

CONFUSION ABOUT CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

Soft Power Push or Conspiracy?

A case study of Confucius Institutes in Germany

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Abstract¹

Since 2004 China has set up over 600 Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms around the world to promote its language and culture. Despite this impressive number these institutions are surprisingly understudied. The few works that approach Confucius Institutes illustrate at least two weaknesses. First there is confusion about the theoretical framework to analyse Confucius Institutes. Second there is a lack of knowledge about the actual activities of Confucius Institutes. This study tries to aim these gaps. In the first part it describes the linkage between Confucius Institutes and the most common concepts they are discussed with: soft power, public and cultural diplomacy, and propaganda. In the second part it investigates what Confucius Institutes are actually doing. Confucius Institutes in Germany are used as a case study and it is argued that Confucius Institutes should be understood as a tool of cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.

Key words: Confucius Institutes, soft power, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, propaganda

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Introduction

Ever since the first Confucius Institute (CI) was established in 2004 there have been obscurities what Confucius Institutes actually are, and what the goals and purposes of these institutes are. On the one hand it is argued “the institutes could increase China’s ‘soft power’” (Paradise 2009: 647); they are seen as instruments of Chinese public diplomacy (d’Hooghe 2007, Rawnsley 2009) or cultural diplomacy (Wang/Lu 2008, Cull 2009). On the other hand critiques perceive Confucius Institutes as propaganda tools (Fan 2008, Steffenhagen 2008).

Besides these theoretical ambiguities another aspect is striking. Hans Hendrichske, director of the Confucius Institutes at the University of Sydney, notes correctly that only “little of this literature [on Confucius Institutes] is based on actual evidence of activities of Confucius Institutes” (Sharp 2010:2).

Therefore this paper pursues two goals. First it aims to untangle the confusion regarding the different theoretical approaches by presenting the concepts of soft power, public and cultural diplomacy and propaganda in relation to Confucius Institutes. Second it will examine the actual activities of the institutes. The study uses Confucius Institutes in Germany as a case study and argues that Confucius Institutes should be understood as a tool of cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.

After introducing Confucius Institutes the paper outlines the theoretical framework to provide an instrument for further analysis. The paper then turns to the case study. For that semi-structured interviews with directors and general managers of eight German Confucius Institutes were conducted between October and December 2009. Furthermore program guides² and annual working reports (CIHQ 2008, 2009) of German Confucius Institutes were evaluated.

About Confucius Institutes

Until mid of 2010 “316 Confucius Institutes and 337 Confucius Classrooms [were] established in 94 countries and regions worldwide (Xinhua 2010)”.³ Confucius Institutes are “non-profit educational organizations promoting the teaching of Chinese language outside

² Most programs are available online, some were provided by the interviewees.

³ The main difference between Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms affects the organizational structure. There is no clear cut distinction between both models but it seems the main difference is whether the local partner is a university or any other cultural or educational entity. To simplify matters, only the term ‘Confucius Institute’ is used.

China, training language instructors and strengthening cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries” (Tang 2010).

All Confucius Institutes are under the authority of Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language Council International. Hanban is composed of representatives from 12 ministries and commissions within the Chinese central government (Ren 2010:1), while the Ministry of Education carries the main responsibility. Hanban is in charge of placing teachers, the development and distribution of teaching materials, and it coordinates the cooperation between the partner institutions in China and abroad which run Confucius Institutes.

More often than not Confucius Institutes are mistakenly understood as the “Chinese version of Spain's Instituto Cervantes, Germany's Goethe-Institute, the British Council and Alliance Francaise” (Li 2008). A closer analysis reveals that this is only partly correct. One important difference between Confucius Institutes and their western counterparts is their organizational form. There are three operation modes for Confucius Institutes: Wholly operated by China, with local partners as joint ventures, and “wholly locally run offices licensed by [...] Beijing” (Starr 2009:70). The most common form is the joint venture structure, as it is practiced in Europe, Australia or North America. These joint ventures are cooperation projects between Chinese and international partners. Normally the Chinese offer teaching materials and send language teachers, while local partners provide space, facilities and local staff.

