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**The Confucius Institutes and China's
Soft Power**

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Abstract

The Confucius Institutes have been established by the Chinese government which operates them in collaboration with foreign universities and educational institutions in order to promote understanding of the Chinese language and culture. The first Confucius Institute opened its doors in Seoul, South Korea in 2004. Within the past seven years, 353 Confucius Institutes and 473 Confucius Classrooms have been established in 104 countries and regions. It is quite unusual for a language school to be able to make progress so rapidly. These developments raise a series of basic questions. First, what are the Confucius Institutes? What are their purpose and function? How have they been able to multiply so quickly? Are Confucius Institutes instruments of China's soft power? This article seeks to answer these questions by analyzing the details behind the establishment of Confucius Institutes, their organizational mechanism, and their activities. This paper concludes that due to insufficiency of cultural content and key concepts which can typify contemporary China, it is hard to see Confucius Institutes as China's soft power.

Keywords: Confucius Institutes, Hanban, cultural content, Soft Power

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The Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power

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Introduction

Confucius (Kong Zi, BCE 551–479) is known as the greatest Chinese thinker in history and as the founder of the school of thought that bears his name. During his lifetime, Confucius wanted to put his thought and philosophy into practice in government, but he was never granted the opportunity to do so. He served the state of Lu in the Chunqiu Period, but was not recognized and he later set forth his theory of statecraft while traveling from country to country. However, his more than ten years of effort came to nothing, and he ultimately devoted himself to teaching and writing. Two and a half millennia later, his name is being used by an educational institution—the Confucius Institute—that has spread around the globe and won the acceptance of many people. However, the Confucius Institutes have not set up an educational program to teach their namesake’s thought; rather, they are institutions that have borrowed his name with the goal of spreading the Chinese language around the world.

The Confucius Institutes are Chinese language schools. They have been established by the Chinese government, which operates them in collaboration with foreign universities and educational institutions in order to promote understanding of the Chinese language and culture. In the space of just four years—between November 21, 2004, when the first institute opened in Seoul, South Korea and October 2008—292 Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms opened in 78 countries. That means 73 new institutes on average opened each year, or one every five days. Such growth has attracted attention, as it is quite unusual for a language school to be able to make progress so rapidly. The entity responsible for opening Confucius Institutes overseas is the Office of Chinese Language Council

International, referred to hereafter by its abbreviation in Chinese, Hanban. Many were dubious when they heard the director of Hanban tell the official Xinhua News Agency in 2004 that Hanban wanted to open 100 institutes in the future. However, people looking at the achievements of this seven-year period have been stunned. A flood of requests to open Confucius Institutes has come from across the world, and Hanban is more self-assured than when it was starting out. By August 2011, 353 Confucius Institutes and 473 Confucius Classrooms had been established in 104 countries and regions.

Many view the rapid growth of these institutes as an increase in China's "soft power." Joseph Nye, the Harvard University professor who first proposed the concept of "soft power," sees the institutes as a prime example of such. Furthermore, there are many who warn that the rising numbers of Confucius Institutes overseas represent a type of "Chinese cultural coercion." Some even criticize the Chinese culture being taught at Confucius Institutes as ideological propaganda for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There is no end in sight to the 'for and against' arguments over the institutes. These developments raise a series of basic questions. First, what are the Confucius Institutes? What are their goals? How have they been able to multiply so quickly? These and other questions come to mind, but we cannot find the answers to them straight away. Most newspaper articles in Japan to date have focused solely on the opening of new institutes and the fact that they are expanding globally. Reports that look into the reasons behind this expansion are relatively few. Moreover, there is very little research and analysis being done at present in Japan or elsewhere that focuses on the institutes themselves.

With that mind, this article seeks to answer the questions raised above by analyzing the Confucius Institutes. It will do so by analyzing the details behind their establishment, their organizational mechanism, and their activities. The article is divided into three sections. Section 1 discusses the position of the Confucius Institutes in China itself and their operational mechanism. Section 2 examines the activities of the institutes overseas and how people there have viewed them. Section 3 analyzes the relationship between the institutes and Chinese soft power. Finally, the conclusion will consider the

problem of the products of Chinese culture as part of a discussion into the future prospects for the institutes.

