



## The Confucius Institutes: China's Cultural Soft Power Strategy

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### ABSTRACT

The employment of culture and language as a Chinese foreign policy strategy combines the leadership's ideas with academic efforts to communicate with the world. China's approach to disseminating cultural soft power is seen through the overseas Confucius Institutes (CIs). The CIs have been recognized as a symbol for transmitting the Chinese language and cultural elements abroad. The author adopted the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to examine the Confucius Institutes of China's cultural soft power strategy. This research addresses that the CIs function as agents of Beijing, fostering global recognition of China as a civilized society and cultural power and improving its cultural connections worldwide. However, the CIs' influence was limited because foreign government-funded organizations did not assess it as an acceptable model. China has faced constraints in translating its soft power into desired outcomes, especially in the United States (US) and European Union (EU).

### KEYWORDS

Confucius Institutes; cultural soft power; cultural policy; cultural diplomacy; language and culture

## INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses China's approach to disseminating cultural soft power through the Confucius Institutes (CI). It provides the analytical method of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) by examining the strength of China's cultural policy, the weakness of the CIs, the opportunity of the CI project, and the threat of US and EU views on the CIs.

Chinese officials and scholars acknowledged that soft power was critical to China's image-building, of which CI was at the forefront. Joseph Nye described soft power as co-opting people rather than coercing them; its ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible assets, such as an attractive culture. An ethical culture has become essential for countries to shape a positive image in world politics (Nye, 2004). Nye differentiates culture into high culture and popular culture. The former, such as education, literature, and art, appeals to the elite, while the latter focuses on mass entertainment, such as "pop" music and movies (Nye, 2011). The Confucius Institute was recognized as a symbol for transmitting the Chinese language and cultural power abroad. The Chinese government's use of Confucius's name to brand the language institute was based on the ideas in the philosophy of Confucius, an educator and thinker whose ideas were rooted in Chinese cultural traditions (Hanban, 2006).

With one of the world's earliest civilizations, China is a cultural treasure-house; its treasures, including its language and values, make them essential resources for advancing soft power (Liu, 2011). During the Shang Dynasty (1523–1027 BC), the foundations of culture, including music, art, and a written language, had been laid. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (770–221 BC), various schools of thought and philosophers emerged (Liu, 1983). The most notable figure is Confucius. His teaching accentuated the importance of education. Confucianism is characterized as a system of social values and ethical philosophy.

Following the examples of Western countries fostering languages and cultures overseas, such as the British Council, Alliance Française, and the Goethe Institute, the CI has become a means of promoting Chinese soft power worldwide (Ngamsang & Walsh, 2013). The British Council aims to build connections and understanding between people in the UK and countries worldwide. The Council is on the ground in more than 100 countries (British Council, 2022). The Alliance Française promotes the French language and culture and fosters exchanges between French speakers and local communities. The Alliance Française has over 800 branches in 130 countries, with over half a million students worldwide (AFUSA, 2022). The Goethe-Institut is Germany's cultural institute promoting the study of German abroad and international cultural exchange. The institute encourages cultural collaboration across the globe by organizing programs of events (Goethe-Institut, 2022). By operating primarily on campuses and directly managed by the Chinese government, CIs are unlike these European institutes (Index on Censorship, 2021). For Chinese leaders, the CI was an ideal platform to let other countries understand China better. Beijing, in 2002, announced plans to establish CIs overseas to promote culture and language. Even though the aim of the CIs was, by nature, education and promotion of cultural relations with other countries, the institutes were not without suspicions. Some

media, governments, and scholars see the CIs as an attempt to exert Chinese political control (Redden, 2022).

The main goal of this research method is to explore the effectiveness of China's cultural soft power strategy through the CIs (Yiu, 2002, 13). This research adopted the SWOT analysis to examine the Confucius Institutes of China's cultural soft power strategy (Wang & Wang, 2020). This analysis allows scholars to identify both its internal and external factors (Speth, 2015, 1). Strengths and Weaknesses are internal factors that strengthen and hinder institutions from achieving their objectives. In comparison, Opportunities and Threats are the external factors that empower and restrict organizations from accomplishing their objectives (Phadermrod et al., 2019, 195). I have taken this research's literature from journals and books. The following section categorizes the literature on China's soft power concept and CIs.

