

Global Diffusion of Chinese Culture: The Case of Confucius Institute in Africa (Nigeria)

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Abstract

For a rising power, China's soft power diplomacy has assumed an unprecedented momentum. As a projection of its soft power diplomacy, the Chinese government has promoted the noble ideas of Confucius as well as the establishment of Confucius Institutes across the world. Obviously, the specter of soft power diplomacy is relatively large. It includes culture, language, public diplomacy, education systems, organization and promotion of various festivals and other related events. These are all geared towards the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce or use force to win international partners. In several African countries, the Chinese government and other relevant authorities have established a number of Confucius Institutes. This is done through mutual understanding and collaborative efforts with authorities of Chinese and African universities. In Nigeria, the desire to embrace the institute started around 2006, culminating in two CIs; Nnamdi Azikiwe University and University of Lagos. The CI at the University of Lagos has been designed to stimulate the study of Chinese language and culture. Since its establishment, the institute has recorded outstanding success in the promotion of Chinese language and culture across the Lagos metropolis and its environs especially through the Bridge program. In addition, the institute has organized several events to celebrate the Chinese New Year or Chinese Spring Festival, the Chinese Autumn Festival, the Chinese Independence Day celebration, among others. Similarly, the CI has also served as an avenue for the introduction of African cultures to Chinese scholars. Despite this important role, no scholarly study has been devoted to analyzing the role of the Confucius Institute in Africa with special focus on the University of Lagos. This gap in knowledge has undermined our understanding of the Confucius Institute as an instrument for the projection of Chinese culture and global diplomacy. The study aims to investigate the critical areas of intervention of the Institute in the promotion of Chinese culture and language. It adopts the narrative and analytical methodology to analyze the activities of the institute *vis-à-vis* the impact of the Institute on Africa. It recommends that effective management of the Confucius Institute is a *sine qua non* for the projection of China's soft power diplomacy.

Key words: Chinese Culture, Confucius Institute, Nigeria.

Introduction

China is bridging the cultural gap between itself and the rest of the world through the establishment of Confucius Institutes across the world. Interestingly, Confucius Institutes are non-profit public institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China whose stated aim is to promote Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world. Officially, it is seen as an avenue to promote knowledge of Chinese language and culture abroad, as well as to encourage commercial and trade cooperation between China and the rest of the world. In that regard, the Confucius institute serves as a tool of cultural diplomacy intended to bolster China's soft power diplomacy abroad.

The Confucius Institute program began in 2004. Its beginning was part of the rise and global significance of China in the twenty-first century. The century is arguably the century of "China rise" in terms of global projection of economic and cultural power. Administratively, Confucius Institutes are designed to emphasize the teaching of Chinese language and culture worldwide, as well as promote the training of Chinese teachers in the host communities or countries. Accordingly, the institutes are administered by the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (also known as Hanban). Hanban is a non-government agency reporting directly to the Ministry of Education in China. Nevertheless, Confucius Institutes operate in collaboration with Chinese affiliate universities/colleges and universities around the world. The cooperation covers the area of financing, which is normally shared between Hanban and the host institutions as well as design and teaching of Chinese language and culture.

Interestingly, the first official Confucius Institute was opened on 21 November 2004 in Seoul, South Korea. Following that success, several other branches have been established. These branches are present in virtually all the continents of the world, including Africa. They have enhanced the creation of an atmosphere of understanding between the host countries and China with respect to their national ideals and institutions in an effort to build broad support for economic and political goals.

Confucius Institute in Africa: A Background

The expansion of the Confucius Institution to Africa has so far been impressive. Indeed, many keen observers believe that Africa is at the heart of China's "soft power" diplomacy and the Confucius Institute is seen as a means to strengthening cultural exchanges between China and Africa. Accordingly, China runs one of the world's largest short-term training programmes in Africa. For instance, the "African Talents Program," announced in 2012, is designed to train 30,000 African professionals in China between 2013 and 2015. In addition, 18,000 African trainees will benefit from full scholarships to study at Chinese universities under the scheme. China also operates 38 Confucius Institutes at many of Africa's top universities, stretching from Cape Town to Cairo, Dakar to Dar el Salam, and Lagos to Rabat. These Confucius Institutes include: Benin Republic (University of Abomey-Calavi), Botswana (University of Botswana), Burundi (University of Burundi), Cameroon (University of Yaounde II), Congo (University of Marien Ngouabi), Egypt (Cairo University and Suez Canal University), Eritrea (Confucius Institute at National Board for Higher Education), Ethiopia (Addis Ababa Confucius Institute), Ghana (University of Ghana), Kenya (Egerton University, Kenyatta University, and University of Nairobi), Liberia (University of Liberia), Madagascar (Antananarivo University), Malawi

