



Confucius Institute: Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

Today advances in technology and human intelligence have made many countries flock to increase their soft power in the international arena. The Chinese government is no exception, actively trying to increase soft power through various programs. One of these efforts can be seen with the establishment of the Confucius Institute. China founded the Confucius Institute to promote Chinese language and culture abroad. These efforts include spreading the Mandarin language, holding cultural exhibitions, and collaborating academically with various countries. This research aims to analyze the Confucius Institute's role in increasing China's soft power. This research uses a qualitative approach by collecting and evaluating data through supporting literature, including academic journal articles and investing news. The Confucius Institute effectively increases the general public's understanding of China. However, there are concerns that Confucius Institutes exist to influence the political views and foreign policies of host countries. Overall, the Confucius Institute is essential to China's cultural diplomacy efforts, but its approach must maintain a balance between cultural promotion and sensitivity to host country contexts.

Keywords: Confucius Institute; Cultural Diplomacy; Golden Bridge; Indonesia-China; Soft Power

Introduction

The global scene has witnessed China's development as a powerful actor in international politics in recent decades. The Confucius Institutes are one of the significant vehicles via which China wields soft power. These Institutes, established worldwide, nominally promote the Chinese language and culture. Still, their underlying political and diplomatic purposes have been the subject of considerable debate and examination (Hubbert et al., 2014). This Article digs into the diverse world of Confucius Institutes, shedding light on its significance as a tool for China's soft power diplomacy. In doing so, this research seeks to examine their genuine character and impact on international relations thoroughly.

The existence of this study is dependent on the requirement to fill gaps left by earlier research. While various studies have examined China's soft power endeavors, a detailed understanding of the objectives, strategies, and implications of Confucius Institutes in the context of quiet power diplomacy still needs to be discovered (Hubbert et al., 2014). This research attempts to provide valuable insights into the current body of knowledge by critically examining the evolution and operation of these institutes and enhancing the conversation around China's global influence. This Article examines the specific aspects of Confucius Institutes through a comparative lens, laying the groundwork for a more in-depth examination that goes below the surface, examining the subtle interplay between culture, politics, and diplomacy in soft power.

What is meant by soft power is that soft power is tasteless but has a natural effect. In a detailed description, soft power is defined as a concept in political science and international relations that refers to the ability of a country or group to influence and attract other countries through culture, values, policies and the attraction of a positive image, not through military or economic violence (J. S. Nye, 2021). The existence of soft power in a country is an ability to gently and persuasively influence public opinion, gain support and advance national interests. This concept was first introduced in 1990 by a political scientist named Joseph Nye. He differentiates between "hard power", which refers to influence supported by military and economic strength, and "soft power", which relies on cultural appeal and diplomacy. Examples of soft power include popular culture, cultural diplomacy, cultural exchange programs, and promoting political values and social systems. Governments and non-governmental organizations often use soft power to build better relations with other countries, promote national culture, or achieve diplomatic goals without direct conflict. Soft power has become essential in modern diplomacy and plays a vital role in world politics. Dr. Ramona Blanes's speech at the SBM ITB Summer Course Program, International Virtual Course 2022, states that "soft power is power that involves shaping other people's preferences through attraction. In other words, soft power is the persuasive power of a country. Usually, soft power is related to intangible things, such as culture or diplomacy. But now, soft power has developed to spread to real things such as infrastructure".

The soft power possessed by China produces several vital advantages for China in the context of its international relations and foreign strategy. One way to provide many long-awaited opportunities is by investing in Confucius Institutes. The Confucius Institute is an institution that has been programmed for Mandarin language teaching activities, cultural diplomacy, and the promotion of Chinese culture (Ferdiansyah, 2019). With the existence of this Confucius Institute, China has succeeded in improving its positive image worldwide. This is considered capable of overcoming negative stereotypes and opening the door to better cooperation with other countries. Apart from that, through the Confucius Institute, China can open a student exchange program, which can increase the attractiveness of education there. This program is undoubtedly interesting for international students to study in China; in the future, they can become ambassadors of Chinese culture in their respective countries.

Research Methods

A qualitative research approach was used in this study to delve deeply into the subtle dynamics of Confucius Institutes' soft power strategies. Qualitative methodologies were employed to investigate the intricate features of cultural influence, perceptions, and interpersonal interactions that characterize the Institute's work. The primary focus of this research is to investigate the various facets of cultural influence exerted by Confucius Institute and to analyze how these initiative shape perceptions and promote understanding across cultures. Data for this research is gathered using secondary data sources include journal articles, scholarly publication and reports. Gathering, organizing, and evaluating qualitative data to determine its meaning through thematic analysis to identify patterns and theme related to soft power strategies and cultural influence. This study investigates the many facets of cultural influence and sheds light on the Institute's role in molding views and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Results and Discussion

History of Confucius Institute

Confucius Institute is a global educational initiative established in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, by the Chinese government to promote the Chinese language and culture worldwide. It is named after Confucius, the ancient Chinese philosopher whose teachings have profoundly influenced Chinese culture and thought. Namely konfusius or 孔子 (*kǒng zi*). This marked the beginning of an ambitious plan to set up similar institutions in countries across the globe (Hartati, 2016).

The primary mission of the Confucius Institute is to teach Chinese language and culture and facilitate cultural exchanges between China and other countries. It seeks to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. Confucius Institutes offer Chinese language courses, cultural events, and various activities related to Chinese art, history, and traditions. They aim to make Chinese language learning more accessible to people worldwide.

