

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES SHAPING CHINA'S SOFT POWER

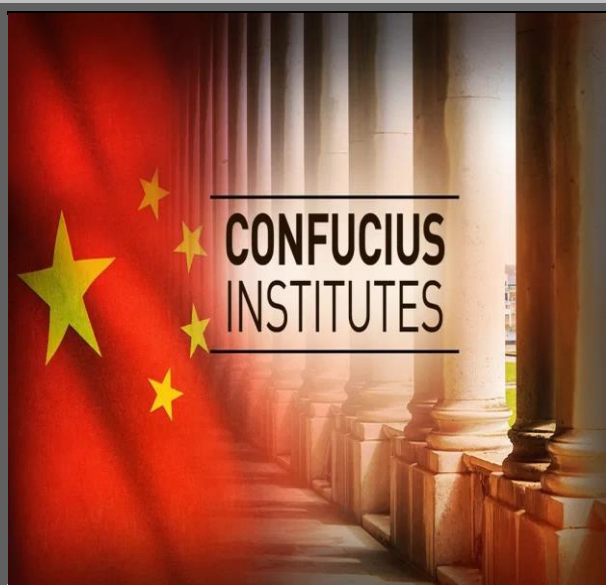
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



After the Cold War, soft power became an essential tool for states to move forward in the complex geopolitical landscape of an anarchic world. Soft power, a phenomenon introduced in 1990 by U.S. academic Joseph Nye is unique in a way that it involves states using positive attraction and persuasion instead of hard power to advance foreign policy objectives. In a globalized world, using force or threatening other nations could lead to considerable costs as states have become more interdependent; consequently soft power has gained more significance. States have re-adjusted their strategies to make their country naturally influential and attractive.¹

Soft power strategy of a state is shaped by its social, political, economic and cultural aspects. Among the different varieties of soft power spanned across the globe, China's soft power can be denoted as "Wise Power of China".² China as world's second largest economy and a major international actor is enhancing its soft power to make China more appealing to the world. China also uses traditional tools of soft power promoting its culture such as establishing "Confucius Institutes" cultural study centres around the world.

1 G. John Ikenberry. 2004. Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. Foreign Affairs; Public Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>

2 Leonova, Olga. 2014. "Globalistics and Globalization Studies." https://www.sociostudies.org/almanac/articles/files/globalistics_and_globalization_3/099-103.pdf.

The Confucius Institutes are a network of cultural and educational nonprofit organizations developed globally by China to project its soft power. Chinese government began to develop these institutes in the early 21st century with the intention to facilitate cross-cultural and academic exchanges, foster people-to-people contacts, and forge deeper understanding of the rich Chinese heritage in foreign countries.³ The main functions of Confucius institutes involve teaching Mandarin language and Chinese culture skills, providing Chinese textbooks and teaching materials.

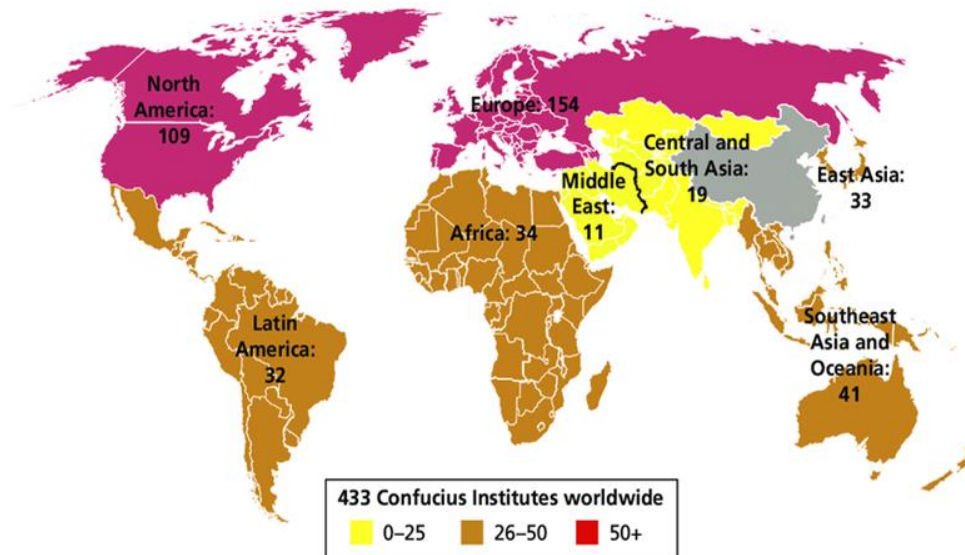
The Confucius Institutes are overseen by Hanban headquarters which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Hanban provides expertise and funds to the Confucius Institutes to operate in the foreign states. This project is a joint venture as it involves partnership between host institutions and educational institutes in China. Hanban also operates a related program of "Confucius Classrooms" which partners with primary schools and secondary schools, providing them with the teaching materials and resources required for teaching the Chinese language and cultural courses.⁴

The first Confucius Institute was opened on November 21st 2004, in Seoul, South Korea by the Chinese government, geographically closer to China. However, this program rapidly expanded throughout the world with Confucius Institutes spanning on every continent except Antarctica. According to data on the distribution of Confucius Institutes by region provided in 2020, it is revealed that the Middle East had 11; Central and South Asia 19; East Asia 33; Southeast Asia and Oceania 41; North America 109; Latin America 32; Africa 34; and Europe had 154 Confucius Institutes.⁵

3 Rehman, Khuzaima. 2022. "China's Sharp Power: The Confucious Institutes." Modern Diplomacy.. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/06/20/chinas-sharp-power-the-confucious-institutes-in-pakistan/>.