1. Founding of the Confucius Institutes and their Operational Mechanism

Positioning the Confucius Institutes

Behind the creation of the Confucius Institutes lies the rapid increase in Chinese language studies overseas in recent years. More than 2,500 universities around the world offer Chinese language classes, and there are already more than 40 million students of the language. Furthermore, several million more people take up Chinese language studies every year. The number of people taking the Chinese Proficiency Test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, HSK) overseas has also rapidly increased year on year. More than 130,000 people sat the exam in 2007. There are many reasons as to why such feverish interest in studying Chinese has arisen across the world; they include three decades of continuous expansion in the Chinese economy, Chinese corporations spreading around the world, new business opportunities being created in China, and the country's expanded presence in international politics.

Clearly there is no way to know the kind of debates that have been taking place among China's leaders over the creation of these institutes. In 2004 the Chinese government formulated a five-year plan for Chinese language education abroad, commonly known as the Chinese Bridge Project (Hanyu qiao gongcheng). Its goal is to bolster the teaching of the Chinese language overseas. The Confucius Institutes have been promoted as an important part of this project. Hanban is the organization that controls the institutes and comprises representatives from 12 state ministries and commissions. Those entities are the General Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of

Radio, Film, and Television, the State Press and Publications Administration, the State Council Information Office, and the State Language Committee.

The question then arises as to what Hanban itself is. According to its website, the organization performs the following functions (Hanban website, <http://english.hanban.org/>, accessed March 1, 2009).

1. To make policies and development plans for promoting Chinese language internationally under the direction of Hanban.
2. To support Chinese language programs at educational institutions of various types and levels in other countries.
3. To direct the Council of the Confucius Institute Headquarters and establish Confucius Institutes.
4. To draft international Chinese teaching standards and develop and promote Chinese language teaching materials.
5. To draft international Chinese teacher certification standards and provide training, as well as select Chinese teachers and teacher volunteers active overseas and certify their skills for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.
6. To draft guidelines for establishing an international Chinese teaching network, create a platform for that network, and provide resources.
7. To develop and propagate Chinese language examinations of all types.

From this it can be seen that Hanban has overall control of a field that includes not only the Confucius Institutes but also Chinese language education policy, the development of language teaching materials, the training and dispatch of language instructors, and Chinese language examinations. The Confucius Institutes are one aspect of the business of propagating the Chinese language overseas and one of Hanban's most important operations. The Confucius Institute Administrative Office was created within

Hanban's general affairs department and is responsible for promoting institute initiatives. As the institute initiative developed in earnest, Hanban created a Confucius Institute Headquarters in Beijing in April 2007 in order to improve their organization and administration. The Confucius Institute Headquarters is registered as a non-profit organization (NPO) with corporate status. The headquarters organizational chart includes an administrative council comprising a chair, a vice-chair, executive council members, and council members. The chair, vice-chair, and executive council members are not elected so much as selected based on the opinions of the education-related administrative units within the State Council. Chen Zili, State Councilor for domestic educational and cultural affairs at the time, served as the first chairman. All five vice-chairs were likewise senior civil servants in state ministries and bureaus. They included the education minister, the director of the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the deputy secretary general of the State Council, a vice-minister for finance, and a former State Council deputy secretary general. The council was chaired at the time of this article's writing by Liu Yandong, the body's third chairman who, like Chen, was a State Councilor for educational and cultural affairs in China. The state covers all of the expenses for the Confucius Institute Headquarters and for its work of expanding the institute's activities overseas. Thus, the Confucius Institute Headquarters is only superficially an NPO. It would be no overstatement to describe it in actual fact as a quasi-governmental organization that strongly reflects government views.

Organizational Form of the Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes have been operated by Hanban in conjunction with universities in China and local partner institutions abroad. Most of the Chinese universities are state-run institutions under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, while the partner institutions overseas are diverse. The institutes can be broadly divided into three categories based on the different natures of the partner institutions.

The first type of institute is that operated in conjunction with a foreign university. Most

Confucius Institutes are of this type. The overseas university provides a location and facilities, while a Chinese university supplies the faculty and classroom materials. The majority of Confucius Institutes in Japan belong to this category. The first institute to be opened in Japan, at Kyoto's Ritsumeikan University, is operated by the university in conjunction with Peking University. The institute at Aichi University is operated jointly by the host university and China's Nankai University.