The history of the Confucius Institute reflects China's desire to expand its soft power and promote its language and culture on the global stage. It has been praised for its role in cultural exchange and criticized for its perceived political influence. Its evolution continues to be a topic of interest in international education and diplomacy.



Figure 1. Confucius Institute of Hanban, 2018
Source: China University of Petroleum

Development of Confucius Institute

The Spread of Confucius Institutes

The Confucius Institute is an education-based institution that, in its implementation, is not the centre of world attention. However, in fact, in a relatively short time, China made the Confucius Institute a rapidly developing educational institution. This development was marked by the spread of Confucius Institutes in various countries worldwide.

Previously thought to be in vain, the investment invested in the Confucius Institute produced commensurate results. The Confucius Institute can become an institution that improves China's image in the eyes of the world. China is no longer a country that can be underestimated because apart from the economy, China has advantages in various aspects, including education and culture (Sun, 2023).

Since its founding in 2004, Confucius has spread to various countries and continents, such as North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia, with the most extensive distribution area being the Asian continent.

Based on information from Hanban (Office of Chinese Language Council International), the body that oversees the Confucius Institute program, as of 2021, there are more than 500 Confucius Institutes and more than 1,000 Confucius Classrooms worldwide. Additionally, Confucius Institutes are spread across many countries around the world. Until now, the number of Confucius Institutes has continued to increase and spread to various corners of the world.

Achievements of the Confucius Institute

Behind its rapid and significant development, the Confucius Institute has achieved various goals previously designed to achieve what it wanted and aspired to. Following are some of the achievements of the Confucius Institutes:

1. ***Making Mandarin the Second International Language after English***, The Confucius Institute has contributed significantly to the spread of Mandarin worldwide. They provide structured and accessible Mandarin learning programs for foreigners at various ability levels. So, in its implementation, many people are interested in learning Mandarin. This makes Mandarin increasingly well-known around the world.
2. ***Increasing Understanding of Chinese Culture***, Through various cultural programs, such as art exhibitions, traditional performances, and lessons on Chinese history and culture, Confucius Institutes has helped people worldwide understand and appreciate the richness of Chinese culture.
3. ***Building Academic Partnerships***, This program facilitates student and teacher exchanges between China and other countries. This creates valuable opportunities for people to learn and teach in different cultural environments. This collaboration enables collaboration on research and academic projects that enrich intercultural understanding. It also supports scientific exchanges between China and other countries through conferences, seminars and research collaborations.
4. ***Making the Confucius Institute a means of Cultural Diplomacy***, The Chinese government also uses Confucius Institutes as a means of cultural diplomacy to help improve relations and understanding with other countries, create good cooperation and maintain friendship between nations.

Confucius Institute as Soft Power of China's

The CI provided a perfect platform for Chinese leaders to help other countries better understand China. Beijing announced its ambitions in 2002 to create CIs worldwide to promote culture and language. Chinese researchers have studied Joseph Nye's idea of soft power since the late 1990s. They proposed that the government create a culturally weak power strategy. Several causes have contributed to this shift:

1. China's economic progress has strengthened its global standing influence.
2. Chinese intellectuals believe that the United States' cultural hegemony has decreased, and China may replace it.
3. China's cultural relations with its neighbors must be strengthened to fulfill its interests.

The CI project reflected China's awareness of language education and cultural diffusion as critical components of creating cultural soft power. There are three possible explanations. The first step is to strengthen China's cohesion, with Beijing

portraying CI expansion as a sign of economic prosperity and the worldwide impact of China. Chinese people can be proud of their heritage. Chinese have a long history, hence strengthening national unity. The second step is to broaden Chinese influence, implying that the CIs have become an official platform for promoting China. CIs assist Chinese higher education in gaining acknowledgement for the quality of its offering in the global market for educational services. The third goal is to reduce China's danger because CI takes part in softening China's global branding (X. Liu, 2019).

The first strategy is to broaden Chinese culture. Through CIs, the government identified strategies for increasing the influence of Chinese culture. During the 11th Five-Year Plan, the State Council adopted the Outline of the National Plan for Cultural Development in 2006. The strategy created a "go-out" strategy to increase the international reach of cultural products.

The second method entails fostering possibilities for Chinese higher education. Higher education is a conduit for cultural soft power, and it has been a vital chance for China to raise the prestige of its universities to recruit international elites.

China is using soft power diplomacy to improve regional bilateral ties by emphasizing the religious, cultural, linguistic, and culinary aspects of its relationships. CIs have effectively expanded and been welcomed as a tool of soft power projection.

Confucius Institute and its Challenges

Although Confucius Institutes have many branches worldwide, some countries and educational institutions have decided to close or restrict the institutes' activities for various reasons, including concerns related to political interference and academic freedom issues.

Hanban, the Chinese government agency pioneered CIs, rebranded itself the Ministry of Education Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) in July 2020 as part of a rebranding campaign to address unfavorable views (Hartig, 2018).

Conclusion

The Confucius Institute is the most valuable investment in China with actual results. The strategies and programs designed in such a way in the implementation of the Confucius Institute have significantly impacted the world. The Confucius Institute's existence is essential because its function is like a golden bridge between China and other countries. Soft power can be cultivated not merely as a diplomatic tool but as a sustainable form of cultural influence. Thus, Chinese cultural diplomacy can enter smoothly and be accepted by the people of other countries with the Confucius Institute. The Confucius Institute is a producer of soft power for China. In its development, it will increasingly open up vast avenues for China to explore the world with the gentle power it has. This study suggests developing initiatives with a more localized approach could enhance the impact on local communities and to refute misconceptions of Confucius Institute's missions.

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