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Confucius institutes in the US: Platform of promoting China’s soft power

孔子学院在美国：提升中国软实力的平台

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Abstract: This study examines the driving force behind China’s “soft power” strategy and how Confucius Institute (CI) fits in the strategy. Drawing on data from the large-scale international surveys from PewResearchCenter and the ten Hanban/CI annual reports (2006–2015), the study finds that China’s outreach through CI has increased the understanding between China and other countries and built a favored image of “a responsible big nation” in the international community. The study shows that, by December 2015, there were 500 CIs and 1,000 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) in 134 countries/regions in the world. Collectively, they offered a total of 211,500 classes and registered over 5 million students from 2006 to 2015. They also attracted 94.27 million participants for cultural exchanges and 23.73 million participants for Chinese language tests in the same time period. Data from the researcher’s 3-month-long field study on two CCs shows that the Chinese language and culture are successfully promoted in American schools and exerting tremendous attraction to students, parents, and communities.

Keywords: soft power, Confucius Institute, Confucius Classrooms, cultural institution, linguistic capital, cultural capital

摘要：本研究旨在探讨中国软实力战略的成因，以及孔子学院在这一战略中所起作用。皮尤研究中心的大型国际调查数据及汉办/孔院连续十年的年度报告（2006–2015）显示，中国通过孔院增加了与世界各国之间的了解，并帮助建立了一个良好的负责任的大国形象。截至2015年12月，汉办在134个国家/地区设立了500个孔子学院和1,000个孔子课堂。从2006年至2015年，它们共开设了211,500个班级，注册了500多万名学生，吸引了9427万人参与各种文化交流，并招收了2373万人参加汉语测试。本研究员对两个位于美国的孔子课堂进行了三个月的实地调查，数据显示孔院对中国语言文化进行了成功的推广，并广泛地吸引了学生，家长和社区。

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1 Introduction

By the turn of the twenty-first century, China successfully built up its economic and military might and became the leading power in the world. In the meantime, the nation was awakening to the need of increasing its soft power by building up the image of “a responsible big nation” with peaceful development and harmonious civilizations. With “raising the Chinese cultural soft power” as the national strategic plan (Xi 2014: 160), many initiatives have been created, out of which the most influential one is the Confucius Institute (CI thereafter). CI has a mission, similar to the other international cultural institutions such as British Council (UK), Institut Français (France), Goethe-Institut (Germany), Italian Cultural Institute (Italy), Cervantes Institute (Spain), and Korean Cultural Centre (South Korea), among others. The first CI was launched in Seoul, South Korea, in November 2004, which was followed by hundreds more being established around the world in just a decade. British Council 2013\(^1\) reports that, out of the 12 current cultural institutions, China’s CI took 31.1\% of the world total (322/1035) and 79.23\% of the US total (103/130) by 2012 (Holden 2013).

CI’s rapid growth and spectacular presentation in the international community have invited numerous studies and analyses from both China and abroad (Gil 2008; Paradise 2009; Wu 2009, 2010; Yang 2010; Stambach 2015; to name just a few). While the Chinese academics focused on CI’s role in spreading the Chinese language and culture around the world to develop the country’s soft power, their foreign counterparts are more critical focusing on its role as an instrument to counterbalance the so-called “China Threat.” However, few have probed why CI has gained such a high popularity worldwide in such a short period of time and why students, parents, and communities are attracted to it. This study attempts to fill in the gap. Drawing on insights from the soft power notion (Nye 1990, 2004, 2011) and the Linguistic capital theory (Bourdieu 1986, 1991), this study intends to answer questions such as: What motivates China to promote its soft power? How do Confucius Institutes fit in China’s soft power strategy? What drives behind the American choice of learning Chinese language and culture through CI? Data for analysis are from four major resources: (1) the Hanban/CI Institute HQ annual reports (2006–2015), (2) the large-scale surveys by PewResearchCenter on the American public view of China (2013) and BBC World Service on influence and

\(^1\) https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/influence-and-attraction-report.pdf
attraction (2012), and (3) the researcher’s 3-month-long observations of CI/Confucius Classrooms (CC thereafter) in an Eastern city, USA, and (4) one-on-one interviews with CI teachers and directors in the US and China.

2 Research framework

Taking a geopolitical approach, Nye (1990) analyzed the power shift and power change in the post-cold-war world and claimed that a second power, which is a more attracting way of exercising power called co-optive or soft power, is needed for the United States to prevent “American decline” and gain the ability “to control the political environment and get other countries to do what it wants (p. 155).” This concept, or rather “strategy,” soon entered the American public discourse and spread to the international community. After the September 11th event, Nye (2004) further developed the soft power concept to mean “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments (2004: x),” or the ability to get others to want the outcomes that you want by co-opting people rather than coercing them. In this framework, power practices are distinguished into two dimensions: soft power (in the form of attraction) and hard power (in the form of coercions or payments). Hard power rests on military and economic might that can be used to get others to change their position with threat or inducements, while soft power utilizes a country’s culture, political values, and foreign policies to shape the preferences of others. In terms of effectiveness, soft power is measured by attractiveness in the eyes of specific audiences, and the attraction must influence policy outcomes (Nye 2004: 34).