The second type comprises institutes operated in conjunction with a public or social organization overseas. In this case, the public or social organization secures a location and facilities while a Chinese university again provides the faculty and classroom materials. One such example is the Chicago Confucius Institute operated jointly by the Chicago Public Schools Office of Language and Cultural Education and East China Normal University. The Confucius Institute at the China Institute, created jointly by the New York-based China Institute in America and the East China Normal University, is an example of a Confucius Institute run in conjunction with a social organization.

The third type comprises institutes created and operated in conjunction with foreign corporations and target Chinese language students in the world of business. London's Confucius Institute for Business is an example. Funding for this institute has come from several multinational corporations including British Petroleum, Deloitte, HSBC, Swire, and Standard Chartered; Tsinghua University and the London School of Economics oversee its educational activities and operation.

There are other Confucius Institutes whose organizational form does not fall within these three patterns. For example, the Open University of China and Michigan State University opened the first Cyber Confucius Institute on May 15, 2006. In Japan, the Nagano Prefecture Sino-Japanese Friendship Association in partnership with China Radio International launched the Radio Confucius Classroom on April 5, 2008.

Instructors, Classroom Materials, and Operational Costs

The language instructors at the institutes are mainly either teachers specializing in Chinese language teaching who have been sent from China or are volunteers. To support the further expansion of the Confucius Institute initiative, the Ministry of Education designated 17 universities—including Beijing Language and Culture University, Peking University, Sun Yat-sen University, and Shandong University—as Confucius Institute support institutions. They are charged with choosing instructors and volunteers from their home institutions (Lin, 2006: 45). Hanban covers the salaries of the language instructors who are dispatched overseas. Slight differences in instructor salaries exist depending on the region, but on average it is US\$1,500 per month * (*Beijing qingnian bao*, June 1, 2007).

Most of the classroom materials used at the Confucius Institutes were those used for Chinese language instruction for foreign exchange students at Chinese universities and in Chinese language curricula overseas. For several years Confucius Institutes used different materials depending on where they were located. In recent years Hanban has been working at a fever pitch to create uniform materials and study programs, a wide variety of materials and programs are available at present.

In principle, Hanban and the local partner institution cover the operating expenses for the institutes on a 1:1 basis, except in the case of the aforementioned business Confucius Institutes, but the reality varies from place to place. As often as not, partner institutions in Europe and around the U.S. cover expenses that vastly exceed the amounts stipulated in the agreements. All of the expenditures from the Chinese side are said to be covered by the government, but just how much money that actually amounts to is surrounded in mystery. Based on interviews with government officials in the Chinese media, it appears that Hanban spends US\$100,000 per school annually (*China Culture Daily*, <http://www.ccdy.cn/pubnews/545848/20090205/567007.htm>, accessed March 2, 2009). A simple calculation shows the expenditure for 300 schools to total US\$30 million, or around 200 million yuan.

* The monthly salary of US\$1,500 is quite low compared to the remuneration received by a visiting researcher going overseas (roughly US\$3,000 to US\$5,000), so university instructors are somewhat less than enthusiastic about being sent overseas to teach at Confucius Institutes.

The amount of money to operate a single institute certainly is not all that much, even if the partner institution overseas is supplying the same amount of money to cover operating expenses.

Reactions from the Government and Universities

Chinese universities certainly cannot ignore the Confucius Institutes given that they are a state-run project, and many universities are in fact extremely proactive about opening institutes. To take China's most prestigious university as an example, since April 2006 Peking University has created Confucius Institutes with ten foreign universities with which it has close ties and formal agreements: Ritsumeikan and Waseda universities in Japan, Stanford University in the US, Free University Berlin in Germany, Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, the University of Granada in Spain, Moscow University in Russia, Cairo University in Egypt, and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in the U.K. The first Chinese university to recruit foreign exchange students and provide them with language training was Beijing Language and Culture University, doing so in the greatest numbers of any Chinese university. By 2009, It had highlighted its strengths as a university specializing in languages by establishing Confucius Institutes at 12 universities in 10 countries. Not only the major universities but also their more local counterparts are making these sorts of moves.