Furthermore Hanban supports Confucius Institutes with an annual budget. By the end of 2007 the Chinese government had spent 26 million US Dollar on Confucius Institutes worldwide (Liu 2008: 31). In her work report for 2009 Xu Lin, Chief executive of the Confucius Institute Headquarters, stated that “funding for the Confucius Institutes contributed from both China and abroad [...] has increased to 119,000,000 U.S. dollars in total, showing a 50-50 percent share from both sides. This is over 400,000 U.S. dollars on average for each Confucius Institute” (Xu 2010:18).

Therefore it can be argued that the Chinese approach is strategic as it is efficient. By utilizing the current global fascination with Chinese language and culture, the Chinese government has found willing international partners to co-finance the Confucius Institutes and thus partially fund China’s “charm offensive” (Kurlantzick 2007). According to Xu Lin this cooperative

model guarantees that Confucius Institutes are an instrument that helps the Chinese government to obtain huge effects with the least amount of money (quoted in Liu 2008:33).

The perception of Confucius Institutes

The financial and organizational linkage with the Chinese government leads to the assumption that Confucius Institutes “are propaganda tools” (Fan 2008:3) or one of “China’s foreign propagandists” (Brady 2008: 159). The Canadian Security Intelligence Service came to the result that China uses Confucius Institutes “in its drive for global dominance” (The Canadian Press 2007) and in various host Cities, there are “deeply divided views about Confucius Institute[s]: some say it’s a goodwill gesture by Beijing to teach Chinese language and culture, while others believe it’s part of a plot by an emerging superpower to infiltrate and influence foreign citizens and their government” (Steffenhagen 2008). Jocelyn Chey, a former Australian Consul-General in Hong Kong, summarizes the opinions of most critics by saying “because of the Institutes’ close links with the Chinese government and Party [the work of these institutes], at best, would result in dumbing down of research and, at worst, could produce propaganda” (Chey 2008: 44).

In contrast, scholars put Confucius Institutes in the context of soft power (Gil 2009, Rui 2010). Paradise sees chances that Confucius Institutes “could increase China’s ‘soft power’” (Paradise 2009: 647). For d’Hooghe Confucius Institutes are an “instrument of” and “China’s latest addition to public diplomacy” (d’Hooghe 2007: 29). According to Rawnsley, China’s approach to public diplomacy has focused on the economy and culture and “the cultural approach is centered within the new Confucius Institutes” (Rawnsley 2009: 285). Cull describes Confucius Institutes as the “central project of Chinese cultural diplomacy” (Cull 2009: 12).

The practical value of Confucius Institutes is discussed in Chinese academic journals. According to Liu the establishment of Confucius Institutes is not just to internationalize education, but furthermore Confucius Institutes are a special representation of China’s soft power which in turn is an important contribution to enforce the good image of China (Liu 2007:51). Li sees the main purpose of Confucius Institutes in helping China to do business and to open markets (Li 2008:46/47). Duan Yi, a former Hanban employee, explains that Confucius Institutes are an effective mechanism for the scientific contribution to economic globalization (Duan 2008:51). Confucius Institute can provide competitive advantages for

China's economy and trade by providing language and cultural consultation. The Confucius Institute in Poitiers, France, is teaching Chinese to French workers at ZTE, a Chinese communications company. And a Confucius Institute in Thailand, with its partner Southwest University Chongqing, is helping the company Chongqing Motorbike to enter the Thai market (Duan 2008:51).

Theoretical framework: soft power, public and diplomacy, propaganda

Soft Power as defined by Joseph Nye "is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" and it arises from "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas, and policies" (Nye 2004: x). Leaving the discussion about the shortcomings of this concept aside⁴, it is obvious that there has to be "an instrument that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries" (Nye 2008: 95).

This instrument, which helps to wield soft power, is public diplomacy. According to one definition public diplomacy means "an international actor's attempt to advance the ends of policy by engaging with foreign publics" (Cowan/Cull 2008:6) and its practice can be divided into five elements: "listing, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting" (Cull 2008:33). Cultural diplomacy in turn is "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad" (ibid.).

The fact that public diplomacy (and cultural diplomacy) is initiated by governments leads to the accusation of propaganda. As Richard Holbrook noted: "Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or – if you really want to be blunt – propaganda" (Holbrooke 2001:B07). Governments aim to distinguish both concepts and argue that public diplomacy deals with "the known facts", while propaganda is based on a mixture of facts and untruths (Wolf/Rosen 2004:3). For Nye "good public diplomacy has to go beyond propaganda" (Nye 2008:101), because "information that appears to be propaganda [...] may turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines a country's reputation for credibility" (Nye 2008:100).