Nye’s theory has been widely discussed, interpreted, and extended. In his British-Council report, Holden (2013: 14) enumerates “the forces that shape countries relations” for the twenty-first century soft power should include commerce, language, history, cultural assets, ideology, desire to create a good impression, resources, and foreign policy objects.

Moreover, according to Nye, hard power and soft power are related, but “soft power does not depend on hard power (2004: 9),” which however does not find support in Huntington’s analysis of the post-cold-war global politics (2011). Instead, Huntington contends that “soft power is power only when it rests on a foundation of hard power (2011: 92)” and that increases in hard economic and military power enhance one’s soft power and its attractiveness to other people. One evidence is that, as one form of culture, language spreads as a country’s power increases, because “increasing power generates both linguistic assertiveness by native speakers and incentives to learn the language by others. (p. 63)”
For example, Japanese economic power stimulated the learning of Japanese by non-Japanese peoples, and the economic development of China is producing a boom in Chinese.

Huntington’s “hard power stimulating language learning” hypothesis can arguably be supported by Pierre Bourdieu’s *Linguistic Capital* theory (1986, 1991). From a sociolinguistic perspective, Bourdieu claims that there are different forms of capital, which include economic, social, cultural, symbolic, linguistic, etc., and that capital takes time to accumulate and has a potential capacity to produce and reproduce profits (1986: 241). Most significantly, the economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital which are convertible and transformable (1986: 252).

3 China’s rise: Reputation, concerns, and strategies

3.1 Rise with reputation

Since its economic reform in the late 1970s, China has successfully entered the global market and transformed to a major economic, military, and political player in the international community, which has brought about both reputation and concerns. It is now the second-largest economy (in GDP and foreign trading) and the single largest market for Internet and telecommunication use in the world (Guthrie 2012: 6). It has also actively participated in global governance, assumed leadership positions in various bodies, such as the WTO, WHO, World Bank, IMF (Kennedy and Fan 2013: 8) and attracted rapid and continuous flows of foreign capital, investors, technologies, customs, and cultures (Guthrie 2012).

Data from PewResearchCenter has extensively reported the “China rise” fact. The 2008 and 2013 Pew surveys involving 20 nations show that China has stimulated perception of power shift in the world politics, with many seeing China becoming the world’s leading power and the US power diminishing (July 18, 2013). Specifically, the median percentage naming the US as the world’s leading economic power has declined from 47% in 2008 to 41% in 2013, while the median percentage placing China in the top spot has risen

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2 PewResearchCenter, July 18, 2013: http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/americas-global-image-remains-more-positive-than-chinas/
from 20% in 2008 to 34% in 2013. In the subsequent survey involving 37,652 respondents in 39 countries conducted by PewResearch from March 2nd to May 1st in 2013, 53% in Britain say China is the leading economy, just 33% name the US; roughly six-in-ten Germans (59%) say China occupies the top position while only 19% think the US is the global economic leader. When asked “will China replace US as world’s leading superpower?” majorities of the respondents say China either has already replaced or eventually will replace the US as the top superpower, especially in the world’s leading powers such as Spain (71%), France (70%), Australia (67%), Canada (67%), Britain (66%), and Germany (66%).

3.2 Rise with concerns

Although data from the aforementioned Pew surveys show the increasing reputation of China as its hard power increases, the data also show that its hard power growth has worried many. On the one hand, its growing military strength has caused enormous anxiety in its immediate neighbors in that nearly all Japanese (96%) and South Koreans (91%), and majorities of Australians (71%) and Filipinos (68%) view China’s military growth as a bad thing for their country. On the other, its strong economic presence in trade and investment in Latin America and Africa, and the potential of replacing the US as the leading superpower has caused increasing negative view in the US with the survey finding just 37% of Americans having a positive view of China, down from 51% in 2011. Citing the spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey (Q26xa-h), Wike et al. (2015) reports that Americans are concerned about economic threats posed by China – especially the amount of US debt held by Beijing, the US-China trade deficit and the loss of American jobs to China. According to Wike et al., this survey found 89% of the Americans very seriously or somewhat seriously concerned about the American debt held by China or job lost to China, 86% concerned about the US trade deficit with China or cyberattacks from China, 85% concerned about China’s impact on the global environment, and 82% about China’s growing military power. In addition, the respondents gave China growing negative ratings from 29% in 2006 to 55% in 2014.