Since the late 1990s, Chinese scholars have studied Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. They suggested that the government should develop a cultural soft power strategy. Several factors have prompted this shift. First, China's economic development has bolstered its global influence. Second, Chinese academics say that US cultural power has declined, and China could now compete on this front. Finally, China needed to improve its cultural ties with its neighbors to meet its interests.

According to Falk (2011), "cultural diplomacy" and "soft power" were often found in Chinese official speeches. Cultural diplomacy is seen as the Chinese government's efforts to spread cultural resources and facilitate cultural transmission overseas. Lai (2012) finds that cultural diplomacy has been more successful in developing countries. Despite difficulties, Beijing has prioritized cultural diplomacy in Western countries, ranking high on its diplomatic agenda, to alter a negative image of China. Flew and Hartig (2014) observed that China's strategists employed culture to exhibit the roadmap of soft power strategy. The CI was an ideal platform to have other countries better understand China. In 2002, Beijing announced plans to launch CIs overseas to promote culture and language. The CIs have become a communication channel to promote the peaceful characteristics of Chinese culture (Hanban, 2012).

Chinese scholars and leaders have embraced cultural soft power because it appears to be an alternative to power politics (Nye, 2011, 81). Chinese discourse largely conforms to Joseph Nye's conceptual framework but is beyond the scope of that conceptualization. Unlike Nye's focus on the efficacy of soft power in achieving foreign policy goals, Chinese scholars frequently refer to a domestic context. For example, Yu Keping argues that education, the psychological and physical condition of the people, technology, culture, social cohesion, and socioeconomic development, are all sources of soft power (Li, 2009, 28). To enhance China's soft power, Men Honghua (2007) states that the philosophy of soft power can be enriched by addressing the important resources of the country's culture, development model, international institutions, and international image (Men, 2007). Yu Xintian (2007) claims that soft power is a powerful instrument for representing national culture in the international community and should be regarded as an essential resource for crafting foreign policy. China should value the interests of

foreign countries and accordingly put forth proposals on strengthening soft power by seeking win-win cooperation (Yu, 2007). The above literature primarily addresses why China employs the soft power strategy and what benefits exist in implementing this strategy.

Since the establishment of the CIs, Chinese scholars and officials have paid close attention to the Institutes' development. According to Huang Lianying (2011), Chinese literature on CIs started in 2005. Since then, the research has gained more momentum (Huang, 2011). Hongqin et al. (2010) argue that the Chinese language has emerged as a subject for the educational market. The enhancement of language curriculum policy has led to the swift expansion of the CIs. The findings, however, indicate that it is unlikely that Mandarin Chinese will replace English as the world's most widely used language. Even though English will continue to be the dominant language in the world, the view that the Chinese language is an essential component in the future has been voiced (Zhao & Huang, 2010).

To minimize the fear of China's threat and to realize the goal of a well-off society, China is adopting a peace-oriented strategy with the CIs. James Paradise (2009) argues that China is building Institutes to spread its language and culture and increase collaboration with foreign academic institutions. China is projecting a more favorable image and reassures the world that its intentions are benign (Paradise, 2009). Hartig (2012) uses the CI in Germany to discuss the concepts of cultural diplomacy and culture institutes as a conceptual tool to analyze the CIs. This case study provides empirical data to explore China's image-shaping efforts in Germany. Hartig discovered that CIs are designed to teach language and promote culture. Nonetheless, they also aim to balance the dominant US cultural influence (Hartig, 2012, 53–57). Pan (2013) applies the theory of cultural diplomacy to explore the CI project and its implications for China's soft power projection. The paper suggests that the CI's project can be understood as a form of cultural diplomacy that is state-sponsored and university-piloted, a joint effort to gain China a more sympathetic global reception (Pan, 2013).

In this research, I answer this key question, "What are China's approaches to disseminating cultural soft power through the CIs?" I wish to improve empirical and theoretical understanding of China's cultural soft power through the CIs and to elaborate on China's intentions in this paper. By identifying the factors of the SWOT, I can recognize China's approaches to disseminating cultural soft power through the CI by examining the core of China's cultural policy, the CI's project, its strategies, and the effectiveness of the CIs. Thus, the following aspects will be examined: the evolution of China's cultural policy, the CI's project, the approaches to disseminating cultural soft power, and US and EU views on the CIs.