Propaganda "in the most neutral sense means to disseminate or promote particular ideas" (Jowett/O'Donnell 2006:2) and it is wrong that "propaganda is always harmful, always false" (Hummel/Huntress 1949/1967:2). Nevertheless in general propaganda has a "highly negative"

⁴ See for example Hall (2010).

connotation (Walton 1997: 383) and “many people mistakenly consider it a synonym for falsehood or lie” (Ford 1967:vii). But “it is only since the advent of Adolph Hitler that this word has acquired universally its sinister connotation” (ibid.). Jowett/O’Donnell also state the negative and dishonest connotation and list words “frequently used as synonyms for propaganda [such as] lies, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing, and palaver” (Jowett/O’Donnell 2006: 2-3). For them “propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett/O’Donnell 2006: 7).

Before turning to the case study, it is helpful to summarize these theoretical approaches in relation to Confucius Institutes. It should become clear, that it is somewhat misleading to describe these institutes as “instruments of China’s soft power” (Ren 2010:2). Based on the above definitions it appears more accurate to understand Confucius Institutes as an instrument of cultural diplomacy with the aim to wield China’s soft power. Taking into account the described proximity between public diplomacy/cultural diplomacy and propaganda, the question arises whether Confucius Institutes are an instrument of cultural diplomacy or tools of propaganda for the Chinese government.

Case study: Confucius Institutes in Germany

To answer this question, the second part of the paper uses Confucius Institutes in Germany as a case study to describe the institutes and their activities. First the general set-up for German Confucius Institutes is outlined, followed by a rating of their actual activities. This analysis will help to get a better understanding of whether Confucius Institutes are telling lies and manipulate cognition and therefore fit into the approach of propaganda; or whether they are an attempt to manage the international environment by making China’s cultural resources and achievements known overseas and thus fit into the cultural diplomacy approach.

Facts and figures about Confucius Institutes in Germany

The first Confucius Institute in Germany was established in 2006 at Free University of Berlin. Currently there are eleven Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Classroom⁵, all organized as joint venture. Most of the German host institutions are universities, except a private foundation in Munich and a local friendship association in Hannover. Besides the University

⁵ Confucius Institutes exist in Berlin, Nuernberg-Erlangen, Leipzig, Trier, Hamburg, Hannover, Duisburg, Dusseldorf, Heidelberg, Frankfurt and Freiburg. Munich is hosting the only German Confucius Classroom.

in Dusseldorf, every university hosting a Confucius Institute has its own department of Sinology or Chinese studies. These departments usually worked closely with Chinese universities for a long time and generally this cooperation was the basis for the establishment of the Confucius Institute (I3, I6).

The average annual subsidy paid by Hanban is about 100.000 US Dollar for German Confucius Institutes. Beyond that institutes can apply for additional funding related to specific projects (I3, I4). When the first German institutes were established in 2006/2007 Hanban only concluded contracts for three years, which led to some insecurities regarding the financial support after this time (Hartig 2007: 69). But currently it seems the financial situation relaxed to some degree and one managing director assumes that funding is safe at least until 2020 (Weigl 2009: 35).

What is happening at Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes address, usually but not exclusively, a mainstream public audience that normally doesn't have any special knowledge about China. The main activities of Confucius Institutes include (fee required) language courses for various levels and a wide range of cultural events such as exhibitions, screenings and various talks. The schedules differ from institute to institute, but generally all offer more or less the same content.

Interesting enough the emphasis between language and culture varies from institute to institute across Germany. Some institutes focus on language courses, as one director puts it: "Language is definitely our main business, language as bread and culture as butter" (I2). Another director explains: "Of course language is the basis. Through language people get to know more about the culture. Because our resources are limited we can't do everything and therefore concentrate on language courses" (quoted in Weigl 2009: 65). Other institutes focus more on cultural activities. At one institute only a small number of people attending Chinese classes (in one semester six to eight classes with four to 13 people), but up to 60 people attended various China-lectures and other cultural events such as exhibitions (I3). One reason for this is the fact, that the lectures are free of charge. "Many people cannot or don't want to spend money for language courses, but want to know more about China and attend the free lectures" (I5).