4 Hanban. 2017. "Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) – Shanxi, China." China Daily. <https://camosun.libguides.com/Chicago-17thEd/websites>

5 Scobell et al. 2020. China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition. [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Distribution-of-Confucius-Institutes-by-World-Region_fig2_343204063%20\[accessed%2012%20Mar,%202024](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Distribution-of-Confucius-Institutes-by-World-Region_fig2_343204063%20[accessed%2012%20Mar,%202024)



Source: Scobell et al. 2020 Publication

As of 2024, Confucius Institutes are scattered and operate in over 149 countries worldwide which reflects the resolve of the Chinese government to enhance its soft power and promote mutual understanding among nations.⁶

The Confucius Institutes have become symbols of national pride and prestige for China. Other states operated similar cultural institutes like the British Council of UK and Germany's Goethe Institute that offer language training and promote culture. However, they are registered as international NGOs while Confucius Institutes are directly controlled by the Chinese government. By sharing Chinese cultural products with international audiences through these institutes, China highlights its heritage and values which ultimately strengthens its soft power and global influence in the 21st century.

Confucius Institutes play a vital role in enhancing China's soft power by spreading out diverse Chinese traditions like martial arts, Chinese calligraphy, music, dances, Chinese cuisines, Chinese knotting and Chinese Gong Fu. Promoting traditional festivals, such as the spring festivals and Mid-Autumn festivals, also portrays China as culturally rich and educationally advanced. Confucius Institutes also offer scholarships available at over 150 Chinese Universities for international students to study in, which attracts students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, learning the Chinese

⁶ Dig Mandarin. 2019. "Confucius Institutes around the World." Digmandarin.com. <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>.

language has become essential in international businesses for job opportunities because Chinese businesses dominate the global market.⁷

According to the statistics provided on distribution of international students studying in China for higher education by continent in 2018, the percentage of students from Asia was 59.95 %; Africa 16.57 %; Europe 14.96 %; America 7.26 %; and Oceania 1.27%.⁸ These statistics indicate that the development of Confucius Institutes worldwide has indirectly impacted the number of international students in China, which through shared learning experiences promotes academic exchanges between China and other countries. As the number of international students in China continues to grow, it will further enhance people-to-people contacts, contributing to a more harmonious and interconnected world.

Moreover, increased tourism also has had a positive impact on China's soft power. While there has been a dramatic increase seen in China's travel and tourism industry during the last decade, the Confucius Institutes can be considered as a driving force of tourism in China as they promote understanding on the Chinese cultural heritage and traditions in foreign countries. As the people living in foreign countries become more familiar with the Chinese culture, it sparks their interest to experience Chinese culture firsthand by visiting the country which leads to increase in tourism. Tourism then fosters people-to-people contacts in China by creating opportunities to build relationships and shared experiences for individuals from different countries.⁹

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also being supported by the Confucius Institutes as spreading Chinese language globally have become crucial for better collaboration within the Belt and Road framework. The Institutes provide the technical personnel with the necessary linguistic abilities to engage in business activities, as the BRI needs Mandarin-speaking individuals. Confucius Institutes have become important for the project's success, one soft power project is aiding another soft power project of China. Confucius Institutes also improve awareness about initiatives like the Belt

⁷ Lesego Alicia Keimetswe. 2023. "The Impact of the Chinese Government Scholarship Program and Confucius Institute on China's National Image in Botswana: A Soft Power Perspective." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-023-00305-6>.

⁸ Review of A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions. 2023. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China . 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202309/t20230926_11150122.html.

⁹ Alexander Ayertey. 2024. "China's Tourism Sector Set for Robust Growth." <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-02-17/China-s-tourism-sector-set-for-robust-growth-1rgH3moRpOE/p.html#:~:text=This%20year%2C%20the%20China%20Tourism>

and Road and dispels misunderstandings, contributing to improved international relations and cooperation.¹⁰

China is projected by Confucius Institutes as a responsible emerging power with peaceful intentions in the international community, countering the negative image sought to be propagated by the West of China being a 'global threat'. These institutes enhance China's soft power and build bridges of understanding with other nations. Through these initiatives, China seeks to present itself as a nation devoted to peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and global cooperation, thereby reshaping negative perceptions about its intentions. The success and rapid expansion of the Confucius Institutes highlights growing influence and presence of China in the international arena.

¹⁰ Xu, Bowen. 2021. "Understanding Education on China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Cultural Political Economy Approach." *Beijing International Review of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25902539-03010005>.