The high anxieties in its geographical proximity and rising concerns in the US supposedly generated the “China threat” rhetoric, which China cannot ignore but must pay attention to. Studies show that China has indeed paid increasing attention to other states’ reaction to its rise and sought strategies to counter the “threat” discourse (Garrison 2005; Wang and Lu 2008; among others). One crucial strategy is to raise the country’s soft power, for which I am turning to the next.
3.3 Rise with strategy: Going for soft power

To ease the discomfort and challenge to the world brought by China’s rapidly rising economic and military hard power, discussions on soft power were initiated by academics in the early 1990s. In 1993, Nye’ Soft power was introduced to China by Wang Huning, a renown political scientist and senior political adviser to China’s central government, who interpreted Nye’s “soft power” as “the culture that represents a country’s power (1993: 91).” In 2005, Nye’s book entitled _Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics_ (2004) was translated into Chinese 《软力量: 世界政坛成功之道》. The introductions sparked heated discussions on how to evaluate and raise China’s soft power both inside and outside of China (Yan and Xu 2008; Lai 2012; Lai and Lu 2012; Zheng and Zhang 2012; Xia 2015; to name just a few). Taking a geo-political approach, Yan and Xu (2008) compared China’s soft power capacities with the US by quantifying them with variables such as international attraction, international mobilizing strength (国际动员力 guoji dongyuanli), and domestic mobilizing strength (国内动员力 guonei dongyuanli). They claimed that China’s soft power was about 1/3 of the US total, in that the popularity of China’s political system and culture was lower than the US and China’s international allies were fewer, but China’s domestic mobilizing strength was greater than the US. From a policymaking standpoint, Xia (2015) suggested that China’s soft power should rest on its mainstream culture, namely, the “Chinese-style” traditional/ancient culture, and develop modern cultural products such as music, movies, and Internet.

Soon after the “soft power” introduction, the Chinese government and statesmen enthusiastically adopted the concept and promoted it at the national level. In November 2006, the then President Hu Jintao brought the “cultural soft power” concept to the nation, and in 2007 the call of “increasing the Chinese cultural soft power” entered the government’s agenda (Xinhua News Agency 2007) and repeatedly emphasized by Hu on several occasions (e.g., January 22th, 2008; October 18th, 2010; July 1st, 2011). On October 18th, 2011, at the Party’s Central Committee convention, President Hu again called for “striving to build a strong socialist country through connecting the world and enhancing its cultural soft power,” which became part of the nation’s strategic plan. The effort was continued and intensified after Xi Jinping succeeded to Hu in China’s presidency (Xinhua Net, December 31, 2013). In his recent book, which is most widely-published in China and translated in 8 foreign languages, entitled _The Governance of China_, Xi dedicated a full
article entitled “Raising China’s cultural soft power (2014: 160–162),” in which he reinforced the government’s agenda on soft power and called on initiatives in a number of areas, such as developing cultural enterprises and products, making efforts to strengthen the foundation of Chinese cultural soft power, spreading China’s social values and economic model, promoting China’s 5,000-year-long civilizations, building up the image of “a responsible big nation,” and taking the leadership in articulating the international public discourse.

The re-conceptualization of Nye’s soft power as the “Chinese cultural soft power 文化软实力 wenhua ruanshili” has stimulated wide-spread interest. A national Center for Soft Power Studies was established in September 2014 in Beijing, with an impressive research agenda, such as comparing soft powers across countries, constructing China’s international communication capacity, globally spreading China’s culture and values, and developing an international discourse system. Nationwide, “cultural soft power” has become a slogan that can be used by any agent for any purpose, for instance, in news titles such as: “Suiping County People’s Court of Law raises cultural soft power to build a clean government.” “Yangzhou Police cleverly uses cultural soft power to develop a strong team.” A quick search on 文化软实力 (wenhua ruan shili Cultural soft power) in China’s largest search engine www.baidu.com pops up 2,130,000 related articles in a fraction of a second (retrieved on October 3, 2016).

As shown above, during the decades-long efforts to develop the “Chinese cultural soft power,” China has taken many steps to build an image of “a responsible big nation” in the international community. In addition to its active leadership in some major international organizations mentioned in Section 3.1, China has demonstrated its “big nation” image by leading the six-party talks on North Korea, advancing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and organizing significant world events, such as the 2008 Summer Olympics, 2010 Expo Shanghai (record high in history by attracting 73 million people from 246 countries), and most recently the 2016 G-20 Summit. In the meanwhile, China has reached out most parts of the world with significant initiatives such as “the Silk Road Economic Belt and

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3 This paper was from Xi’s speech made at the Eighteenth Session of the Politburo on December 30th, 2013.
5 http://news.dahe.cn/2016/09-09/107462625.html
7 http://2010.qq.com/a/20101101/000039.htm
the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (abbreviated as the Belt and Road or B&R)\(^8\) and Confucius Institutes. The B&R aims to create a cohesive economic area through building infrastructure, cultural exchanges, and broadening trade, which includes over 60 countries situated on the original Silk Road through Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, as well as many of the AIIB members in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Parallel to its economic reach is its cultural and language reach out through global presence of the Confucius Institute program.