### **STRENGTH: CHINA'S CULTURAL POLICY**

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established in 1921, three debates on cultural policy have occurred. The first debate occurred during the anti-Japanese war period (1937 to 1945). The debate was due to the Japanese invasion. Mao Zedong claimed that China should have a cultural policy to defeat the enemy (Hughes, 2014). The second debate was a battle

between the proletariat culture and the bourgeois culture (from 1956 to 1976). Mao emphasized that the CCP would harness literature and art to achieve national interests (Hong, 1994). The third cultural debate occurred during the 1980s after China launched the “opening up and reform” policy. The debate included discussing Chinese culture more openly. Chinese scholars adopted a more practical approach to displaying cultural soft power (Lynch, 2013). The following explores the strength of China’s cultural policy from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping.

### **The Deng Xiaoping Period**

Deng Xiaoping leaned toward Confucianism, filling an ideological vacuum after the Cultural Revolution from 1967 to 1976 because top leaders recognized the drawbacks of over-emphasized politics and negligence of culture. Confucius was resurrected to be the symbol during Deng’s era. In 1984, Deng supported the setup of the Confucius Foundation of China, an organization promoting Confucianism and traditional Chinese research to increase global cultural exchanges (Whittaker, 2013). In October 1989, an elaborate celebration of the anniversary of Confucius’ birthday was held in Beijing. Gu Mu, a close adviser to Deng, gave a speech endorsing Confucian values for improving social harmony in China. Since then, the Chinese government has sponsored annual commemorations of Confucius’ birthday. The yearly festivals feature conferences highlighting the resurgence of the study of Confucianism (Whittaker, 2013). The cultural policies under Deng were lenient. Most Chinese scholars could study a culture of their choice, national or foreign if it did not espouse anti-socialism (Hong, 1994).

### **The Jiang Zemin Period**

An interest in soft power began taking shape in the 1990s, with academics deliberating the virtues of cultural interaction. Wang Huning, the brainpower of Jiang Zemin, argued in a 1993 article that a global shift from power based on wealth and violence to a knowledge-based power structure had existed. Chinese culture based on Confucianism could seek peaceful solutions to global problems and attract other countries (Palit, 2013). Cultural, economic, and political developments became the ‘three-in-one’ model for strengthening “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Zheng Bijian coined the concept of “China’s peaceful rise,” advocating for promoting Chinese culture abroad to overcome hostility towards China. Jiang’s administration has sought to resurrect Confucianism to promote domestic order, secure sustainable national development, and alleviate the China threat (Lo & Pan, 2014). Jiang Zemin acknowledged that cultural advancement was urgent because it played a crucial role in rejuvenating China. While delivering a political report at the 16th CCP Congress in 2002, Jiang accentuated that China should treasure the fine tradition of Chinese culture and absorb the achievements of foreign cultures in building a socialist spiritual civilization. To create a well-off society, China should embrace the vitality of cultural development and strength to enhance the attraction of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics (Jiang, 2002). Developing the cultural industry was essential to enriching culture in the market economy during Jiang’s era. In 2002, China’s propaganda chief, Liu Yunshan, noted that cultural power and influence were critical to integrating national

power and global competitiveness (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). Under Jiang's leadership, Chinese foreign relations discourse expressed an increasing appreciation of China's cultural traditions as a basis for the PRC's interactions with the world (Whittaker, 2013).

### **The Hu Jintao Period**

Under the presidency of Hu Jintao, China was inclined to use the Confucian idea of harmony to counteract the "China threat theory" externally and to maintain a "harmonious society" internally (Lo & Pan, 2014). Cultural soft power was found when browsing Chinese official publications and websites. Culture became a noticeable aspect of China's foreign policy (Li, 2008). The Hu administration had launched efforts to disseminate its cultural presence worldwide. President Hu stated at the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting on January 4, 2006, that the increase in China's global status and influence would have to be demonstrated in hard and soft power, such as culture. The 11th Five Year Plan (2006-10) for cultural development devoted an entire chapter to the "go global" strategy for Chinese culture, encouraging the media and cultural enterprises to expand cultural coverage and global impact (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). It urged more presence and influence of China in the international cultural markets to communicate with western audiences (Palit, 2013). The release of a cultural plan indicated that a cultural soft power strategy had been established. In 2007, cultural soft power became a highlight in the annual conferences of both the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), signaling that expanding Chinese culture was a pivotal part of the national strategy (Liu, 2011). The revival of Confucius' image made him a prime candidate to represent national pride on the global stage. The opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing featured a choir dressed as disciples of Confucius, chanting quotations from the Analects. On top of that, in 2009, a state-owned film company produced a film promoting Confucius (Whittaker, 2013).