The Chinese government has attached great importance to the Confucius Institute undertaking, sending Beijing's local ambassador or consul to attend opening ceremonies for new institutes overseas. One often witnesses the spectacle of ministerial or vice-ministerial level officials coming from China to attend openings at prestigious universities regarded as strategically important. Depending on the situation, even a senior official at the level of executive vice-premier of the State Council might attend. Chinese President Hu Jintao attended the ceremony held on June 15, 2004 to mark the opening of the Tashkent University Confucius Institute in Uzbekistan. Premier Wen Jiabao, meanwhile, joined Portugal's prime minister to attend the signing ceremony for the Lisbon University Confucius Institute on January 31, 2007.

Based on the above, we can see how much emphasis the Chinese government places on the operations of the Confucius Institute.

Problems Arising in Establishing Confucius Institutes

Of course, the Confucius Institute initiative has not been simply a, one-dimensional success story. There are many critics of the institutes in China. For example, Hanban engages in commercial activities focused on the Chinese language education market overseas, including the Confucius Institutes. As a result, some suspect that it is generating enormous profits. Hanban is not the only entity to face such criticism; it applies to many of the individual business units that exist within China's current political and economic structures. Criticisms of this sort are unavoidable to the extent that its accounts are settled in an especially transparent fashion given that it is a business unit that receives all of its economic support from the government. Furthermore, since the problem of educational inequality within the country has not been completely resolved, there will also be those who are critical of spending large amounts of money on language businesses overseas (Zhe Ren, 2010).

The most serious problem is that of human resources. It is thought that some 100,000 people will be needed every year to work as Chinese language teachers overseas. However, the number of people who can be trained each year to teach the language to non-Chinese remains at about 5,000; the demand thus far greatly exceeds the supply. Only 33 universities in China have teaching Chinese as a foreign language in their curricula. Those programs produce only 1,500 graduates every year. Another 3,000 or so people acquire certification to teach Chinese as a foreign language during their time away from university. Combining these two figures gives around 5,000 people. In efforts to resolve this dilemma, in March 2004 the Ministry of Education launched its Volunteer Program for International Chinese Teachers. The original goal of this program was to provide volunteers with a certain amount of training and send them overseas to teach Chinese for 6 to 24 months at a time. However, the program has not developed

satisfactorily owing to cost constraints (*Jingji Cankao Bao* [Economic Information Daily], April 30, 2004). Moreover, in many cases volunteers have been sent abroad after receiving only brief amounts of training because the supply cannot keep up with the demand.

2. Overseas Activities of the Confucius Institute

Thus far this study has examined the circumstances behind the founding of the Confucius Institute in China, its organizational mechanisms, and the problems it faces. Next, let us consider the reception that the Confucius Institutes have met with overseas. This section will explore the actual activities of the institutes overseas and how the institutes are seen.

Confucius Institutes are being opened mainly around Asia, Europe, and North America. Sixty-five have been opened in the latter region, with those established at U.S. universities accounting for the lion's share (55). In 22 countries in Europe, 55 institutes have been opened, with comparatively large numbers in Russia (9), Great Britain (8), Germany (8), and France (7). In Asia, there are 63 schools in 22 countries, led by Japan (13, or 16 if Confucius Classrooms are included—see Table 1 for details), Thailand (13), and South Korea (12) (Hanban website, http://www.hanban.edu.cn/kzxy_list.php?ithd=gzky, accessed February 2, 2009). All of these countries are also of great importance to China's diplomatic activities. The fact that 55 have been opened in the U.S. might seem surprising, but it makes sense if we consider how big a presence the U.S. is in Chinese foreign affairs. Russia and the three European Union (EU) countries follow it in the importance with which they are regarded. The large number of institutes created in Asia can be understood as reflecting not only the great importance that China places on relations with its neighbors, but also the strong interest that those countries have in China in return.

Here, I would like to touch on the example of Japan to get a feel for the realities of the Confucius Institutes overseas. In Japan, universities that have invested energy into education and research about Asia,

in particular, have been quite active when it comes to establishing Confucius Institutes. The first institute in Japan was established jointly by Ritsumeikan University and Peking University and opened its doors on June 28, 2005. The number of institutes steadily increased thereafter; 13 (16 including Confucius Classrooms) were founded by 2008 (see Table 1).

