

From embrace to decoupling: the closure of Confucius Institutes in the United States

Zhaoxiong Gong

School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

20110170005@fudan.edu.cn

Abstract. A lot of Confucius Institutes have been built globally since 2004. Many believe these institutes could serve as bridges to enhance mutual understanding between the East and the West and dispel misjudgments. Yet in practice, it also brought some controversies, criticisms or even frustrations in the output of China's soft power. In 2014, the University of Chicago and the Pennsylvania State University in the United States terminated the cooperation with Confucius Institutes. Confucius Institutes have gradually sparked concern and apprehension among American academics and politicians. The number of Confucius Institutes in the United States has declined sharply since 2017, with many Confucius Institutes and Classrooms being forced to close due to various political and public pressure. Moreover, this wave of closures shows no sign of reversing at present. The increase or decrease in the number of Confucius Institutes in the United States reflects the changing dynamics of closeness and distance during contact process of two countries. This paper intends to clarify the reasons behind the shift, analyses how cultural awareness and cultural misunderstandings arise during cross-cultural interactions, thereby impeding cultural exchange. It seeks to propose solutions that may prompt both parties to rethink and revise its mode of operation.

Keywords: Confucius Institute, Orientalism, culture awareness, misunderstanding

1. Introduction

Confucius Institutes (CI) are non-profit educational institutions affiliated with the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) [1] of the Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China. With the aim of providing quality services for foreigners to "learn Chinese and understand China", facilitating cultural exchanges and providing Chinese teaching resources [2], Confucius Institutes, after the first established in South Korea, become a giant network with 498 Confucius Institutes and 773 Confucius Classrooms across 160 countries and regions worldwide by the end of 2023 [3].

The Confucius Institute program began in 2004. In that year, China have signed contracts with Tashkent State University in Uzbekistan, University of Maryland in the United States, University of Nairobi in Kenya, agreed on establishing Confucius Institute jointly in June. In the same month, the Confucius Institute in Seoul was formally inaugurated, becoming the first Confucius Institute to commence operations worldwide [4]. Usually, The Confucius Institute builds together with local affiliate colleges and universities, and the financing is shared between Hanban and the local host institutions.

There are many languages and culture promotion organizations all over the world such as British Council in UK, Alliance Française in France, Goethe-Institut in Germany and the American Cultural Centre in US. Unlike these organizations, Confucius Institutes operate within foreign established colleges, universities, even high schools, providing teachers, funding and educational materials. With its fast expansion, concerns on academic freedom and worries that "the institutes present a selective and politicized view of China as a means of advancing the country's soft power internationally" had been raised. Several setbacks occurred since 2014, including the University of Chicago and the Pennsylvania State University terminated the cooperation with Confucius Institute, and Stockholm University in Sweden announced shut down the Confucius Institute on June 30, 2015 [5].

Nowadays, in the context of globalization, every country is affected by the merging of international economy and politics, also, cultures combine and influence each other. Dealing with the relationship between native culture and another culture becomes a big challenge that everyone should face. Many governments realized culture would be a difficult issue to solve. Some treated it cautiously, but some not. Still, a few countries like simplifying, labeling other cultures prejudicially. Shutting down Confucius Institutes may use as an example. It is clear that there are many problems in Confucius Institutes and its operation system. The supervisory and operational bodies need to find out and resolve them sincerely. Meanwhile, it reflected the western

common attitude toward oriental culture. So, this thesis intends to clarify the reasons behind the phenomenon, including culture awareness and Orientalism, cultural imperialism and cultural hegemony, as well as to analyze improper acts in the cross-cultural interaction. Hopefully, summarize solution to rethink and modify its mode of operation.

2. Problems and challenges in Confucius Institutes

Although the purpose of Confucius Institutes is to teach Chinese language and promote Chinese culture around the world, a lot of western scholars criticized Confucius Institutes interfere academic freedom. They think Confucius Institutes have non-academic goals.

2.1. Unclarity and ambiguity caused by China's foreign publicity policy

Firstly, some countries have a lack of understanding regarding China's foreign publicity efforts. They tend to doubt everything the Communist Party of China (CPC) said, and the Chinese government's attitude toward Confucius varies from time to time. Communist leaders criticized and denounced Confucius as the personification of China's "feudal" traditions throughout the 20th century, with anti-Confucianism ranging from the 1912 New Culture Movement to the 1973 Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign during the Cultural Revolution. In recent decades, interest in pre-modern Chinese culture has grown in the People's Republic of China, and Confucius in particular has seen a resurgence in popularity [6]. A professor of Chinese politics at the University of Sydney, Kerry Brown, notes the irony that the CPC now lionizing Confucius vilified him just four decades ago for association with patriarchal, hierarchical, and conservative values [7]. But now, Confucius is a recognizable symbol of Chinese culture. Chinese government has invested heavily in promoting the spirit of Confucius, built hundreds of Confucius Institutes abroad in a short time. The sharp change may cause puzzlement and suspicion of the purpose in setting Confucius Institutes.