Within the wide range of cultural activities these lectures, given by distinguished scholars, are one main feature. Most of these scholars – well known academics in their given research area in Germany and abroad – speak about topics related to their research which are of interest for a broader audience. Such topics include lectures about Traditional Chinese Medicine, The Silk Road, or talks about Chinese literature (I3, I5, I6).

All these activities can be understood as the “attempt to manage the international environment by making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas” and would therefore fit into Cull’s definition of cultural diplomacy (Cull 2008:33). Of course these activities also could help to “shape perceptions” and therefore would fit into the above definition of propaganda. But as there are no official statements read out and lectures praising the Three Representatives or the Scientific Concept of Development, it is hard to identify efforts to “manipulate cognition, and direct behavior” (Jowett/O’Donnell 2006:7).

What is not happening at Confucius Institutes

Taking all this into account, the difficulties arise from a different aspect: the crucial point is not so much what is actually happening at Confucius Institutes, but much more what is *not* happening there.

According to its General Principles, Confucius Institutes “shall not involve or participate in any activities that are not consistent with the missions of Confucius Institutes” (Hanban undated). These very general remarks make it very hard to decide what is allowed and what not, especially because: “The Confucius Institutes Headquarters reserve the right to interpret this Constitutions and By-Laws” (Confucius Institute Online 2009). Furthermore Confucius Institutes “shall abide by the laws and regulations of the countries in which they are located, respect local cultural and educational traditions and social customs, and they shall not contravene concerning the laws and regulations of China” (Hanban 2009).

The mingling of local cultural traditions (in Germany – or elsewhere in the West – freedom of the press or separation of powers can be understood as ‘local cultural traditions’) and laws and regulations of China hints that there can be conflicts of interest. All interviewees assured that there is no interference from Hanban and no attempts to push topics in a certain direction.

We are no executive organ of the Chinese Ministry of Education. [...] Of course, who is giving the money may try to have a say, but as far as I can see none of the institutes connected to a university would allow an intervention in its independence (I6).

“Hanban doesn’t impinge on our daily work at all” (I9) is a statement which can be heard from almost any staff member at German Confucius Institutes. Accordingly “Hanban is much more like an offering platform. You can choose various parts and structural elements to integrate in your own program” (ibid.). Another revealing point is the following argumentation: “Hanban is much more an administrative body which is not that much interested in questions of content. Besides, there are too many institutes around the world and they cannot have a close look at everyone” (I5).

All this sounds like the old Chinese saying after which the sky is high and the emperor far away, but there are limitations for Confucius Institutes. That’s not so much the case with “sporadic well-meant hints to celebrate spring festival” (I7) and things alike, but much more with sensitive topics, such as the T-words, Taiwan, Tibet and Tian’an’men.

People in charge of Confucius Institutes are fully aware of this problem. One managing director in 2007 put it this way: “If you sign such a contract, you know the limits” (Hartig 2007:69). This seems to be the general understanding throughout the institutes. “The independence is limited regarding precarious topics. If topics like Tibet or Taiwan would be approached too critical, this could be difficult” (I3). Even though it is true that “circumstances have changed in China, it’s no more 1976 and there is a bigger openness in the cultural sphere” (I2), nonetheless Confucius Institute staff knows “of course in which context we operate” (ibid.).

But it is up to every institute to define this context and try to find ways how events can be organized. “If we would cover critical topics, it has to be in a balanced way and with the necessary respect towards Chinese sensitivities” (I3). But it seems Hanban doesn’t really trust its international partners. According to Weigl at the Third Confucius Institutes Conference in 2008 there were “no direct content-related precepts” but it came up “that the following topics are not very welcomed: Tibet, Falun Gong and Taiwan” (Weigl 2009:36). This later was confirmed by one managing director.⁶

⁶ E-mail conversation with the author, 20. July 2010.

One manager speculates that the institute “probably couldn’t exhibit Ai Weiwei but I guess we could hold a discussion with the Tibet Initiative”⁷ (I6). Yet another manager admits that “it would be very interesting to see what happens if someone would really invite dissidents. It would be interesting to see someone testing how far one can go and how this would be handled” (I9). But the general understanding is more like this:

Confucius Institutes are not an institute for anti-Chinese organizations, like dissident groups or Falun Gong. It would be dewy-eyed to affirm this. We know where we stand and I think we make full use of the space we have. But that Falun Gong appears here, that’s a physical impossibility (I2).