(University of Malawi), Morocco (University of Hassan II and University of Mohammed V-Agdal), Mozambique (Eduardo Mondlane University), Namibia (University of Namibia), Nigeria (Nnamdi Azikiwe University and University of Lagos), Rwanda (Kigali Institute of Education), Senegal (University of Dakar), Sierra Leone (University of Sierra Leone), South Africa (Centre for Chinese Studies, Durban University of Technology, Rhodes University, and University of Cape Town), Sudan (University of Khartoum), Togo (University of Lome), Zambia (University of Zambia), and Zimbabwe (University of Zimbabwe).

These CIs have remained the bastion of hope and the bases for the promotion of Chinese language and culture, in terms of advertising the rich cultural heritage of China and the Chinese as well as the propagation of the philosophy of Confucius with respect to training and breeding of future African experts on Chinese language and culture.

The Concept of Soft Power and the Confucius Institute

Soft power diplomacy is the opposite of hard power diplomacy. Under a regime of soft power diplomacy, nations win international allies or partners through their ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce or use force. The instruments to achieve soft power diplomacy include but are not limited to culture, language, public diplomacy, education systems, organization and promotion of various national festivals. These aspects of diplomacy are geared towards symbiotic and collaborative relations with friendly countries through a process driven by education, interaction, diverse cultural participation and exchanges with the aim of achieving social, cultural and ideological understanding among the nations concerned.¹ In addition, soft power diplomacy can also be perceived as an aspect of cultural diplomacy, which is about the exchange of information, ideas, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples

in order to foster mutual understanding.² In this direction, cultural diplomacy or soft power may embrace elements such as the arts, including films, dance, music, painting, sculpture, etc.; educational programs such as universities and language programs abroad; exhibitions which offer the potential to showcase numerous objects of culture; and literature - the establishment of libraries abroad and translation of popular and national works, among others. These elements are intended to incorporate both practical, subject-based schooling and a focus upon the socialization of individual members of the countries concerned. Through this medium, their national values, beliefs and perceptions of the world are shared by their respective people(s). Indeed, international relations are to a large extent interactions among cultural entities or systems.³ This means that it is difficult to separate China's or Nigeria's foreign policy from its national culture or tradition because they are interwoven. As a matter of fact, the foreign policies of states are largely influenced by their domestic elements.

In line with the mantras of soft power diplomacy,⁴ the Chinese Confucius Institute is tied to the universities and related institutes where the best brains can help mould the ideas and ideals of the institute. Obviously, the intellectual brains have helped to facilitate the growth of the Confucius Institute as well as the teaching of Chinese language and culture across the world since the Chinese government decided to promote this aspect of its national power.

Moreover, the Confucius Institute has cultivated the stimulating habit of holding annual conferences and seminars where scholars across the world meet to brainstorm on the possible way to move the CIs and the study of Chinese culture and language forward. For instance, between 2006 and 2014, Hanban has so far held nine global conferences, mainly in Beijing with the 2014 edition held in Xiamen. The various conferences provided avenues for scholars and

cultural enthusiasts to brainstorm and share ideas on the best way to spread Chinese culture and language across the world.

Due to the way the Confucius Institute has been run so far in connection with the spread of China's soft power diplomacy, its establishment can without doubt be seen as a marked departure from the organization of similar international cultural institutes that were established before it. These institutes include Britain's British Council, France's Alliance Française and Germany's Goethe-Institute. Certainly, these three cultural entities are organized to reflect imperial pasts as well as ongoing geopolitical strategies of their respective countries. In that connection, they serve as avenues to promote the objectives of soft power and are established in sites in their host countries where they can fulfill their mandates openly. However, unlike these three organizations, Confucius Institutes are established within universities, colleges, and secondary schools around the world. From these bases, the Chinese government through the institutes provides funding, teachers and educational materials to support the teaching and propagation of Chinese language, philosophy, ethics and other aspects of Chinese culture. Interestingly, with respect to funding, Hanban and the host institutions are jointly involved in the management of the institutes. This has so far promoted transparency and accountability in the running of the institutes. Needless to say that the partnership involved in the running of the institutes has produced a win-win situation for all the parties involved in the spread of Chinese language and culture in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos

The commercial, economic and industrial importance of Lagos makes the city a major component of China's engagement with Nigeria. Lagos, being one of the largest concentrations of black Africans, is a gateway to Africa and a major business hub in West Africa. It offers enormous benefits to Chinese and other Asian immigrants. Indeed, there is a large presence of Chinese construction workers, businessmen, investors and Chinese business and commercial interests in Lagos State. These Chinese will find it much easier to do their business if a good percentage of Lagosians can speak, read and understand Chinese language and are versed in the Chinese cultural traits which will enhance negotiations and relationships.

In the same vein, the location of the University of Lagos within the Lagos metropolis has imposed on it the task of training manpower that will in turn facilitate the dissemination of Chinese language and culture. For instance, the steadily growing business between the Lagos State Government and China is an indication of the imperative of promoting Chinese language and culture in the city. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigerians need the Chinese language to avoid misunderstanding and do business successfully and competently with their Chinese counterparts. Therefore, an investment in the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos is a sine-qua-non for the blossoming of Chinese language and culture in Nigeria.

In line with the apparent strategic position of the University of Lagos in the teaching of Chinese language and culture in Nigeria, the management of the university negotiated an agreement with Hanban on the establishment of the Confucius Institute on the campus of the university. The agreement was eventually signed in 2006. Consequently, the University of Lagos delegation attended the International Conference of Hanban in Beijing in 2007. At the conference, the

university authorities reaffirmed their readiness to promote the teaching of Chinese culture and language in Africa.

The Chinese Bridge Competition

Aside from strategic teaching arrangements, the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos has some set programs in line with the dictates of the Confucius Institute. These include the “bridge competitions,” which are used to foster and promote Chinese language and culture across the globe. In Nigeria, the Chinese Bridge Competition is organized annually by the Confucius Institute to test Chinese learners in Nigeria and to evaluate the efforts of Chinese teachers in the country. The competition comprises three parts: Chinese dance, Chinese knowledge and Chinese song. Interestingly, a total of 19 schools attended the 2014 Competition. The competition featured three categories of participants drawn from tertiary, secondary and primary schools in Lagos State. It should be stressed that the excellent performances from the participating schools demonstrates the fast growing interest in Chinese language and culture by Nigerians.

Promotion of Chinese Cultural and National Festivals

The Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos also promotes its activities through the organization and promotion of Chinese cultural and national festivals. During the period of such festivals, the institute brings together members of the university community and outsiders. It affords them the opportunity to interact with Chinese cultural experts and scholars of Chinese studies within and outside the university.

Since 2009, the institute at University of Lagos has organized a two-hour reception attended by Chinese teachers, Nigerian students and other dignitaries to witness the celebration of Chinese

festivals. The festivals are usually spiced with various performances including dance, songs, martial art and magic displays. Interesting, the highlight of the occasions is usually a special rendition by a Nigerian student. During the 2014 ceremony of the Chinese National Day, a Nigerian student delivered the theme of “My Chinese Heart” in fluent Chinese to the admiration of the audience. Dignitaries were also treated to various Chinese cuisines including Chinese dumpling, a peculiar food always eaten by the Chinese during spring festival.

Furthermore, to show the cultural communication between China and Nigeria and to show the cultural teaching achievements by Confucius Institute, the opening ceremony of most of the festivals was performed by Nigerian students and directed by Chinese teachers. For instance, Yanko dance, Fan dance, Chinese traditional cloths dance and choruses were performed by students of the University of Lagos studying Chinese language. Other activities of the day included Chinese calligraphy, paper-cut art, playing Chinese musical instruments and preparation of Chinese cuisines. There were also regular Chinese movies showed to the audience especially to broaden people’s knowledge about China, oriental culture, Chinese language and culture.

Participants at a Chinese Cultural Month at UNILAG

In addition, the institute has also promoted the Chinese Dragon Boat festival. The Dragon boat festival consists of a lot of elements, not only the board where the story of how dragon boat is written for students to read and get information, but also movies to show the festival. Furthermore, the centre has designed a lot of Chinese cultural experience classes, Chinese

message boards and Chinese ethnic dressing exhibitions to underscore the importance of the Chinese Dragon Boat festival in particular and the Chinese culture in general. As a result of these cultural attractions, the students have continued to show high enthusiasm for the festival.