According to *The Economist*, quoting remarks from Chinese officials, saying that the Confucius Institutes were "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up". The statement has been seized upon by critics as evidence of a politicized mission [8]. There are many scholars regarded Confucius Institutes as an exercise in soft power, but a few of them considered the institutes may have the role of intelligence collection. What's worse, some even think it's a kind of "China threat" and "infiltration" [9] in the context of China's fast development.

Some colleges and universities think it contains political viewpoints in the contract with Confucius Institutes, because they have to sign a contract which declares their support for Beijing's "one China" policy, several topics concerning China's borderland are prohibited from discussion in the institutes, for the purpose of avoiding displeasure and confusion. But this claim is in dispute. In reality, China's foreign publicity policy is neither as multifaceted nor as intricate as it may appear. In most instances, its purpose is simply to foster mutual understanding, reduce misunderstandings, and dispel apprehensions. To put it plainly, it seeks to cultivate friendships on the basis of mutual comprehension.

2.2. China's political correctness and sensitive topics

Secondly, in the short time-frame of rapid expansion, the Institutes have been the subject of much controversy. Criticisms of the Institutes have included practical concerns about finance, academic viability, legal issues, and relations with the Chinese partner university, as well as ideological concerns about improper influence over teaching and research, industrial and military espionage, surveillance of Chinese abroad, and covert propaganda [10]. Underlying such opposition is concern by professors that a Confucius Institute would interfere with academic freedom and be able to pressure the university to censor speech on topics the Communist Party of China objects to [11].

In June 2014, the American Association of University Professors issued a statement urging American universities to cease their collaboration with Confucius Institutes unless the universities can have unilateral control of the academia affairs, that the teachers in Confucius Institutes can have the same academic freedom enjoyed by other university faculty members, and that the agreements between universities and Confucius Institutes are available to the community [12]. The AAUP statement triggered extensive further debate in the US and was widely reported by US media.

In reality, every nation has its own political correctness and taboo subjects. Certain topics are particularly sensitive, and as educational institutions and teachers, would naturally seek to avoid discussing them whenever possible. Confucius Institutes prioritise language learning as their primary focus, wishing to keep sensitive topics out of the classroom. Due to differing perspectives and the disparate teaching materials used in the East and West, people from different countries may hold entirely divergent views on the same events.

2.3. Impact of some Chinese officials' conduct and actions

Thirdly, "Braga censorship incident" caused bad effect internationally; many media depicted it as a "big scandal". On 22 July 2014, the former Director General of the Hanban and Chief Executive of the Confucius Institute Headquarters demanded staff to remove some pages from the published program for the European Association for Chinese Studies conference in Portugal, asserting that these contents do not comply with Chinese regulations. The Wall Street Journal depicted as a bullying conduct to academic freedom. This action has prompted a fresh wave of criticism targeting Confucius Institutes. In September, 2014, the University of Chicago cut ties with their Confucius Institutes, blaming its Chinese counterpart coerced the university into continuing to host the institution through threatening letters and telephone calls, describing it as a bully behavior. Some journalists and scholars pointed out that Confucius Institutes "sparked fears about censorship and Beijing's soft-power ambitions, and it's their own fault." [13]

Some scholars have also directed criticism towards the Confucius Institutes' governing body, the Hanban, describing it as "an instrument of the party state" operating in disguise of an international pedagogical organization [14].

However, in China, netizens have engaged in heated debate over this matter. Many support the legitimate actions and statements of Chinese officials, arguing that they were maintaining the interests of the government and the nation and should not be subject to criticism, while some others concurred with the Western perspective. Moreover, some argued that the words and actions of Chinese officials in the international arena are highly susceptible to being magnified and overinterpreted; consequently, they ought to pay greater attention to their conduct and manner.

3. Analysis of closure of Confucius Institutes in the United States

Once, the United States established the largest number of Confucius Institutes globally. At its peak in 2016, the United States hosted 110 Confucius Institutes. Chinese scholar Wu Chenchen divides the development of Confucius Institutes in the US into three phases: rapid growth phase (2005-2013), steady development phase (2014-2017), and sharp decline phase (2018-2022) [15]. As of August 2025, according to data from the Confucius Institute official website, only 10 Confucius Institutes and 7 Confucius Classrooms remain operational in the United States [16]. Behind this abrupt shift lie extremely complex and diverse causes.