4 Global presence of Confucius Institute: Mission and effects

4.1 The mission and role of Confucius Institute

Long before the “soft power” concept was brought to light, teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) was promoted by the country as an important source to build up international relations. As stated in the Chinese Ministry of Education website\(^9\) (retrieved on September 14, 2016), “TCFL of China began in 1950, when Tsinghua University set up a training course of Chinese language for the international students from East Europe, the first group of foreign students we received since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.” However, unlike its earlier practice which only enrolled students from foreign countries, China’s TCFL has, since 1987, stepped out internationally with Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (abbreviated as Hanban 汉办) as the chief agent. Since then, it has launched a large number of initiatives, such as Chinese Bridge Proficiency Contests, Chinese Proficiency Test, Chinese volunteer teacher program, scholarships, exchange and cooperation, teaching materials, and Confucius Institute (CI). The institute used Confucius’ ideology of peace and harmony as the “guiding principle” for its construction and named it as such (2006 Hanban Annual Reports, p. 9). In the summer of 2016, the researcher was offered an opportunity to meet with the Deputy Director-General of Hanban/CI headquarters in Beijing. When asked why the institute chose “Confucius” as its name but not something else, he said that

\(^8\) [http://www.xinhuanet.com/silkroad/english/index.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/silkroad/english/index.htm)

initially there were quite a few candidates to compete for the title, such as Yangzi River Institute (长江学院 Changjiang Xueyuan), Great Wall Institute (长城学院 Changcheng Xueyuan), etc. Eventually, Confucius Institute (孔子学院 Kongzi Xueyuan) won because Confucius was a teacher, an educator, and the originator of Confucianism, a school of philosophy and the cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture that has a history of 2,500 years. Moreover, the Confucianism beliefs embodied the key aspects of Chinese culture and were well-known in China, the Chinese communities around the world, and the international community as well.

By the mission statement publicized in its official website, Confucius Institute aims to meet the world’s need for Chinese language learning, to increase their understanding of Chinese language and culture, and to strengthen the cultural exchanges with other countries. Moreover, CI is positioned as a non-profit public educational organization that intends to develop friendship with other countries and promote a world of diversity and harmony. Interestingly, “soft power” is however not openly mentioned in the mission statement. In her interview with the CI Deputy Director-General, the researcher asked if CI should be viewed as a platform of promoting China’s soft power or promoting the Chinese language and culture. The answer was the latter, because “CI aimed to be peacefully co-existing with the other languages and cultures” as a partner, not as a “power” that might sound “aggressive.” In her interviews with the CI directors or staff in the US, the researcher occasionally heard assertive answers, such as “we ARE promoting China’s soft power. Why not?” But the following is the typical answer:

We position ourselves as promoting the Chinese language and culture. We offer Chinese classes and establish Confucius Classrooms in the community only if they make requests to us. We don’t view ourselves as promoting soft power. If we do, how can we peacefully co-exist with the other languages such as Spanish, French, and Italian?

However, there is little doubt that promoting Chinese language and culture worldwide is part of China’s soft power strategy, as revealed in China’s academic research and the government’s statements. Taking an international education approach, Wu maintains that “spreading a country’s language plays an important role in raising its national soft power (2013: 11)” and that “China is the second largest economy in the world right now, but its soft power is still relatively weak. Spreading the Chinese language can reduce misunderstandings, compromise conflicts, and undermine the ‘China threat’ rhetoric (Wu 2015: 28).”

10 http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_10961.htm
Viewing CI as the key institution of Chinese language internationalization, Wu suggests building up a global academic accreditation system to make CI become a transnational educational enterprise (2013: 105). Such views accord with the government’s strategical plan, as shown in the “responsibility statement” publicized by the Chinese Ministry of Education in its official website (retrieved September 14th, 2016):

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) is an integral part of China’s reform and opening up drive. To promote TCFL is of strategic significance to popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the economic and cultural cooperation and exchanges between China and other countries around the world, and to elevate China’s influence in the international community. In the past 50 years, with the growing international status of China, there are more and more learners of Chinese around the world. Especially in the recent decade, Chinese teaching has been on a rapid rise in many countries and regions. The Chinese language will be used in more countries and regions, and it will become an important tool and bridge for the exchanges of politics, foreign affairs, economy and trade, culture, education and science and technology between countries.

As shown above, the Chinese language is officially employed as “an important tool” to promote various resources, such as culture, political values, foreign policy, economy and trade, etc., some of which are in Nye’s soft power scheme, and some are going beyond.

