

China's Confucius Institutes—More Academic and Integrative

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Ever since the first Confucius Institute was launched in 2004 in Uzbekistan, this initiative has been seen as an arm of Chinese government for expanding China's soft power. The past 15 years witnessed a phenomenal growth of the Confucius Institutes around the world. By the end of 2011, 358 Confucius Institutes and 500 Confucius Classrooms were established in 108 countries—with 21 percent Confucius Institutes and 60 percent Confucius Classrooms located in a single country, the United States—though they remain controversial in many democratic societies. After all, the organization behind these Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, the Confucius Institute Headquarters or *Hanban*, is affiliated to China's Ministry of Education and operates with government funds. Notably, in 2011 alone, *Hanban* spent US\$164.1 million directly on all kinds of projects and activities in Confucius Institutes across the world. This figure is expected to grow significantly in the years to come. At the recent Global Confucius Institute Conference in Beijing, *Hanban* announced three new major programs applicable to Confucius Institutes worldwide. They include the Confucius China Study Plan—focusing on research aspects of Confucius Institutes, appointments of

permanent academic staff at all Confucius Institutes, and the “Chinese Day” program connecting Confucius Institutes to their local communities.

Apparently, these new programs aim to transform Confucius Institutes into an academic unit and an integrative part in their host universities as well as the local communities. The Confucius China Study Plan will champion research function of Confucius Institutes. It sponsors visiting scholars associating with Confucius Institutes to undertake research projects in China for a period of 2 weeks to 10 months, provides doctoral scholarships, and supports conferences and publications on China Studies related topics. The scheme for appointing the Core Teachers aims to create permanent academic positions at those Confucius Institutes that have operated for more than two years. The Core Teacher is supposed to be hired and compensated at the level of lecturer or assistant professor by Western standards, with *Hanban* covering their salaries and benefits in the first five years and 50 percent in the second five years, and the rest to be paid by the Confucius Institutes where they teach. Finally, the Chinese Day program designs to promote the Chinese language and culture as well as the Confucius Institutes in their local communities, through conducting thematic activities on a regular basis.

TRANSFORMATION REQUIRES RESEARCH SUPPORT

While it remains to be seen if these initiatives may work to upgrade Confucius Institutes around the world, they will certainly bring a lot of visibility (and possibly more controversies) to them and might open up a new research agenda. Between the goals and objectives spelled out by these new initiatives and the

reality in which Confucius Institutes operate, there are a number of roadblocks. First and foremost, Confucius Institutes are largely operating at the margin on their host campuses, hardly making a part of the mainstream functions—i.e., research, teaching and service. In many cases, they are somehow competing with the existing structure of China Studies and Chinese-language teaching—i.e., the preexistent programs, centers and institutes that house China-related content. The Confucius Institutes' outreach activities often appear to be disconnected with the host universities' community engagement strategies and schemes. In this context, the goal for integration is nothing short of a challenge and requires research support for the sake of figuring out appropriate strategy and action plan.

In order to be integrative, Confucius Institutes need to transform themselves, and such questions may stand in their way of fulfilling such a transformation: How can Confucius Institutes contribute to the host university's research function/agenda? In this regard, Confucius Institutes need to generate synergies with the existing research structure and agenda in their host institutions, rather than competing with them or creating a new structure. How can Confucius Institutes contribute to the host university's teaching and learning (pedagogical betterment) in general? Apart from offering Chinese-language learning programs and courses, Confucius Institutes may maneuver to showcase the humanistic aspects of the Confucian education tradition and make them available and supportive to pedagogical reference and progress in their host institutions. Finally, how can Confucius Institutes connect to the host university's community engagement efforts? How can they contribute to branding of the host university? The aforementioned questions may help upgrade and substantiate a research agenda surrounding Confucius Institutes, yet a meaningful research on

them cannot afford losing grip in the difference or even contrast with respect to university culture.

In all cases, Confucius Institutes involve a partnership between a Chinese university and a non-Chinese one, which inevitably brings together different university cultures and sometimes could lead to a “clash” of university cultures. For instance, *Hanban* now requires all Confucius Institutes to work up their strategic planning, which often needs to take the form of three- or five-year plans. The Chinese universities are quite familiar with and used to this kind of practice. However, many Western partner universities may not necessarily be able to cope with such a requirement, as the long-term planning is not a part of their culture. In this circumstance, how could the Confucius Institutes’ planning survive the culture that traditionally de-emphasizes planning? Even if more and more Western universities now adapt to the planning culture, there needs to be a careful effort to connect the Confucius Institute planning, to that of the host university as a whole.

AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCES IN UNIVERSITY CULTURE

More importantly, the partnership denotes the difference in decision-making patterns. Chinese universities tend to feature a bureaucracy (and sometimes a political system) model of decision making, characterized with a top-down approach and short-time horizon. Western universities, by contrast, are more likely to demonstrate the collegial model in decision making, and sometimes even characterize an “organized anarchy.” Decisions come often out of consensus, which requires a great deal of communications, consultations, and discussions. It is crucial to raise awareness toward this kind of difference in

university culture and carefully nurture the partnership as a “unity with diversity”—a Confucian concept itself. All in all, the transformation of Confucius Institutes, as an academic effort or an integrative one, requires not only resource support but also—and more importantly—a thrifty handle of the difference in university culture, in order to form a shared “intersubjective meaning.” As a pressing step, *Hanban* needs to convince the world that, with these new programs, it is not taking advantage of the lack of funding for sinology and social sciences in Western universities, and trying to muscle in and control the teaching of the Chinese language and Chinese history through the funds it supplies to those strapped institutions. Perhaps, it is important for China to proceed slowly and gain trust.