Table 1 *List of Confucius Institutes in Japan*

	Date Opened	Japanese Institution	Location	Chinese Institution
1	June 28, 2005	Ritsumeikan University, Confucius Institute Ritsumeikan University, Confucius Institute Tokyo Classroom	Kyoto Tokyo	Peking University
2	November 1, 2005	Obirin University, Confucius Institute Obirin University, Confucius Institute Takashima Classroom	Tokyo Shiga	Tongji University
3	December 15, 2005	Hokuriku University, Confucius Institute	Ishikawa	Beijing Language and Culture University
4	February 24, 2006	Aichi University, Confucius Institute	Aichi	Nankai University
5	August 3, 2006	Sapporo University, Confucius Institute	Hokkaidō	Guandong University of Foreign Studies
6	October 25, 2006	Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University, Confucius Institute	Oita	Zhejiang University
7	April 12, 2007	Waseda University, Confucius Institute	Tokyo	Peking University
8	August 28, 2007	Osaka Sangyo University, Confucius Institute	Osaka	Shanghai International Studies University
9	November 7, 2007	Nagano Prefecture	Nagano	China Radio

		Sino-Japanese Friendship Association Radio Confucius Classroom		International
10	November 16, 2007	Fukuyama University, Confucius Institute Fukuyama University, Confucius Institute Ginga Confucius Classroom	Hiroshima	(Beijing) University of International Business and Economics and Shanghai Normal University
11	November 25, 2007	Okayama Shoka University, Confucius Institute	Okayama	Dalian University of Foreign Languages
12	December , 2007	Kobe Tōyō Iryō Gakuin, Confucius Classroom	Hyōgo	Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine
13	January 22, 2008	Kōgakuin University, Confucius Institute	Tokyo	Beihang University

Sources: Compiled by the author from *Nikkei torendinnetto*, <<http://trendy.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/pickup/20080425/1009943/>>, accessed March 1, 2009; and Hanban website, <<http://www.hanban.org/index.php>>.

Confucius Institute Activities

Turn next to the actual activities in which the Confucius Institutes engage, according to paragraph 11 of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes, the services provided by the institutes overseas include the following items: (1) provide Chinese language training for people from all walks of life; (2) train Chinese language instructors and provide Chinese language teaching resources; (3) hold the Chinese proficiency test (HSK) and tests for the certification of Chinese language teachers; (4) provide information and consultative services concerning Chinese language education and China's culture, economy, and society; and (5) conduct research on contemporary China. Chinese language education receives particularly strong emphasis. Opened with non-profit objectives, the Confucius Institutes are

quite appealing when compared to for-profit language schools for adults. In Japan, they are also seen as being more trustworthy than the average language school thanks to the brand power of the name “Confucius” and the support structure that the universities provide.

Let us look at the example of the Obirin University Confucius Institute to better understand the reality of these schools in Japan. This institute offers a variety of open lectures on Chinese language at all levels from beginner to advanced. Courses are available that focus on conversation, interpretation and translation, and HSK preparation to cater for students with such respective objectives in mind. Aside from language, the institute also offers classes on such topics as Chinese tea, calligraphy, and film, through which students can get a taste of Chinese culture. The courses are broken up into a spring term from April to August with 15 sessions per course, and a fall term from September to the following February with 20 sessions per course. Students can choose their preferred time as well, with lectures given on weekdays in the morning, afternoon, and evening (*Nikkei torendinnetto* <http://trendy.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/pickup/20080425/1009943/>, accessed March 1, 2009). The cost, always a crucial issue, is 35,000 yen for fifteen 90-minute classes. In contrast, the night-school course at Nitchū Gakuin, a school with a long history in the field of Chinese language education, costs 46,000 yen per course (ten 120-minute classes), including enrollment and tuition fees and expenses. Comparing the two, we can see then that the Obirin University Confucius Institute is relatively cheap.

Language education and cultural activities form the core of the operations that the Confucius Institutes engage in overseas, but some institutes are involved in unique activities aside from those. Let’s take an example of an institute that opened in Thailand. In August 2006, in conjunction with Southwest University of Chongqing, China, Thailand’s Khon Kaen University opened a Confucius Institute in the city of the same name. Thailand’s sericulture industry is also being developed in the Khon Kaen region. The Chinese partner institution, Southwest University, has taken advantage of its strengths in silkworm research by sending, along with language teachers, specialists in that field who provide mentoring to the

local sericulture industry. On top of this, we also see that the Chinese have been making efforts to break into the Thai automobile and motorcycle markets owing to their size. The Chinese held a Chongqing industrial exhibition in the region and invited Chongqing's automobile and motorcycle manufacturers to display their latest products there (Zong, 2007: 97).

