



THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE IN CHINA'S POLITICS. THE CHINESE PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

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In the past few decades soft power has become, , the most commonly used foreign term on the Asian continent and has received special attention both from specialists in International Relations and from the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party. Stepping into the third millennium, China shows a tendency of reconfiguration for its position and role in relation to the other great powers of the world, and adopts the soft power strategy, which is adapted to assert itself globally. For almost two decades in which the concept of soft power has been studied and attempts to adapt it to the country's values have been made, China concludes that its tradition, culture, history and philosophy can be an advantage in creating links with the other countries from Asia as well as those outside the Asian continent.

In this regard, the Chinese government is allocating a generous amount of money for the establishment of Chinese language, culture and literature centers, named Confucius Institute around the world, starting with Asia. At present, China argues that their role is particularly important, as these centers, built on the model of English, French, or Spanish language centers, are not only aimed at the Chinese-speaking public, but are an intermediary between China and the host country, in order to establish cooperative relations, presenting Chinese culture, history and civilization and attracting as many sympathizers as possible.

The article presents, describes and analyzes the structure and operation of the Confucius Institutes from a Chinese perspective, and illustrates the relationship between China's soft power policy and their operating program, as exposed by Chinese sources as well.

Keywords: China; soft power; Confucianism; Confucius Institutes.

Confucius, Confucianism and Confucius Institutes

Confucius is known as the greatest Chinese thinker in history and the founder of the school of thought that bears his name. During his lifetime, he tried to introduce his philosophical ideas into the country's political practice, but was unable to do so, so he withdrew from public life and devoted his life to writing. The central idea Confucian philosophy spins around is the importance of the group in building a harmonious society, an alignment with the Chinese government's new tendency to open up to the world by replacing socialist ideas with a system centered on Confucian principles (Li 2006, 583).

In the twentieth century last decades, with the economic liberation led by Deng Xiaoping and the gradual opening of China to the West, signs began to suggest that traditional Chinese culture remained, even during the Maoist period, deeply

imprinted in the consciousness of the Chinese people. On the cultural front, it was during this period, from the 1980s onwards, that the cultural fever phenomenon began to emerge, a phenomenon bearing its name from the intellectuals' increased interest for all the aspects on Chinese culture and history (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 5).

Thus, from this post-Maoist period, a message of tolerance towards Confucianism was conveyed by the government. At this stage, Confucian ideas went through a neutral period, i.e. they were neither promoted nor banned, as was the case during the Maoist period. One proof of this is the participation of Gu Mu, vice-premier of that period, in a symposium dedicated to Confucius, who presented Confucianism as the crystallization of Chinese national culture (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 6).

Since the 1990s, the attitude of both the government and the population has been increasingly open to Confucian values. Thus, China is reintroducing the Confucian notion of harmony. Harmony, the foundation of classical Chinese society, is once again being brought to the attention of Chinese leaders, who are proposing to

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rebuild a harmonious society. In the 2006 Cultural Development Plan, Confucian terms such as harmony, filial piety and peace have increasingly found their way into Chinese discourse (Rošker 2013, 4).

Since 2014 onward, China's new leader has been laying the foundations for a new socialism with Chinese characteristics, which means a renewal of Chinese society through the prism of traditional culture. Basically, Xi Jinping sees the future effectiveness of the party as dependent on the level of growing interest in the country's millennia-old culture. Thus, he even states the following: A nation's culture is a unique feature that distinguishes one nation from another (Xi 2018, 2).

At the same time, Xi urges the promotion of the cultural spirit that has stood the test of time and is of great value today. Thus, the return to Confucianism has been gradual, initially readopting cultural values, and now these values are making their presence felt in the political sphere of the country's governance.

Now, in the 21st century, the Chinese people have been increasingly confronted with an incompatibility between the ideas forwarded by Marxism and the innovation brought about by the contemporary period, to which, in their desire for development and evolution, they have had to find solutions to adapt. In other words, contemporary society brings evolution, but leaves an increasingly unmanageable moral vacuum in the Chinese consciousness. The solution to fill this gap is to return to the Confucian moral values that were suppressed and denied in the immediate aftermath of the communist regime in China, as they were seen as the main obstacle between the Chinese people and modernization (Liu 2011, 195).

China makes great efforts to present itself, to make itself known and to have a dialogue with its Asian neighbors and countries in the rest of the world, realizing that socialist ideology could be a factor of mistrust in terms of freedom of speech. As a result, it draws on its millennia-old culture, the cultural symbols which China has identified itself with, the most important element being Confucian philosophy and, implicitly, its founder, Confucius.