Of all the criticism toward Confucius Institutes, American scholars and universities expressed the strongest voice in all countries. Their attitude on Confucius Institutes is a typical Cold War thought, which could hardly see among European countries. It is clear that Americans take for granted they could output their culture and values, but always keep alert on what input into America, especially from oriental countries and communist countries.

3.1. The double standards in promoting national culture

In context of globalization, every country has to face the influence of foreign culture, especially to face more powerful American culture; actually, a lot of countries could do very little in such an unequal relation. To some extent, globalization is Americanization. Almost every powerful and attractive cultural product is all made by America, and that is performance of imperialism which closely connects with the American.

Talking about cultural imperialism, it is often referred to the proliferation of Western moral concepts, products, and political beliefs around the globe. The United States is the typical cultural imperialist, as a global economic and political superpower, the spread of American values in the entire world is at the leading edge of a wave of spread of western goods and consumerist culture. Some people maintain that the dissemination of American values and universal principles benefits most nations, as the promotion of ideals such as liberty, democracy, equality, and human rights should indeed be regarded as universal values in the eyes of many. Proponents contend that the modern mindset championed by the United States and the standards for becoming part of an industrialised, modernised world have rendered global society a better place. American exceptionalism is popular among people within the United States. Some American citizens will participate in exceptionalism without even being aware of it. American aggressively expanded their culture and described the other nations as the subordinate status under the hegemony of United States.

Cultural imperialism is a very common and old phenomenon. Powerful countries imposed their cultural values on other nations for centuries. Now, as a global economic and political power, the United States is inevitably intruding into the cultures of other countries all over the world. They even believe that the spread of American's culture is beneficial to the entire planet; meanwhile, they seldom consider their behavior is cultural imperialism, not to mention admit it as a threat to other countries. To take Hollywood Movies as an example, they are the most powerful cultural product output to the world. Many American values internalized in the movies skillfully, not only make big money by selling movies, but also change a lot of people's mind in many countries. In recent years, Hollywood Movies put a lot of Chinese elements in their movies, but the core is pure American culture, like *Mulan* and *Kungfu Panda*. They could output values in the name of entertainment, but the establishment of

Confucius Institutes in America would cause criticism. This is double-standard, and this is unequal but actually happened in the real world in exchange of cultures.

3.2. The influence of orientalism

Apart from this, Orientalism may also help us to understand the shut-down of Confucius Institutes. Orientalism is a term that is used by art historians, literary and cultural studies scholars for the imitation or depiction of aspects in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian cultures (Eastern cultures). Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, much academic discourse has begun to use the term "Orientalism" to refer to a general patronizing Western attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies. In Said's analysis, he concluded "the principal dogmas of Orientalism". The first dogma is that Orientalist histories portray "the West" as "rational, developed, humane and superior," caricature "the Orient" as "aberrant, undeveloped and inferior." second dogma is that "the Orient" lives according to set rules inscribed in sacred texts, not in response to the changing demands of life. Third dogma is "that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself", so the depiction relating to "the Orient" from the West is "inevitable" and scientifically "objective". The final dogma is "that the Orient is at the bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible)." [17]

And Confucius Institutes, which represent for Chinese culture, may easily be regarded as a inferior, obsolete organization, especially with connection of Communist Party of China, some American scholars find excuses to describe Confucius Institutes as devils. The international audience could see how arrogant they are when comparing eastern civilization to western civilization.

3.3. Dilemmas in cross-cultural communication

Another reason may explain shut-down of Confucius Institutes in America is culture awareness. There are four levels in cross-cultural interaction: level one: cultural differences are exotic; level two: cultural differences are frustrating; level three: the different culture is believable; level four: the different culture is believable as lived experience. Apparently, many scholars in America and American college teachers may be at level two. After the honeymoon with Chinese culture, they become picky in everything. People in this stage may find people from the other culture to arrogant, insensitive, dirty, superstitious, manipulative, or in some other ways not very human by their standards [18].

To a certain extent, cross-cultural communication has not served as a means to foster understanding, but rather has become a process of mutual misunderstanding, and even mutual apprehension. For nations sharing geographical proximity and cultural similarities, cross-cultural communication tends to be relatively easy and straightforward, affording the peoples of both countries a generally joyful cultural exchange experience. However, when dealing with countries separated by vast distances and possessing entirely distinct cultures and lifestyles, the process of cross-cultural communication may be fraught with shock and misunderstanding, potentially even causing mutual resentment and condemnation.