### **The Xi Jinping Period**

Xi Jinping's administration has taken initiatives to promote Chinese culture, including programs to fund translations of Chinese literature into foreign languages, the expansion of the Chinese film industry, and the theme of "sending Chinese culture to the world." Xi attempts to regulate cultural policies within China with notions of soft power (Rosen et al., 2014). Xi Jinping has voiced the importance of Confucianism several times. He said in public that he would like to read the Analects and *Collecting Stories and Thoughts of Confucius* (Buckley, 2013). On September 24, 2014, Xi, at a seminar to mark the anniversary of the birth of Confucius, addressed that Confucianism had profoundly influenced Chinese civilization and has been an essential part of traditional Chinese culture (Zhang, 2014). He also acknowledged that language was the best way to understand a country. Xi understands that the CIs have become an essential conduit of people exchanges between China and the West, contributing to China's cultural soft power and global influence. Therefore, the CIs served as important platforms to help the world know China. Xi said, "as bridges for linguistic and cultural exchanges, the CIs have actively facilitated people worldwide to learn the Chinese language and understand its culture (Hanban,

2015).”

Culture is the core and strength of Chinese soft power, among which traditional Chinese culture is the most valuable source (Wu, 2018). China’s fine culture reflects its civilization's wisdom and essence, offering insights into governance and moral building (Bao, 2022). Confucianism accentuated that a king’s ruling should rely on moral force instead of military force. Benevolent governance will triumph over hegemonic rule. These values are embodied in harmony, laying the basis of cultural appeal (Wu, 2018). China has influenced the world through the appeal of its culture. The Chinese government suggests that confidence in one’s culture is an essential source of strength for the country’s development. The Chinese government has taken measures to protect and disseminate traditional culture (Bao, 2022). The Chinese government has returned to its roots, projecting that culture into the future through modern technologies, new ways of thinking, and adaptation. Culture develops on the foundations of economic abundance, strengthening Chinese culture and civilization (Hooi, 2021).

### **OPPORTUNITY: THE CULTURAL SOFT POWER VIA THE CI**

The CI provides an opportunity for the world to learn the Chinese language and culture. The CI project reflected China’s recognition of language teaching and cultural dissemination as an essential means of promoting its cultural soft power. Three rationales exist. The first is to consolidate China’s cohesion, where Beijing portrayed the CIs’ expansion as a sign of rising China’s global influence (Wang & Adamson, 2015). Chinese people can be proud of being Chinese with a rich history, thereby consolidating the nation’s cohesion. The second is to expand Chinese influence, suggesting that the CIs have become an official mouthpiece for showcasing Chinese prestige. Foreign audiences receive a Chinese cultural product, carefully crafted, packaged, and delivered. The CIs help Chinese higher education gain recognition for its delivery of educational services in the global market. The third is to diminish the China threat because the rise of China’s economic and military influence has threatened the western powers. To resolve this tension, the CIs became part of China’s strategy to soften its global image from threatening to benign, from an aggressive dragon to a friendly panda.

#### **The Project of the Confucius Institute**

Hanban, the CI Headquarters, was responsible for initiating policies, sponsoring activities, and engaging in cultural exchanges. Each CI was under the leadership of directors. The director, enforcer, communicator, and organizer manage the CI. While on duty, they require effective communication with Hanban, the Chinese embassy, and the local government. Foreign applicants submit to Hanban a Letter of Intent, establishing a CI that proves: a need for Chinese learning, an ability to provide a facility, and a pre-selection of China’s counterpart. After submitting the letter, the applicant requires Hanban’s approval (Lin, 2013).