Today, his name is borne by several hundred educational centers called Confucius Institutes. These are not centers that propagate Confucian

ideas and have no close connection with this Chinese personality but have only borrowed his name, associating the Institutes with a Chinese symbol that relates to its millennial history. The Confucius Institutes are centers for teaching Chinese language to non-Chinese audiences. They were established with the support of the Chinese government and have been present since 2004 on all continents (Hughes 2014, 52).

The Institutes operate in collaboration with foreign universities in major cities around the world and aim to promote understanding of China, language and culture, as presented on Hanban official website, an educational institution affiliated to the Chinese Ministry of Education under which all Confucius Institutes are located (Pan 2013, 26).

Chronologically, the first Confucius Institute was set in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea. Four years later, in 2008 there were already 292 Confucius Institutes and classes in various schools in 78 countries. In 2011, there were other 473 Confucius Institutes in 104 countries. Today, there are 579 Confucius Institutes around the world, with the largest number in Europe (Hanban 2019). According to Hanban website, the opening of another 500 such Institutes will be approved by the end of 2020, with the aim of making China known for what it is, a movement called the *Confucius Revolution*.

There are various ways in which Hanban is working together to establish a Confucius Institute. Usually, the partner universities provide the location and all the facilities, while the Chinese side provides the teaching staff, course materials and various other ancillary materials especially designed for foreign students. Of course, given that the number of Confucius Institutes is constantly increasing, the main problem Hanban faces is to provide the necessary number of specialized teachers, which amounts to about 100,000 people per year (Pan 2013, 29). In this regard, China has also developed a volunteer program in which young Chinese students or graduates from the course of teaching Chinese as a foreign language can be engaged in this project and receive permission to contribute to the promotion of Chinese culture and language anywhere in the world.

The activities of the Confucius Institute, according to Hanban, are as follows: assisting students from all fields in learning Chinese



language, training Chinese language instructors and providing materials for teaching language and culture, organizing HSK Chinese language certificate, informing about Chinese culture, economy and society, conducting research on contemporary China and promoting open activities to encourage foreigners to get involved in learning about China (Liu 2011, 195). In recent years, with China's opening up to the West, with the development of the economy and due to its growing presence around the world, interest in the Chinese language has been on the rise, here of course there are different factors, each individual having their own motivation.

Currently, about 2,500 universities around the world provide courses in Chinese language, literature, culture and there are about forty million students registered for Chinese language courses at university level. In addition to these, several million others study in non-academic settings, in language centers, online or at Confucius Institutes (Meng 2012, 182).

Confucius Institutes from the Chinese perspective

In China, a five-year plan was designed with reference to the educational side, initiated and supported by the Chinese government and emphasizes the importance of promoting the Chinese language study abroad (Zaharna 2014, 9-10). This is due to China's confidence in its own potential and diplomacy, making use of language and culture to subsequently establish economic relations.

Thus, the Confucius Institutes have seen a great deal of promotion in this five-year project, as the main tool through which China can achieve its goal. In 2007, a Confucius Institutes office was established in Beijing to improve the organization of the other Institutes abroad. Spatially, Confucius Institutes can be found around Asia, in Europe, Australia and North America.

All the countries where China has approved their establishment are countries of great importance in terms of potential economic development relations and are relevant to both China's projects and diplomatic work. Thus, we can see the large, growing number of Institutes in Europe, but if we look at the economic side of the collaborations between China and the target

countries, we can conclude that this is not at all surprising. As far as Asia is concerned, the large number of Confucius Institutes reflects the leading position China is assuming vis-à-vis its East Asian neighbors and the promotion of a harmonious development policy together with other countries.

The rationale behind the establishment of the Institutes is China's desire to restore its national image and counter the theory that it is a threat to the countries with which it has built ties. The Institutes, a particularly important tool of Chinese soft power, help build relations and partnerships with the target country, promoting a friendly, non-threatening image of China. China's stake for so-called peaceful development is to establish partnerships and promote a new, attractive image through culture, with the Confucius Institutes at its core (Zaharna 2014, 195).

Through the Institutes, China sends messages of harmony, willingness and initiative to create a good international environment conducive to shared development. In order to show as much transparency as possible and with the aim of promoting its millennial culture, a suite of important elements relevant to Chinese culture such as Chinese New Year, Tea Ceremony, Confucius' birthday are exported from the domestic level and presented internationally within the Institutes and with the help of Chinese teachers, who are true ambassadors of Chinese culture, responsible for the relations between the target country and China.