4.2 Effects of the Confucius Institute

4.2.1 Global reach out to communities and individuals

Data from the annual reports issued by Hanban/CI Headquarters show that, from 2006 to 2015, CI drastically increased in the number of institutions, hosting countries, classes offered, students registered, activity participants, and Chinese test takers, among others. As its performance increased, so did the CI status, which can be merely shown in the title change of the annual reports. The 2006 annual report, which was the first of its kind, was only named under the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban). In the subsequent reports, the title was changed to Hanban (CI HQ) in 2008–2011 with CI HQ included but contained in the bracket, which was switched to CI HQ/Hanban in 2012–2013 with CI being placed side by side with but before Hanban, and finally CI only in 2014 and 2015 with Hanban being dropped off. Such changes show that over time CI has evolved into a full-fledged institution from one of the many initiatives sponsored by Hanban.
Figure 1 shows that there were only 122 CIs (including CCs) in 49 countries in 2006, which grew up to 500 CIs and 1,000 CCs in 135 countries in 2015. In addition, the 2015 Report notes a distribution preference of the hosting countries in that, out of the 135 countries, over half are in North America and Europe (65.2% for CIs and 80.1% for CCs). And as the sole superpower, the United States enjoys the most CIs and CCs in the world, with 108 CIs and 349 CCs (21.6% and 34.9% of the world total, respectively).

Figure 2 presents the classes offered by CI/CC and their registered students in 2006–2015. In 2006, there were only 300 classes offered with 13,000 registered students, which grew up to 72,000 classes and 1.394 million registered students in 2015, boasting hundreds of times of increase over 2006. In addition, the total of combined classes offered in 2006–2015 reached 211,500, and the total of registered students were over 5 million in the same time period.

Table 1 presents the number of cultural exchange participants and Chinese test takers. According to the annual reports, the cultural exchange activities included artistic performance, academic forums, festive gatherings, speech contests, etc. And the tests included HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test), HSKK (Oral Chinese Proficiency Test), YCT (Youth Chinese Proficiency Test), and BCT (Business Chinese Test). As shown in the Table, there was a combined total of 94.27 million participants for cultural exchanges from 2006 to 2015 and 23.73 million participants for Chinese language tests in the same time period.

In addition to the “going global” practice, CI also acts locally by sponsoring international academic conferences and supporting “study tours in China”
for students and business leaders from abroad. It has also established an advanced academic Chinese study program named as “Confucius China Studies,” which recruited 112 doctoral students from 37 countries in 2015 alone.

As the data shown above, the CI program has immensely expanded in the period of 10 years (2006–2015) and made direct interactions with hundreds of millions of people globally. Collectively, these efforts enabled CI to reach the goals it set in its mission, such as meeting the global demand for Chinese language and building international connections between China and the world.

Figure 2: Offered Courses and Registered Students in 2006–2015.

Table 1: Cultural activity participants and Chinese test takes in 2006–2015.

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<tr>
<td>Participants of cultural exchanges</td>
<td>220,000</td>
<td>1.4 million</td>
<td>3 million</td>
<td>5 million</td>
<td>7.22 million</td>
<td>9.48 million</td>
<td>9.20 million</td>
<td>10 million</td>
<td>47.75 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of test takers</td>
<td>72,924</td>
<td>138,000</td>
<td>310,000</td>
<td>548,000</td>
<td>689,000</td>
<td>2.01 million</td>
<td>3.52 million</td>
<td>5.02 million</td>
<td>5.42 million</td>
<td>6 million</td>
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4.2.2 World-wide increase of Chinese popularity

With CI reaching out globally, China’s international influence and attraction have been rising around the world. BBC World Service (May 2012)\(^\text{11}\) reports that a 22-country global poll involving 24,090 people around the world suggests that views of Europe slide sharply, while views of China improve significantly in both the developing and industrialized world. On average, in the countries surveyed both in 2011 and 2012, 50 per cent of the respondents hold positive views of China’s influence, which has overtaken both the EU and the US, as shown in Figure 3.

As shown in Figure 3, China’s positive influence was the highest of the three countries. It was 50 % high in 2012, up 4 % over 2011; EU was 48 % in 2012 down 8 % over 2011; and the US was 47 % in 2012, down 1 % over 2011.

![Figure 3: Views of Country’s Positive Influence: China vs US vs EU.](Image)

Source: BBC World Service Poll, May 2012, p. 3.

The findings mentioned above are supported by the PewResearchCenter survey\(^\text{12}\) conducted in 39 countries among 37,653 respondents from March 2 to May 1, 2013, which finds that China’s global influence, as measured by China’s economic and soft power, is respected, especially in Africa and


\(^{12}\) http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/chapter-3-attitudes-toward-china/
among young people. Among the major findings, a median of 72% in Africa and 58% in Asia and Latin America look favorably on China. In 16 of the 38 nations surveyed, younger people are significantly more likely than older people to look favorably on China. In the US there is a 30% young-old gap, in which 57% of the young people (age 18–29) have a favorable view of China, compared with 27% of the older people (age 50+). Moreover, half or more of those surveyed nations see China as more of a partner for their country than as an enemy.