The CI’s core projects included the following: First involved training and recruiting teachers. Hanban cultivated teachers by relying on Chinese universities to develop an international Chinese education. They also collaborated with foreign universities to institute

majors in teaching Chinese (Hanban, 2014). The second included organizing CI brand projects. They held language competitions and invited foreign school principals to visit China and international students to participate in summer camps in China (Cao, 2013). The third included establishing new institutes. Hanban assessed applications for new institutes, provided aid and teachers, formulated rules, and approved annual programs and budgets (Hanban, 2006). The fourth was providing scholarships for teachers and students. Hanban also offered scholarships for teachers and international students to enroll in the “Master of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages” (MTC SOL) program in China (Hanban, 2009). In 2020, China renamed Hanban to the “Center for Language Education and Cooperation.” Instead of using funding from the government, the Chinese International Education Foundation, a Ministry of Education-sponsored, non-governmental organization comprised of universities and corporations, was formed to provide financing to the CIs (Lum & Fischer, 2020).

### **Approaches to Disseminate Cultural Soft Power**

Chinese strategists believe that a world power should also be a crucial cultural hub whose ideas, social life, and beliefs appeal to people of other countries (Li, 2009). The official apparatus has campaigned for cultural attractiveness with tremendous efforts. It includes administrative organs responsible for implementing cultural policies (Liu, 2011). The CI project can be seen as an intricate soft power using peaceful means to exert China’s influence abroad. (Pan, 2013).

The first approach is to expand Chinese culture. The government outlined approaches to increase the influence of Chinese culture through CIs. In 2006, the State Council adopted the Outline of the National Plan for Cultural Development during the 11th Five-Year Plan. The plan designed a “go-out” strategy to augment the influence of cultural products abroad (Li, 2009). The Outline of the Cultural Reform and Development Plan during the 12th Five-Year Plan Period, released in 2012, stated that culture is becoming an important source of national cohesion and creativity. The section “Strengthening foreign cultural exchange and cooperation” accentuated accelerating the building of overseas Chinese cultural centers and CIs (China Copyright and Media, 2012). In 2016, the total monetary output of cultural industries accounted for 2.75 percent of the GDP. With financial support from the government, the cultural communities held many cultural events. Research institutes have also contributed to the growing popularity of cultural soft power by holding conferences (Liu, 2011). After the cultural policy had been outlaid, Confucius was venerated. In 2010, the film *Confucius* packed movie theaters. A statue of Confucius was erected on Tiananmen Square in 2011 (Shambaugh, 2016).

The second approach includes cultivating Chinese higher education opportunities. Higher education is a conveyor of cultural soft power and has been a critical opportunity for China to gain its universities’ prestige to attract foreign elites. China invested in higher education to improve innovation at home and competitiveness abroad (Shambaugh, 2016). Students from 196 countries and regions were studying in China. The total number of international students in China reached more than 490,000 in 2018 (Statista, 2018). The Ministry of Education aimed to create world-class universities in China. Nine leading universities combined to form the so-called

“C9” (China Nine) and to make China a global leader in technology (Shambaugh, 2016). Some elite universities aim at moving up the global rankings. For example, the 2022 Best Global Universities ranked Peking University 45th and Tsinghua University 26th globally (US News, 2022).

Moreover, the CIs project generated opportunities for China’s universities. Utilizing cooperation with foreign universities in establishing CIs, Chinese universities have gained more opportunities for external contacts. They act as unofficial cultural diplomats, contributing three-fold to the CI project: seeking foreign partners, enhancing the CIs’ status, and allowing China to increase its human capital. China increased funding to finance international students to study in China, supported world-renowned foreign universities’ cooperative programs, and sponsored foreign scholars to work in China. China’s “brain gain” efforts aim to improve its higher education capacity by using foreign-trained human resources (Pan, 2014).

China's cultural soft power approach in developing the CIs differed from the western concept. While political overtones lead to cultural soft power approaches adopted by the Chinese government, Western countries engaged in soft power primarily via private industry through the movie industry, churches, and universities. Chinese leaders acknowledge that cultural soft power in the West still holds a dominant position, and China still has a long way to catch up. Similarly, the rising interest of foreigners in Chinese culture does not mean they agree with the Chinese government, nor do they become less fearful of China’s rapid rise. Some Chinese scholars (Tseng Wen, Hong Gao, Ding Zhongyi, and Wei Xing) propose recommendations for improving China’s cultural soft power to beautify its image: the government should use the CIs as its national strategic development tool; the CIs should become institutionalized and flexible to promote Chinese culture better (Wen, 2007, Gao, 2011).

### **WEAKNESS: CHALLENGES OF THE CI**

Even though the Confucius Institutes have experienced rapid growth with a global expansion since early 2000, several scholars, including Shuai Li, Yanyin Zhang, Joe Tin-Yau Lo, and Suyan Pan, identified several weaknesses and challenges the CIs have encountered.