Naturally, there is no guarantee that all of the Confucius Institutes are as active as the ones mentioned above. The Waseda University Confucius Institute, the first of the institutes to focus on research, made a splashy debut in Japan in 2007. A powerhouse lineup attended the ceremony for inking the pact, including former Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō (Waseda alumnus), Upper House parliamentarian Yoshimura Gōtarō (Waseda alumnus), and Lower House parliamentarian Obuchi Yūko (Waseda alumna) from Japan and then-Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and then-Ambassador Wang Yi from China. However, although the institute had the goal of “working together to train young scholars and engaging in joint Sino-Japanese research projects,” it has been extremely quiet and is not well-known off campus.

Assessments and Criticisms of Confucius Institutes Overseas

It is safe to say that there is a China boom and interest in learning Chinese in many places around the world based on the rapid expansion of the Confucius Institutes over such a short period. However, this is not the only reason for their rapid spread overseas. The most important reason is the issue of financing. Previously, when an overseas institution wanted to set up a Chinese language educational curriculum, they could expect very little financial support from the Chinese government. Now, however, the burden on overseas partner institutions has been reduced. When they open a Confucius Institute, they can receive a certain amount of financial support from Hanban, which is a stand-in for the Chinese government. Most of the written agreements state that Hanban and the partner institution will jointly provide financing at a 1:1 ratio. While the actual ratio differs greatly depending on the location, getting Hanban to provide some US\$100,000 per institute per year in financing is indispensable to their

stable operation. This financing probably makes it relatively easy to attract partner institutions.

Launching a Confucius Institute frequently gets better publicity when establishing close ties with the local community. For example, the Cyber Confucius Institute that Michigan State and the Open University opened received great publicity by appointing members of the state Board of Education as advisers in an attempt to increase its influence and name recognition at the local level. Moreover, by using local newspapers, news organizations, and television to aggressively publicize the facility, it attracted the attention of the local community (Yi, 2007: 78). The Confucius Institutes are being noticed for promoting an understanding and appreciation of China overseas through the medium of less-politicized fields like language and culture. For example, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on a visit to the Chicago Confucius Institute on February 8, 2008 made a point of speaking about the contribution the institute was making in promoting Chinese culture. On his visit to China, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in talks with institute administrators lauded the institutes for the great contribution they were making to cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Of course, the effort to expand the Confucius Institutes also faces many problems. The biggest issue the institutes face overseas is that of wariness and concern. Many see them as constituting a Chinese cultural invasion and as being permeated with ideology, and moves are being made to resist them. In Japan, for example, there are well-rooted efforts to warn people about the expansion of the institutes in both the public and private sectors. None of the efforts to bring Confucius Institutes to state-run universities in the country have been successful.

Given that the institutes are still relatively new, many issues likely lie below the surface. There are aspects to them that are not yet apparent, and they will need to be examined over a longer period to make an objective assessment. However, it may well be that because the Confucius Institutes are a state-run project, they are going to face many problems in terms of raising funds, their actual operation, their systems for determining responsibility, and so forth as a result of their rapid spread. A more detailed

investigation of this dimension will be needed in the future.

3. The Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power

Two episodes of note involving language occurred at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit meeting held in Australia during September 2007. In one, then-U.S. President George W. Bush misspoke during a speech, referring to host country “Australia” as “Austria,” a mistake for which people called him a fool. Bush, who was visiting Australia when public opinion critical of the Iraq War was at its height, quickly boarded his plane for the flight home leaving the criticism and laughter behind. The second occurred during a lunch meeting chaired by then-Australian Prime Minister John Howard when the then-leader of Australia’s main opposition party, Kevin Rudd, offered a greeting to Chinese President Hu Jintao. Speaking in fluent Chinese, Rudd issued a volley of remarks, referring to Hu as Australia’s most-respected guest and inviting him to take time off and do some sightseeing around town. In so doing, he upstaged Howard and took his place as the shining star of the event. On top of that, the following day Rudd created a big sensation by conversing with Hu again in fluent Chinese at a meeting between the pair that lasted for 30 minutes. Rudd’s name as rendered in Chinese, Lu Ke-wen, became widely known throughout China as a result. The Rudd-led Labour Party scored a victory in the Australian general election that took place in November 2007. As a consequence, “Lu Ke-wen” experienced a boom in his popularity in China as the first Western leader to speak fluent Mandarin.