As shown in the aforementioned surveys, China’s favorability has been rising globally in the twenty-first century, especially among young people. Such evidence suggests that China’s outreach to the world through CI has increased the understanding between China and other countries, and successfully built an image of “a responsible big nation” in the international community. It also indicates that Chinese language learning and cultural exchanges have been playing a significant role, since young people who have obtained more opportunities to acquire Chinese language and culture than their old counterparts, have much higher favorable view of China.

Such impact shows that the CI program has accorded with and successfully implemented China’s “soft power” strategy as an important platform, as President Xi Jinping concluded at the 2015 UK CI annual conference (2015 CI Annual Development Report, p.59):

Confucius Institutes and Classrooms have played an active role in facilitating people around the world to learn the Chinese language and understand the Chinese culture, and they have also made important contributions to people-to-people exchanges between China and other countries, as well as the development of diverse and colorful world civilizations.

5 Confucius Classrooms: What attract American public?

As shown in Figure 1, Confucius Classrooms (CCs) did not become a distinct division until 2008, but by the end of 2015 they doubled the size of CIs, with 1,000 around the world and 349 in the US alone. According to Hanban,13 CC aims to adopt flexible teaching patterns and adapt to suit local conditions

13 http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm
when teaching Chinese language and promoting culture in foreign primary schools, secondary schools, communities and enterprises. In most of the cases, CCs are associated or sponsored by CIs or NGOs. In the US, the Asia Society has established a national network, which sponsors 100 CCs in elementary, middle, and high schools located in 27 states and the District of Columbia. Likewise, College Board sponsors 15 CCs located in K-12 schools. These CCs primarily cater to K-12 schools and serve as their model sites for the Chinese language and culture study.

In the past years, the CC program has been crucial in the US, where Chinese language has been, to date, marginal and classified as a “less commonly taught language.” According to the ACTFL report (2010), the Chinese language instruction merely takes 0.23% of the total foreign language enrollments in American schools in 2004–2005 and was still less than 1% (0.67%) in 2007–2008. Teacher shortage was believed to be the major obstacle, as the Asian report (Stewart and Wang 2005) stated “key bottleneck to building capacity in Chinese is the lack of qualified teachers” in the US. When the first CI was established in the University of Maryland in 2005 and followed up by many others in the US, K-12 Chinese language teaching was a major part of the CI services, for which many CI teachers were dispatched to teach in local schools. However, as CI made increasing impact on the American public, there emerged negative policies and actions to contain them, such as the accusation of CI visa violation by the US Department of State on May 17th, 2012, and the boycott against CI by the American Association of University Professors in June 2014. As a result, CI teachers have been banned from American K-12 schools since June 2012. To meet the needs, the CC program has become the major vehicle to reach and support the K-12 Chinese instruction. So far, the CC program has been successful, with its size doubling CI worldwide and tripling in the US. One may wonder why CCs can survive and succeed in the American schools while CI is out. How are CCs operated? What products do they promote? How are American public attracted to them?

5.1 Confucius Classrooms at a glance

To seek answer to the questions listed above, the researcher conducted a 3-month-long case study of two CCs associated with the CI located in the university where the researcher has been serving on the faculty, during which the researcher kept close communications with the CC supervisors and the teaching staff. She also sat in the classes throughout the programs, taking
notes and pictures,\(^{14}\) and occasionally serving as the language assistant when there was a need. At the end of each class, she participated in the curriculum planning and conducted semi-structured interviews with the class instructors and assistants. These two CCs were both located in elementary schools, a few miles away from her university campus. In her interview with the university CC supervisor, the researcher learned the following procedures for CC establishment: (1) the CI announced the availability of CC programs to the local community and invited applications, (2) interested schools applied for it, and (3) once the application was approved, the CI provided with start-up and operational funds, teaching materials and resources, and a Chinese language assistant. The hosting schools provided with classrooms, facilities, and principal instructors.

Both principal instructors observed by the researcher were 1\(^{st}\) grade teachers, who had a long connection with the university CI and served as the “resource persons” of Chinese language and culture in the regional schools. Before the researcher’s observation started, these two instructors had run the CC program once a year for a number of years. In addition, they participated in the CI-sponsored tour to China, during which they visited some of the major cultural sites and exposed to the essential Chinese culture, such as Forbidden City, Confucius’ hometown Qufu, Xi’an terracotta soldiers, Hangzhou West Lake, etc. Through the tour, they accumulated a good amount of teaching resources, such as Chinese music and songs, Chinese paper cuttings, dragon artifacts, terracotta soldiers, seals and chops, the Four Writing Treasures, etc. However, they were not Chinese language teachers and did not have the needed Chinese language proficiency to teach the language component, so a teaching assistant was recruited for each program to help with the language instruction. Given the fact that CI teachers were still banned from the American schools due to the “visa” issue, the CI hired two advanced students of Chinese as the teaching assistants, one for each school.

