

Through a soft power approach, the CIs program seeks to foster an environment at the global level that is favorable for China's economic modernization and development. The "Belt and Road" initiative is one of China's most critical outbound policies, which aims to connect developing nations with high-growth potential (Tung, 2016) to revitalize modern trade routes between China and Europe. For Chinese companies, cross-border

M&A is an essential way for them to make outbound investments, as this approach can help Chinese companies to expand their scale, expand their markets and obtain vital strategic assets in the shortest possible time to achieve rapid internationalization (Deng, Yang, Wang, & Doyle, 2017). However, due to different cultural environments, firms often face massive cultural conflicts and foreign responsibilities when conducting cross-border M&A, which results in a very high failure rate of cross-border M&A. Some studies have shown that cross-border M&A success rates are higher in countries with similar cultural, psychological, and institutional distances (Demirbag, Glaister, & Tatoglu, 2007). Therefore, cultural issues are the main obstacle to internationalization for Chinese companies. The promotion of CIs, on the other hand, helps to increase knowledge of the Chinese language and culture across countries, increases knowledge of the Chinese language and culture in the host nation, breaks down cultural barriers, and increases cultural exchange and diffusion, thus reducing the failure rate of cross-border M&As and promoting Chinese firms' outward FDI (Liu, 2020). The ease of language communication then helps to reduce misunderstandings and ineffective communication due to cultural differences when negotiating business cooperation, enhances the acquired company's trust in the Chinese company, and reduces the psychological distance between the acquirer and the acquired, thus reducing transaction costs and increasing the success rate of cross-border M&A. Lien et al. (2012) found that CIs have a tremendous active impact. Through their data study, Xu et al. (2015) discovered a substantial positive correlation between the existence of CIs and the results of Chinese OFDI. In countries with lesser economic development and political status than China, CIs can help decrease culturally based legitimacy difficulties, make overseas investments, and help partners in these countries to build their economies. In contrast, in countries with better economic development and political status than China, China can enhance cultural exchanges with host countries through CIs to enhance their understanding of Chinese culture and help Chinese companies gain more benefits in cross-border trade (Liu, 2020). Additionally, the learning systems in these nations with more robust economies tend to be better developed, which is helpful for CIs in improving their training and curriculum programs, thus strengthening the beneficial effect of CIs on cross-border M&A.

In addition to cultural and economic aspects, CIs play a considerable role in diplomacy. CIs have great cultural appeal and can be seen as a spiritual link between people from different countries and China. Their establishment manifests the Chinese government's efforts to create a favorable perception of China. Over the last century, Western political parties and media have often expressed unfavorable views on China's one-party ruling system, human rights issues, and political issues in Tibet and Taiwan, arguing that China's political system runs counter to the world's trend of democratization and that the "China threat theory" they spread has demonized China for a long time. These statements damage China's national image, increase diplomatic pressure on China and complicate the complex international environment (People's Daily, 2012). Under such circumstances, an excellent national image is vital, and thus CIs named after Confucius, China's most famous philosopher and educator, was created. By naming it after Confucius, the Chinese government does not want it to have any political overtones but only to be established as a cultural symbol of the Chinese nation based on culture and

history. Those whom the CIs positively influences will show a more pro-China attitude, thus reducing to some extent the obstacles to China's foreign policy and pushing China's diplomatic career in a better direction (Peerenboom, 2006). For example, when it comes to commerce between China and the United States, Yeh et al. (2021) experimentally analyzed that those Americans who were influenced by China's soft power felt warmer toward China and were more in favor of the US government's trade talks with China rather than trade wars and were more interested in friendly cooperation with China in a peaceful rather than conflictual manner. At the same time, establishing CIs is also more conducive to implementing the "One China" policy. Because CIs require foreign partners to adhere to the One China principle (Zhou, 2016), which means that institutions that want to establish CIs in their own countries or regions are obligated to recognize the independence and unity of the PRC, the CCP will be better positioned to achieve its goal of marginalizing Taiwan in terms of global influence. The acquisition of these diplomatic advantages is proof enough that CIs can help soften China's international image and help the Chinese government succeed in diplomacy at a time when China's world discourse is growing.

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY CIS AND SUGGESTIONS TO SOLVE THEM

According to the above three points, CIs play a very positive role culturally, economically and diplomatically and are one of the key contributors to the success of China's soft power in recent decades. However, at the same time, the development of CIs has faced many questions and obstacles, and many criticisms and objections still exist. First, CIs need a strong faculty, as it is more challenging to recruit qualified local teachers, so many Chinese teachers must travel to foreign countries to teach (Lo, 2016). However, the salaries of CIs need to be higher to attract good teachers to leave their hometowns to work abroad. Suppose CIs want to address this faculty issue. In that case, they will require closer collaboration between CIs and scholars and faculty in the host country, seeking more local faculty with a background in cross-cultural studies. Second, some foreign institutions and scholars oppose joining CIs because they believe that CIs threaten the freedom of the press and freedom of expression they advocate and may threaten local students' intellectual integrity and independence. For example, Sahlins (2015), a professor at the University of Chicago, has strongly denounced the political implications of CIs as limiting the benefits of open dialogue and the motivations for US colleges working with CIs. The American Association of State University Professors (2014) has posted reports that the existence of CIs violates academic freedom and student autonomy. All of these debates about CIs directly or indirectly contributed to the University of Chicago's shutdown of its CIs in 2017, increasing suspicion and criticism of CIs in the literature. Nevertheless, academic freedom is inherently difficult to define. To solve this problem, CIs need to be more rigorous in compiling books and designing courses, avoiding some of the more sensitive political issues as much as possible, and encouraging students to think outside the box and look at Chinese culture dialectically. Third, the number of CIs has been growing exceptionally rapidly with government

support and the "China fever" trend around the world, which requires more financial support from the Chinese government. Under such circumstances, some people have begun to question whether the Chinese government has allocated domestic and overseas education funds appropriately and whether it is reasonable to use such a vast amount of funds and teacher resources to develop overseas Chinese language education when 10 million children in China are not receiving proper education, and whether there are improper money transactions or corruption behind this (Lo & Pan, 2016). To reduce these questions about the source and destination of funds, CIs need to be more open and transparent in announcing the flow of funds and be more active in seeking public scrutiny. Although the above suspicions are not fully proven, they all increase the general public's distrust of China to a certain extent and give overseas forces an excuse to use these suspicions to attack the Chinese political system. The Chinese government is eager to expand the scale of CIs in a short period. However, at such a speed that is too fast, it will inevitably lead to inefficiency and poor quality, which will inevitably result in unreasonable use of resources and may instead have the counterproductive effect of making partners lose confidence in CIs and increasing widespread suspicion and opposition (Lo & Pan, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In general, this paper analyses the positive impact of the establishment of Confucius Institutes in the world on China from three aspects: culture, economy and diplomacy, and affirms the success of China's policy of developing soft power represented by CIs. At the same time, the authors also analyze the difficulties encountered in developing CIs and propose solutions to each of these problems. Although many skeptical voices still surround CIs, their positive impacts still far outweigh their negative ones. the development of CIs has dramatically enhanced China's soft power and, to a certain extent, increased China's international influence and improved its international image. Therefore, the policy represented by China's CIs, which has subliminally increased its international influence by spreading its soft power, is undoubtedly successful. Of course, this does not mean that China has become so strong that it does not need to continue to enhance its soft power; on the contrary, this is a critical period for China to improve its soft power, and China still needs to make great efforts on the way to improve its soft power.

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