The first challenge was that the Confucius Institutes had difficulty recruiting qualified teachers. Because the CIs could not employ enough experienced teachers from the host countries, Hanban needed to recruit and dispatch more trained teachers from Mainland China. However, such teachers were in short supply because experienced Chinese teachers might not be willing to leave their families to work overseas. In addition, the relatively low pay, adoption of the new culture and society, and going to third-world countries reduced their incentive to work and live for around three years overseas (Lo & Pan, 2014).

The CI’s second challenge was the lack of sufficient teacher training. Some teachers lacked knowledge about the local educational system, local students’ learning styles, intercultural communication capability, and foreign language skills in the hosted countries. At the same time, the local Chinese teachers in the target nations were deficient in subject

knowledge of Chinese culture, language capability, and teaching experience because some teachers had not received proper training (Li & Tucker, 2013).

The third challenge was to provide more appropriate Chinese teaching materials and textbooks for students. Hanban had initially planned to use the textbooks published in China. However, this strategy was soon met with some resistance because many textbooks were developed with a one-size-fits-all mentality and needed to consider cultural and sociological differences across different countries (Li & Tucker, 2013). The materials did not attract the interest of international students because the textbooks lacked local sensitivity and context (Lo & Pan, 2014, 5). Some were too dull to raise the incentive to study.

Concerning the shortage of qualified teachers, proper teaching methods, and suitable Chinese teaching materials, the CIs did not work well for learners in certain countries and cultures. Hanban implemented measures such as developing guidelines for the global promotion of language and culture, enhancing teacher training, and localizing the supply of language instructors to respond to these challenges (Thorpe, 2015).

### **THREAT: US AND EU VIEWS ON THE CI**

Even though the official aim of the CIs is education and the promotion of friendly relations with other countries, Western countries have suspicions about the language institutes. Some see CIs as an attempt to exert Chinese political control. With those critics, the CI programs have been controversial during its global expansion. The arguments included the following. The first was infringing on academic freedom. China's contributions to host universities gave Beijing leverage over those institutions. The grants coming with the establishment of the CIs could make universities more susceptible to pressures from Beijing. The second was the "infamous" Trojan horse scheme. James Paradise notes that the CIs may be viewed as Chinese "Trojan horses." While ostensibly promoting the Chinese language and culture, Paradise argues, the CIs are part of a broader soft power projection in which China is attempting to win hearts and minds for political purposes (Mosher, 2018). The third was the propaganda tool. Representatives from the state bureaucracy and foreign partners govern the CIs. Through the hidden bureaucratic networks, Beijing ensures its priorities are executed. The CIs are part of the propaganda system directed at external audiences.

The CIs serve as agents of Beijing by relaying knowledge regarding language and culture to foster global recognition of China as a civilized and harmonious society and improve its cultural connections in the global community (Pan, 2014). Consequently, the CIs serve as a branch office for selling China's cultural content, an advantage in promoting China's soft power. The Chinese government's use of the CI as a platform for foreign policy can be seen as a cultural approach, using benign activities to counter external pressures of the China threat. However, the CIs have been a source of controversy in the US and the EU, stemming from the institutes' financial, administrative, and political support from Beijing (Whittaker, 2013). In March 2012, the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee held a hearing on Chinese propaganda efforts

(Hartig, 2014). Some Confucius Institutes in European countries closed amid censorship and espionage accusations (Vanttinen, 2022). The CIs have triggered a round of debates and have been scrutinized since then.

Supporters claim that the CIs contribute to the general good by facilitating Chinese language teaching. Students in the CIs were obtaining an appreciation of China. Knowledge and skill gained at a CI would equip students to be more employable. The CIs could help generate appreciation by connecting Chinese dreams with the world. The CI was beyond a platform for learning the language but helped professionals as a platform for the art to polish their professions in communicating with China (Zhang, 2014). Supporters described the fears regarding CIs as unfounded. They said Hanban had no input on staffing or curriculum. The universities did not let Hanban constrain their academic freedom (Gioia, 2014).