Each of these two CCs was after-school program, 6 hours per week, located in the school libraries. While one of them ran 6 sessions in total, one hour per session, the other ran 5 sessions, 1.25 hours per session. Each program enrolled 20–25 students on voluntary basis and was managed by the school teacher, who was in charge of developing the curriculum, organizing the class activities, providing teaching materials, and making the instructional decisions. The

\(^{14}\) Note: All pictures illustrated in this section were taken by the researcher in the classrooms with the instructor’s permission.
teaching assistant was under the supervision of the school teacher, who assisted in the research of teaching materials, language instruction, and program-end student presentations.

The two CCs used an identical booklet as their major teaching material, entitled “China,” as illustrated in Figure 4. It started with “Confucius: birth time, place, teachings, sayings,” followed by Xi’an terracotta soldiers and other cultural sites such as the Great Wall, Forbidden City, etc. When asked where they obtained the booklet, the instructors answered, “from the Confucius Institute.”

The booklet was instrumental and informative, which introduced the major features of Chinese culture. It was written in English, with Chinese characters being only used for key elements. The booklet seemed to be compiled locally, because it was not included in the Hanban/CI HQ textbook collections. According to the 2015 CI annual report, the CI HQ published 6,083 volumes of teaching materials and 424 volumes of cultural reading materials (p.), out of which the most popular textbooks were New Concept Chinese，《新概念汉语》，New Practical Chinese Reader，《新实用汉语课本》，Stories of Chinese People’s Lives，《中国人的生活故事》，Tales form China’s Classic Essential Readings，《中国蒙学经典故事丛书》，to name just a few. During her visit to the CI HQ Beijing in the summer 2016, the researcher visited its book exhibition hall, which demonstrated all the books it developed or used, but this booklet was not included.
Such informality or flexibility in the CC program scheduling and material selection and adoption accords with the policy of “adopting flexible teaching patterns and adapting to suit local conditions when teaching Chinese language and promoting culture,” set by Hanban/CI HQ.

5.2 Products/capitals promoted in Confucius Classrooms

The content or products covered by the two CCs were basically identical, which represented linguistic, cultural, and symbolic capitals, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986, 1991) in the Linguistic Capital theory.

5.2.1 Linguistic capital

The students learned very basic Chinese words/sentences to introduce themselves, such as 你好 (Ni hao Hello), 我叫 XXX (Wo jiao XXX, My name is XXX), 我 XXX 岁 (Wo XXX sui, I am XXX years old). They also learned how to express gratitude with 谢谢 (Xiexie Thank you) and farewell with 再见 (Zaijian Good-bye), and ask for a favor with 请 XXX (Qing XXX, Please XXX). In addition, a good amount of class time was spent learning how to count 1–10 in Chinese and write them in Chinese character form with Chinese brush pens, as shown in Figure 5.

![Figure 5: Writing Chinese numbers.](image)

5.2.2 Cultural capital

Although some Chinese usages were introduced, the CC programs were, by and large, focused on the Chinese culture, presented in English. Following the
sequence arranged in the booklet, the programs first introduced Confucius, including his birth place, sayings, and significance. One of the instructors compared Confucius with Jesus for their birth time to illustrate that Confucius was an ancient prehistoric icon of Chinese tradition and civilization. Slips of English-translated Confucius sayings were distributed among the students, with which the instructor and the students discussed about the meanings and their relevance to the present world. Once they fully understood the sample sayings, the students were instructed to make bookmarks with their choice of sayings, as shown in Figure 6. Then each student read and explained his/her saying in the finished bookmark.

Figure 6: Self-made bookmarks with Confucius sayings.

The other cultural elements covered in the course included China’s ancient inventions such as paper making, powder, earthquake detector; its relics and cultural sites such as the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Summer Palace, terracotta soldiers in Xi’an, West Lake in Hangzhou; and its artifacts such as Kite-making, paper-cutting, and water painting.

However, no modern Chinese culture, such as pop music or movies, was included except for a children’s song entitled “Two Tigers,” which is sung to the tune of “Frère Jacques” and has been passed down in China since the 1940s.

15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2yXLm9T3E
5.2.3 Symbolic capital

Related to cultural products promoted in the CC programs were artifacts that symbolized the Chinese traditional literati or scholarship, such as calligraphy, seals and chops, Four Treasures for calligraphy (i.e., the ink brush, inkstick, paper and ink stone). Chinese unique cultural symbols such as lanterns, lion dance, zodiac years were also introduced. Each presentation was immediately followed by class activities, such as practicing Chinese calligraphy, making Chinese paintings and lanterns, and pressing prints on their papers with the Chinese Chops and red ink. In addition, Chinese food symbols related to traditional festivals and cooking/dining utensils were demonstrated together with real Chinese food.