Therefore finally it depends on local German staff⁸ what happens at Confucius Institutes and what not. “I didn’t ask anyone what we can do or not. Insofar I surely square it with my conscience or with what I know about China, what we can do and what we cannot do” (I7). There can’t be any final judgment whether this could lead to some kind of self-censorship, but it can be argued that staff members of Confucius Institutes or members of Confucius Institutes councils –mostly recognized scholars – wouldn’t risk their reputation doing active propaganda for the Chinese government. But on the other hand it is also obvious they wouldn’t risk losing the money coming from Hanban by covering anti-China topics.

The question how independent Confucius Institutes can work or how much Hanban is interfering mostly concerns the non-linguistic aspects of course work. Nevertheless there are critics, like the dissident Xu Pei, who impute that “in language courses communist propaganda is spread” (Xu 2008). Critics note that “through the teaching material, Beijing propagates its ideology of patriotism for the Communist Party and China, autocratic culture, and nationalism” and thus “Beijing Chinese language schools brainwash students overseas” (Yuan/Liu/Kemker 2009:B2).⁹

Without taking a stance in this somewhat ideological argument one aspect leverages this supposition, at least for German Confucius Institutes: “Most of the text books provided by Hanban are only in Chinese and English and many people coming to our institute are not that good in English, so we also have to use German books” (I9). All interviewees confirm that

⁷ Tibet Initiative Deutschland e.V. describes itself as “the largest and oldest political Tibet Support Group in Germany.” It tries to “influence the People’s Republic of China with all nonviolent means to put an end to arbitrariness, torture, political and cultural oppression in Tibet.” (http://www.tibet-initiative.de/eng/tid/about_us/, access March 3rd 2010.)

⁸ All managers or directors of German Confucius Institutes have academic and/or working experience in China.

⁹ Quoted in The Epoch Times, a newspaper founded by practitioners of Falun Gong.

they are “very autonomous in the usage of teaching materials” (ibid.) and most of the institutes combine teaching materials from Hanban with German books and resources. Some institutes even start to design their own teaching materials (I1, I4). It is against this background that the accusation whereupon propaganda is spread in language courses grasps more or less at nothing, at least in Germany.

Conclusion

As illustrated, the analysis of Confucius Institutes should more draw on the framework of public and cultural diplomacy than only using the framework of soft power. Cultural diplomacy is the instrument through which soft power is wielded and Confucius Institutes in turn should be understood as one instrument of China’s cultural diplomacy to wield and bolster Chinese soft power globally.

However, the distinction between public and cultural diplomacy and propaganda is not too obvious. As the case study of Confucius Institutes in Germany reveals, there is some evidence to describe Confucius Institutes as a tool of cultural diplomacy, understood as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas” (Cull 2008:33).

But the engagement with foreign publics is hampered by one crucial aspect. Due to the connection and links to the Chinese government, and the authoritarian characteristics of the Chinese government, Confucius Institutes lack one feature which is essential for institutions like German Goethe-Institute or British Council: the principle of non-intervention by the government.

Despite this lack of detachment from the state, it also seems not appropriate to label Confucius Institutes as propaganda tools when propaganda is understood in the negative common sense. The crucial point is that Confucius Institutes in Germany don’t actively tell lies and half-truths. But when it comes to certain sensitive topics, Confucius Institutes turn quiet or even silent. Therefore these institutions don’t do active propaganda, but also they don’t practice comprehensive and pure cultural diplomacy, but much more a cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.

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Interviews

The interviews were realised between October and December 2009.

I1 - Interview 1, conducted 6.10.2009.

I2 - Interview 2, conducted 7.10.2009.

I3 - Interview 3, conducted 9.10.2009.

I4 - Interview 4, conducted 23.10.2009.

I5 - Interview 5, conducted 26.10.2009.

I6 - Interview 6, conducted 27.10.2009.

I7 - Interview 7, conducted 30.10.2009.

I8 - Interview 8, conducted 4.11.2009.

I9 - Interview 9, conducted 3.12.2009.