Language is not the only issue involved in these two episodes. These episodes provide good materials that enable us to observe the changes in American and Chinese soft power. America’s decision to not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the “war on terror,” and the war in Iraq are all connected to the spread of anti-U.S. sentiment around the world, dealing a blow to U.S. soft power. Meanwhile, with its economy continuing to grow rapidly, China has been earning high marks around the world as “a good and free-spending buyer” and as offering “the best market.” Soft power has been defined as the capacity to

influence the behavior of others to accomplish the outcomes that that one wants (Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 2004). American soft power is based on American culture, including everything from Hollywood movies and such popular music genres as rock and jazz to things like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, sneakers and T-shirts, to even literature like hard-boiled detective stories and mysteries, classical music, the fine and plastic arts, and even the urban culture of cities like New York and Los Angeles (Aoki, 2003: 137). The concept as applied to China, however, takes on an even broader range of meanings.

Even though more than 30 years have passed since the “socialism with Chinese characteristics” reforms of 1978 began, Western criticism of China regarding its political system, human rights issues, its treatment of Tibet, and so forth continues unabated today. This has been an important element in forming China's image overseas; there are many factors to account for on the negative side when we speak of Chinese soft power. However, the culture of the country—with its 5,000 years of history and one of the four great ancient civilizations—also retains an appeal that continues unabated today. There is also the fact that increasing numbers of notable Chinese are active at a global level in sports, film, and music, including such individuals as film director Zhang Yimou, movie star Zhang Ziyi, 100-meter hurdler Liu Xiang, basketball player Yao Ming, and pianist Lang Lang. Outside of the worlds of traditional and popular culture, too, China has been steadily expanding its influence through its economic activities abroad and participation in multilateral, international organizations. Furthermore, many countries have responded favorably to the Chinese foreign policy approach with its emphasis on practical gains without creating enemies. The China boom overseas are among the factors at work when it comes to doing business with China, and the Confucius Institutes are truly satisfying the resulting demand.

Harvard's Joseph Nye has noted the marked increase in Chinese soft power in recent years. Drawing attention to that rise, Nye indirectly implies that concentrating its efforts in that area would be a clever approach for China to take. Nye cites Beijing's creation of Confucius Institutes around the world to teach China's language and culture as one example of this soft power (*Wall Street Journal Asia*,

December 29, 2005).

The Age of Cultural Competition

The name of the Confucius Institutes has its origins in Germany's official cultural institution, the Goethe Institut. The Goethe Institut was founded in 1951 to provide a variety of services related to German society, arts, and language. It has established more than 140 facilities in 78 countries around the world, and the network formed by the institutes, German cultural centers, and language testing organizations plays an important role in Germany's external cultural exchange activities. Germany's Goethe Institut is not the only official cultural institution engaged in international cultural exchange activities. The Alliance Francaise, the British Council, Spain's Instituto Cervantes, and Japan culture centers operating under the umbrella of the Japan Foundation are among the entities to have won approbation abroad through their long years of involvement in cultural exchange activities.

The Confucius Institute has modeled its activities mainly on those of the Goethe Institut and the Instituto Cervantes. It has followed in their footsteps by doing work mainly related to language education and cultural exchange. The Goethe Institut also serves as a model for the Confucius Institute in the sense that even though it was established through the efforts of the government, the stress on the independence of its activities makes it appealing for its lack of political import. In terms of operations, on the other hand, China's approach differs from those of Germany and Spain. In the latter cases, operational headquarters in the home country takes the lead in creating branches overseas (primarily in capital or major cities). Beijing, however, has taken advantage of the inter-university network to expand its institutes rapidly. This is because even though the first Confucius Institute was established in Seoul in November 2004, it was not until April 2007 that the Confucius Institute Headquarters opened its doors.