Participants at a Chinese Karaoke Competition at UNILAG

There is also the celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival. The festival is usually celebrated with Chinese music, cultural exhibition and videos to the admiration of those who attended. The Mid-Autumn festival at the University of Lagos offers a unique opportunity for the students to learn more about the beauty of Chinese cultural history as well as the personalities that shaped their history. The 2014 Mid-Autumn festival was unique because the organizers incorporated the Chinese poetry eloquence competition, called “mid-autumn moon, poetry for love.” Indeed, there were three activities made up of Chinese games, including guessing Chinese characters by using hands and feet, show direction in Chinese and pick nuts with chopsticks. Participants truly had a wonderful time.

Preparing Students for the HSK and the Establishment of the B.A. Program

The Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos has also assisted in preparing students for the Chinese proficiency test or examination otherwise known as Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK). Through this medium, the institute has promoted the teaching of Chinese culture and language across Nigeria. The HSK is held regularly at the Confucius Institute, University of Lagos. In 2014, close to 50 Students turned up for the exams. They took the exam to reflect their Chinese proficiency at various levels. Through the examination, the centre has provided information

about contemporary China to Nigerians interested in tourism, studying or doing business in China.

The centre has also developed Chinese language courses, trained teachers and facilitated the establishment of a B.A (degree) Chinese program which has since kicked off in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lagos. It is the belief of the authorities of the University of Lagos in particular and members of the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos in general that through an organized language exchange programme, the cultures of Africans and the Chinese would be acquired by those who will pass through the training programmes designed at the institute. This thinking is informed by the fact that it is through the process of learning that culture becomes an integral part of the lives of people.

Challenges and Prospect of the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos

While the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos has achieved tremendous progress since its establishment, there is no doubt that it has a few challenges that have impacted on its rapid growth and development. Indeed, there are a few challenges that have hindered the smooth diffusion of Chinese soft power across Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. First, in the area of quick exchange of personnel between China and the University of Lagos, there are sometimes some challenges with the issuance of visas to Chinese volunteers and renewal of work permits for those already in Nigeria. This problem has been compounded by the cumbersome nature of renewal of work permits for Chinese and other immigrants in the country.

Second, as a corollary to the above point, it is worrisome that the number of Chinese Volunteers is becoming relatively inadequate to cope with the demand for Chinese language learning in Africa. Yet, the interest in learning Chinese language and culture keeps growing among Africans. At the University of Lagos, for instance, there is a need for some increase in Chinese Volunteers to cope with the growing interest in Chinese language and culture while growing a local capacity building for local teachers. This should not surprise us because with China's swift rise to prominence on the global stage, the demand for Chinese (Mandarin) language courses and qualified teachers is growing rapidly.

Third, there is the challenge of funding and inadequate physical infrastructure to cater to the needs of the enthusiasts of Chinese language and culture. Hence, there is the need for improved funding to meet current demands. It is also expected that Hanban will assist the CI at the University of Lagos to erect its own building given that the present structure has become grossly inadequate. Moreover, the Chinese language laboratory currently in use at the university is not up to standard. The university is still expecting the Language Laboratory promised it by Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) & Hanban.

Fourth, related to this is the fact that the institute at UNILAG is not yet able to recruit its own core teachers. To remedy this problem, it will be imperative for the Chinese government to increase the number of scholarships granted to African students interested in studying Chinese language in Chinese universities. This will help to ensure the availability of local manpower that will sustain teaching and learning at the centre.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that China has a gigantic, marvelous cultural repertoire, worthy of world interest and admiration. Its cultural and diplomatic relations with African countries have clearly advanced significantly through the establishment of Confucius Institutes. The momentum of two-way cultural engagements has been accelerated through the establishment of Confucius Institutes across a spectrum of African universities. Certainly, growing opportunities for investment in both human and material resources are expected to be attractive to intellectuals from both sides, given the evident complementarity of the Chinese and African cultures. Similarly, as far as peaceful coexistence is concerned, China's soft power diplomacy in Africa has been largely welcomed as a positive contribution. In the context of a partnership to advance a new global order driven by intellectual cooperation, the Confucius Institute has come to stay in Africa.

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³ A. Adefuye, *Culture and Foreign Policy: the Nigerian Example* (Lagos: NIIA, 1992), 3.

⁴ See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 2004); Carnes Lord, *Losing Hearts and Minds?: Public Diplomacy and Strategic Influence in the Age of Terror* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006)

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