From the Chinese perspective, the ultimate goal of the Institutes is to serve as a development platform for establishing stable, strong international relations and to facilitate interaction between countries at the diplomatic level, with Chinese government representatives believing that in dealing with different areas, the only way to know commonalities and identify inconsistencies is through communication. In other words, initial differences can lead to cooperation and friendly relations between China and the rest of the countries (Hong and Lin 2011, 38).

Sun Ya Pan, a professor in the Department of Social Sciences in Hong Kong, identifies and expounds the three approaches of cultural diplomacy reflected in the Confucius Institutes operation mechanism, which confirms China's plan to recognize the potential Chinese language teaching has in establishing international relations,



increasing foreign investment and not the least, increasing the soft power influence in relation to the target country.

Thus, it was since 1980 that Hanban has been concerned with developing different ways of teaching Chinese abroad, and until 2000 it operated as an agency providing such services. Since 2004, Hanban has been supported by the government and has expanded its scope to incorporate all elements of cultural diplomacy to support China's efforts to increase its soft power. The dynamic growth in the number of Institutes, the cooperative relationships established at universities around the world, and China's growing popularity among people on the rest of the continents reflect the fact that China's soft power is also growing.

The three diplomatic approaches (Pan 2013, 196) that can be found in the Confucius Institutes' agenda of activities are as follows:

1. To promote China's culture, tradition and foreign policy among local communities, these activities being closely conditioned by good cooperative relations between representatives of the Institutes and those of affiliated universities. Thus, China is present through teachers and volunteers in various activities taking place in shopping centers, parks, entertainment venues, with demonstrations of calligraphy, film screenings, traditional Chinese painting, music, film screenings, traditional cuisine, etc.

2. Establishing contacts with political representatives, intellectuals, business partners in the context of cultural events, with the aim of preparing the ground for the subsequent establishment of possible business relations. To this end, China has invited leadership representatives from the countries with successful Institute initiatives on official visits, to attend sports competitions and film launches, considering that friendship leaves no room for competition.

3. The Institutes' final method of action targets the general public, people who have nothing in common with China, from children to the elderly, with the aim of spreading the Chinese tradition and forming a positive opinion among the masses. Thus, representatives of Confucius Institutes organize entertainment and cultural activities, intercultural festivals in each target country and get in touch with as many people as possible, striving to attend activities targeting audiences of all ages, as often as

possible. In this vein, Hanban representatives claim that Confucius Institutes' main objective is not to exercise soft power, but to enable the world to understand Chinese culture and civilization and to make this possible through teaching Chinese (Tao and Wang 2018, 13).

Challenges to the harmonious development through culture

China is making great efforts to increase the number of Confucius Institutes in the world, but it faces various difficulties, the main problem being target countries' skepticism towards China's intentions and the inability to collaborate due to significant political differences. In this respect, China is wrapping its socialism in Confucian values, seeking to give new meaning to this philosophy in order to use it as a link between the democratic society outside China and, at the same time, to avoid infringement on the socialist values existing within the country.

China is accused by some of its more skeptical partners of using these Institutes for political control. Despite this, professors at the Institutes, including Xu Lin, say that the Institutes' courses discuss language and culture, not issues of political ideology (Tao and Wang 2018, 16).

The goals of China's actions regarding the Confucius Institutes were not achieved due to the discrepancy between the large number of Institutes opened in a relatively short time and the inability to send enough competent teaching staff to cover the courses scheduled in them, which put quantity over quality and showed a lack of professionalism. Also, domestic support from the Chinese people for this far-reaching action by the Chinese government was minimal, as Chinese education tried to assimilate modern Western ideas which it adapted to its own system (Meng 2012, 17). The Westernization of the Chinese education system leads to an incongruity between the image foreigners have on Chinese values, including Confucianism, and the actual values prevalent in Chinese society.

Another issue that raises problems in fulfilling the mission of the Confucius Institutes is their future plans, with specialists presenting the hypothesis that foreign language teaching, in this case – Chinese, is not sustainable for the of cooperative relations establishment at the economic level. Even in this regard, China is proposing the establishment



of a Confucius Institutes research Centre which will take into account the developments of all the Institutes and gradually introduce other programmes related to Chinese language teaching.

Among these institutes' operating rules, there is a ban on the Confucius Institutes taking part in activities that are not in line with their mission, which has left room for interpretation by sceptics. With all openness, sensitive topics related to China's politics, human rights, Taiwan, Tibet, Falun Gong, Hong Kong, are often politely avoided.

However, the reasons why universities accept these partnerships are due to several factors: to benefit from the annual financial support received from China, to broaden their educational offer and also because of the lack of alternatives to provide courses in Chinese culture, language and civilization. There are a number of China's partners who have overlooked the restrictions imposed on the Confucius Institute, due to their dependence on Chinese financial support and also out of a desire to avoid offending the ideological beliefs of their Chinese partners (Meng 2012, 37).