The spread of the institutes under the aegis of the Chinese government has stirred up its neighbors considerably. There has been surprise in Japan, Korea, and India at the vigor of the Confucius

Institutes, and each has felt the need to step up its own international cultural initiatives. We should keep an eye on how their continued efforts to match up against “Confucius” play out, with their use of the names of noted individuals from their respective pasts such as Murasaki Shikibu, Sejong the Great, and Mohandas Gandhi to publicize their respective languages and cultures to the world.

Taiwan is perhaps the most concerned about the Confucius Institutes. Bear in mind that China has been openly accepting of foreigners coming to the country only since the mid-1990s. Prior to that, it was Taiwan and Hong Kong that promoted Chinese language training and Chinese culture. Taiwan in particular invited foreigners in large numbers to its universities and devoted its energies to cultural activities including language study. This played an important part in bolstering Taiwanese soft power in international society. However, Taiwanese soft power has declined relatively speaking on account of the economic development and open-door policies adopted on the Chinese mainland. For a long time, Taipei was the place that overseas Chinese around the world chose for Chinese language studies, but now they choose instead places on the mainland like Shanghai and Beijing. Unlike the members of their parents’ generation who acquired their education in Taiwan, the younger generation of overseas Chinese study at Peking University or Fudan University in Shanghai. As a result, these children know almost nothing about Taiwan (Joshua Kurlantzick, 2007: 71).

Conclusion

Many people if asked to give an example of something that represents American popular culture would be likely to say without hesitation “Hollywood.” Similarly, they would likely to be say “manga” or “anime” if asked about Japanese popular culture and “serial dramas” in the case of Korea. However, nothing is likely to come to mind right away if they are asked to provide one for Chinese popular culture. One might come up with “movies” for Hong Kong or “television dramas” for Taiwan, but what sort of original items of popular culture would someone associate with the Chinese mainland? It certainly is hard

to find something distinctively Chinese about the Chinese youth of today, who eat fast food, imitate Japanese clothing fashions, and enjoy Hollywood movies. This issue also confounds many scholars who debate about Chinese soft power.

Behind this confusion is the fact that the Chinese culture industry lags considerably behind. The industry is far behind those of the U.S. or European countries, and it also trails compared to those of its neighbors Japan and Korea. To give one example, a string of Chinese movies have won awards at international film festivals in recent years, but they have an extremely limited presence in foreign markets and are a long way from being something people would regard as synonymous with Chinese pop culture. Chinese scholar Yu Xin-Tian observes, “China’s modernization is still in its early stages, and it is not sufficiently coherent to respond to the myriad other cultures and values in the world (Yu and others, 2007: 319). At a moment when it is not possible to claim in clear and simple language that something in particular stands out in Chinese culture, China would seem to have no choice but to put that aside and instead stress its history and culture in its quest to find words or concepts synonymous with its culture. Finding such a synonym may become more important than increasing the number of institutes as the Confucius Institute undertaking continues to develop.

In October 2005, *Time* magazine (Asian edition) put on one of its covers Chris Li (Li Yuchun), the winner of an event for singers called the “Super Girl” contest. Some 400 million people watched the event with excitement and cast their votes by mobile phone, the results delivering a victory to the tomboyish Li. A popular program adapted for China from “American Idol,” “Super Girl” represents a new element in Chinese popular culture. The opening ceremonies for the 2008 Beijing Olympics—which offered up an exquisite pairing of the traditional and the contemporary—certainly were something that China wanted the world to see and they charmed many. New Chinese cultural products are being generated steadily. Expanding the Confucius Institutes stands as both an action for propagating Chinese culture and also a process for rediscovering it.

Of course, there are limits to just how much China's positive image overseas can be boosted by developing a culture industry. Soft power can certainly make its influence felt so long as it operates in conjunction with how affairs are handled in China itself. Is the world of Chinese politics open? Does Chinese society respect human rights? Does the country provide education and social welfare of a high quality? Is it a society in which foreigners can settle and live happily? Although China has managed 30 years' worth of huge economic growth, it still faces many problems when it comes to creating political and social systems and has countless other problems in various areas that need to be dealt with promptly. As such, a long road still lies ahead for China in its quest not only to be a country in demand economically for its manufacturing capacity, but also to become a truly appealing great power that disseminates its culture to the world.

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