Regardless of the outcome, we must maintain confidence in cross-cultural communication. Everything is dynamic and full of change. With the advancement of mobile internet and the improvement of living standards, people will invariably find common ground while respecting differences through frequent interactions.

3.4. Intensifying competition between China and the US

Both China and the United States have established cultural institutions in each other's countries, namely Confucius Institute and American Cultural Centre. Despite assertions of differences in their founding objectives and management models, both nations effectively regard the other's institutions as "quasi-diplomatic agency", which performing public diplomacy functions, thereby subjecting them to extensive political scrutiny. To examine why China's "culture institutes" and "instrument of China's image" [19] are viewed with distrust, the answer might hide in the shifting process of Sino-American relations. Examining the trajectory of China and American relations reveals that the proliferation of Confucius Institutes has followed a parallel pattern of bilateral level of intimacy. The evolution paths of Confucius Institute "are closely related to the development and transformation of Sino-US political relations." [20] It can be said that the crises Confucius Institutes faced in the United States, at its core, is a crisis in Sino-American relations. Consequently, an operation intended to enhance its cultural appeal was interpreted as espionage, and "feared as spy outposts, neocolonial incursions, and obstructions to academic freedom" [21].

Since 2018, the Sino-American trade war has triggered comprehensive competition and confrontation between the two nations. China-US relations are gradually deviating from traditional normal track. Confucius Institutes in the United States "face a crisis of organisational legitimacy" [22]. The United States' widespread closure of Confucius Institutes has restricted public understanding of China, fuelling the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation about China. This inevitably heightens American apprehension regarding China's development. Such concerns and worries, in turn, further incentivises the US to close more Confucius Institutes or other exchange channels. This deadlock cycle risks culminating in strategic

miscalculations between two nations, potentially inflicting calamity and harm upon both and the global communities. From this perspective, the future of Confucius Institutes in the United States appears far from promising.

4. Conclusion

Based on the simple analysis above, we may find that the reasons of shutting down Confucius Institutes are various. As for Confucius Institutes and its supervisory authorities, there are many aspects need to be improved, and the staff themselves also should pay attention to their own behavior and speech. The words and actions taken to safeguard national interests are understandable, but there may be more effective avenues for upholding rights and interests. The international image is very important. Qualified and modest people are always needed. Relevant personnel are responsible to maintain the sustainable development of Chinese culture.

And for some foreign scholars, transferring the prejudice of China's government and Communism to Confucius Institutes is superficial and partial. At least they ought to be aware of one thing: it is unfair and unobjective to mix politics with language and culture. And we also could see the function of media in these issues. Sometimes, without independent thinking and systemic research, journalists arbitrarily report the news which is not the real fact, could mislead civilians and may lead to serious consequences.

It is clear to see that culture output is much different from culture input. In the current international environment, China is not a powerful cultural output country, at least in terms of cultural products. China is still very weak in literature works, music, movies and designs. The world still lived under the pressure of cultural imperialism and cultural hegemony of the United States. Global South passively receive a lot of values rather than to output them. Like hundreds of years ago, European countries colonized southern countries in the name of "spreading" Christian civilization to the "primitive" people. Now, The United States is a cultural imperialist which conquered other civilization, to spread universal values, rights and standards of development. It is more subtle and less brutal than former colonization. It is being done in the name of freedom of the market and freedom of expression. And, it seems that this process will continue for some considerable time yet.

All in all, Confucius Institutes should learn from British Council, Alliance Française and Goethe-Institut, not only their operating system, but also their strategy in promoting their culture. Confucius Institutes should distinguish what should do and what shouldn't. With clear function and in the name of language learning and culture study, help foreign students to know about China. As to rational criticism, Confucius Institutes should accept and correct or make some adjustment. As for irrational condemnation, just ignore and calm down. A mature culture needs confidence and patience. With right strategies and actions, Confucius Institutes could make themselves more popular. As it should be, Confucius Institutes must keep digging the essence of Chinese culture, try to systematize, standardize and globalize it so as to attract more foreign people to learn Chinese culture and language. Now, almost all culture products need a good package, like Hollywood Movies which disseminate American culture imperceptibly and without resistance. Also, Both the governments of China and the United States should remove antagonism between eastern culture and western culture, and enhance the mutual understanding of each other, eliminate the misinterpretation of the other side, update concept about developing countries and their cultures. All Easterners and Westerners all should work together to facilitate the cross-cultural interaction between the east and the west.

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