Nevertheless, the most exciting symbols to the students were those related to Chinese martial arts. To make it even more thrilling, the CI dispatched a visiting Martial Arts Master to the school and taught a 20-minute session to the students, which attracted not only the students but also school staff and parents, as shown in Figure 7. At the end of the session, the Master asked the students, “Do you want to come to China to learn martial arts?” She was responded with a thunderous reply, “Yes!”

![Figure 7: Learning Chinese martial arts.](image)

Curriculum-wise, both CC programs were short and informal but extremely effective. With their thoughtful curriculum planning, rich resources, clear pedagogical sequence and well-designed class activities, the Chinese products/capitals were successfully promoted. By Bourdieu’s *Linguistic Capital* theory (1986, 1991), all these forms of capitals have the potential to transform and convert to economic capital.
5.3 How students and parents are attracted

The three capitals listed in Section 5.2 partially answered the question “what drives behind the American choice of learning Chinese language and culture through Confucius Institutes/Confucius Classrooms?” The other part of the answer rests on if the products are appealing to the buyers, i.e. the students, teachers, and parents. By the evidence gathered through the researcher’s observations, the response was extremely positive and enthusiastic.

During the course of study, parents poured in emails, thanking the school teachers for the program, “Because it opens a door to the kids for something huge and different.” At the end of the program, many parents requested the school to re-open the program the next year, promising to bring in their other kids. Moreover, the principal of one of the hosting schools one day walked into the class to express his gratitude, saying, “We are very lucky to have this program. It opens a door to China for our students. China is huge now.” In the one-on-one interviews with the researcher, one of the teachers commented on,

This is an enhancing, enrichment and enlightening program, in which children learn Chinese language and culture. China has a long civilization, which made important innovations, and has the world-known Great Wall and Confucius. The US is no longer the game of town. Kids need to open their minds and know that there is a different world.

The CC practices and attraction to the American public support Bourdieu’s Linguistic Capital theory (1986, 1991) that participants knew that these capitals were important and that they would bring in gains in the long run.

6 Discussion and conclusion

To ease the discomfort brought by its rapid economic and military might, China started its “raising the Chinese cultural soft power” campaign at the beginning of the twenty-first century to project an image of “a responsible big nation” and an ideology of “peaceful development and harmonious world.” For this purpose, the Chinese government established Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms worldwide as the platform to promote Chinese language and (traditional) culture. As a result, China’s favorability has been rising worldwide.

According to Nye, soft power is a power of positive attraction, which must influence policy outcomes (Nye 2004: 34). However, China’s favorability has been low and continues to decline in the US even though China has established many more CIs/CCs in the US than in the other countries. Moreover, although the CC products are attractive to the American public, they have yet influence
American policy outcomes. Instead, CCs are still after-school but not in-school programs. And starting from fall 2012, CI teachers have been banned from American public schools even though there is a serious shortage of Chinese teachers in some schools.

Furthermore, there are some sustainability issues with the CI program. First, unlike its counterparts which are mostly sponsored by individuals or foundations, China’s CI is heavily funded by the government. For instance, it had a total government budget of over $310 million in 2015 alone, for which Hanban/CI HQ has been facing questions such as “how come your agency has spent so much money?” as informed in the researcher’s one-on-one interview with the CI Deputy Director-General in summer 2016. Secondly, there are no after-school programs for other languages such as French, Italian, and Spanish in the schools observed by the researcher. When asked why, the answer was “there was no support from those languages.” This shows that, on the beneficiary side, there is no systematic promotion strategy for foreign language education but piece-meal program-based projects that largely depend on the financial availability of the sponsor(s). Finally, China’s CI program in the US is largely focused on mainstream American schools and has yet connected with the community Chinese schools, which currently have 200,000 students in the US and have sustained/developed in the US for over 150 years.

In conclusion, drawing on theoretical perspectives from Nye’s soft power notion (1990, 2004, 2011), Bourdieu’s *Linguistic Capital* theory (1986, 1991), and Huntington’s “hard power stimulating language learning” hypothesis, this study examines the driving force behind China’s “soft power” strategy and how Confucius Institutes fit in the strategy. With data from the large-scale international surveys and the 10 Hanban/CI annual reports, the study suggests that the CI program has been successfully serving as a platform to promote China’s soft power in the US and around the world. Moreover, the case study of the two CC programs demonstrates how Chinese products/capitals are promoted in the CC program and how attractive they are to the American public. As predicted by Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1991), these capitals will, with or without the participants’ awareness, produce and reproduce themselves and eventually convert to economic capital.

**References**