To critics, the complaints about the CIs far outweigh the benefits because the institutes on campuses serve Chinese interests. The FBI director, Christopher Wray, told a Senate panel in February 2018 that the FBI was concerned about the institutes (Sabrowsky, 2019). Some universities have closed their CIs in response to concerns voiced by lawmakers (Redden, 2019). Critics stated that the CIs are integral to China's overseas propaganda setup. The US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), enacted in August 2018, prohibited the US Department of Defense (DoD) from funding Chinese language programs at an institution's Chinese-funded CIs without a waiver. The University's DoD-funded Chinese Language Flagship program would have lost funding with the new policy had it not decided to close its CI (Sabrowsky, 2019). Since then, the number of CIs has dropped significantly. In 2017, 103 CIs were present in the US. As of August 25, 2022, only 16 CIs existed (National Association of Scholars, 2022). Universities cited reasons for terminating the CIs, including concerns about the difficulties of the operation due to Covid-19 and the desire to keep DoD Chinese language flagship funding (Lum & Fischer, 2020).

Since 2019, some European countries have closed all their CIs. The closures result from rising anti-Chinese sentiment among the European public and government. They saw the CIs not as academic bodies but as the Chinese government's propaganda instruments. Doubts grew because of controls on what could be discussed at the CIs, with Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang being banned subjects (O'Neill, 2021). For example, the deteriorating relations between Sweden and China resulted in concern regarding the Chinese government's human rights violations and oppression of ethnic and religious minority groups (Flittner, 2020). In Finland, a contract between Helsinki University and the CI was terminated following accusations of conducting espionage and an attempt to block discussions on Tibet (Vanttinen, 2022). In a question to the European Commission in December 2020, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, Filip Man, asked: "Does the Commission plan on calling the Member States to close all CIs?" (O'Neill, 2021). In July 2021, Germany's Education Ministry called on the country's universities to end cooperation with the CI (O'Neill, 2021). Therefore, Belgium closed its Confucius Institutes in 2019, Sweden and Denmark in 2020, and Norway in 2021 (Vanttinen, 2022).

### CONCLUSION: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CI

The CIs can highlight the positive side of China, such as the success of joining the world community and its economic development. However, the CIs can be vulnerable to attack. If the CIs were viewed as a government tool, Americans and Europeans might not trust them. CIs' influence can be limited because it is not an acceptable model for foreign government-funded organizations residing on college campuses. The CI, in general, has not been an effective platform to promote China's cultural soft power in Western countries. The CIs expanded in the US because learning the Chinese language was gaining popularity. This popularity was due to its commercial potential rather than enthusiasm for culture. If China were to lose its economic strength, a decrease would occur in the desire to learn Chinese (Wang & Adamson, 2015, 229).

If one of the major purposes of the CI soft power project is to brand China's global image, public opinion polls can be valid means of gauging whether the outcomes could help this purpose. The Pew survey shows that 51% of Americans felt favorably towards China in 2011. By 2018, only 38% felt favorable (Devlin, 2019). A Gallup poll in 2021 put China's unfavorable view among Americans at 79%, the worst reading since its polling began in 1979 (Aredy, 2021). The American assessment of Chinese culture is much less positive than what Beijing hoped for. Over 70% do not think Chinese popular culture is appealing (Aldrich et al., 2014). China has faced constraints in translating its soft power into desired outcomes in the US and EU. Some supporters argue that the relations between China and Western countries might be worse without these cultural interactions through the CIs (McCord, 2014). The CI, in general, has not been an effective platform in the US and EU to promote China's cultural soft power because of the rising anti-China sentiment, such as the cover-up of Covid-19, the trade war, South China Sea tension, Xinjiang internment camps, and the 2022 Taiwan Strait crisis, portrayed by the western media.

With its rapid economic growth and increased global influence, China has invested in cultural soft power resources. The strategic objective behind the CIs' proliferation can be traced to China's vision portrayed as a globally benign image. The CIs' influence can be limited because it is not an acceptable model for foreign government-funded organizations and its presence on the university campus. The reaction to the CIs has been mixed in the US and the EU. While many universities appreciate the CIs' contributions, skepticism has arisen about them. The CIs' capacity for the attraction was in question, given the objections they encountered. The CI project is like "searching for stones to cross the river" (Deng Xiao-ping). China has utilized cultural diplomacy to obtain its national interests. However, China's political systems and ideology have undermined its soft power credibility. Therefore, the CI project can do little to relieve the fear of China's threat. The results of the soft power, attempted through the CI, reveal that China's cultural diplomacy still has a long way to go.

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