Role and activity of Confucius Institutes in Romania

There are currently four Confucius Institutes in Romania, as follows: Sibiu (2007), Cluj (2009), Brasov (2012) and Bucharest (2013), and in addition to these, two other Confucius classes opened in Deva and Constanta, Confucius classes operating in collaboration with high schools in these cities and addressing students from highschool environment (Tomozei 2018, 1). According to the cooperation agreement between the Office of International Relations for the Study of the Chinese Language (Hanban) and "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, the purpose of establishing the Confucius Institute is to strengthen cooperation between Romania and China, to support and promote the development of Chinese language studies and to enhance mutual understanding between the Romanian and Chinese peoples. In addition to their mission of promoting and propagating Chinese culture, language and civilization, they also had the role of supplementing the teaching staff of the Chinese language and literature sections of the Faculties of Foreign Languages and Literatures, facilitating dialogue between Chinese and Romanian officials and organizing

various activities aimed at promoting the Chinese language, such as organizing trips, summer camps, taking the exam for the Chinese language certificate, etc. (Confucius Institute Agreement 2019, 1).

Among the tasks of the Confucius Institutes is the preparation for the HSK (hanyu shui ping kaoshi) exams, whereby students receive a Hanban-recognised Chinese language certificate that serves as a passport for the admission process for students applying to study at partner universities in China. Also, primary and secondary school students can choose to prepare and take the YCT (Youth Chinese Test). The Confucius Institutes also offer a number of scholarships to study in China to learners who perform very well in Chinese language courses and organize a summer school program, where learners can visit China for two weeks with Chinese teachers (Hubbert 2014, 33).

Another relevant activity in which the Confucius Institutes participate in partnership with the Chinese Embassy is the Chinese Bridge competition, (hanyu qiao), where learners, representing Confucius Institutes from each country, participate in a competition where they showcase their knowledge of Chinese language, culture, civilization and art. The winners of the national stage qualify for the international stage, which takes place annually in China (Hubbert 2014, 33).

At the same time, it was also possible to notice an openness on the part of the local authorities who took part in the various activities organized by the Confucius Institutes in Romania, but in the case of these institutes, being opened relatively recently, we cannot speak of a major influence in rethinking the relationship between the two countries, as the good cooperation between the Romanian public and the Institute is largely due to the already existing Romanian-Chinese relations. The only concrete result that could be observed in the activities of these institutes is the support of students in the process of learning Chinese language and the familiarization of the foreign public with the elements of Chinese culture. However, the presence of Chinese teachers is of great help to the universities, which is proved by the increasing number of students in the Departments of Asian Languages and Literatures as well as at the pre-university level (Wang 2016, 36).

Conclusions

China's new openness to the West is intended to send a message of goodwill, to make itself known and thus to establish cooperative international relations with a view to economic development. To this end, the Chinese government is using the soft power instruments at its disposal: millennia-old culture, civilization, philosophy and the Chinese language, and is banking on the fact that anything different from the West will appeal primarily to the civilian population. According to this plan, China believes it will succeed in holding a dialogue with democratic countries, establishing close economic relations and partnerships, distracting the public from the shortcomings left behind by a communist-style government and emphasizing the positive elements in the country's culture.

From the information presented in the article, it can be concluded that China's image is currently positioned between two extremes: The first, which is represented by its positive and benevolent attitude, its desire to conquer with its charm, relying on its thousands of years of history, culture and philosophy, and proposing itself as a model of society that has endured over millennia, and the second, rather skeptical perspective of some Western countries that

associate the Confucius Institutes with the Trojan horse, considering them as extensions of the Chinese government in the space outside China.

On the other hand, we cannot exclude the real situation, at least at the national level, that their number and status as relatively new Cultural Centers has not allowed them to exert too much influence to be considered valuable instruments of soft power politics. It is true that in the rest of Europe and beyond, the number of these Institutes is significant, which may raise questions and attract skepticism from analysts. This could indeed motivate the decision of foreign universities to stop collaborating with Hanban and suspend the work of the Confucius Institutes.

As it is already known, the effects of soft power are not visible in a short time, and it is necessary to form an objective view before labelling them as a threat or a harmless means of gaining easier access to Chinese language, culture and civilization, a thorough analysis conducted over a long period of time, a possible establishment of an Institutes research Centre operating independently of Hanban, and empowered to refute or confirm any assumptions about the Confucius Institutes and the usefulness of their actions, is needed.

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