

Nov 04, 2016 by **APDS Bloggers**

# Finding Support For the Confucius Institutes <sup>[1]</sup>

**APDS Blogger: Chen Chen**

China's Confucius Institutes have become a public diplomacy phenomenon. Many public diplomacy researchers have been impressed by the rapid spread of Confucius Institutes around the world. In the United States alone, more than 60 Confucius Institutes have been established since 2004. Meanwhile, around the globe, the Chinese government has opened more than 200 Confucius Institutes in over 80 countries.

Some members of the US Congress have concerns over this trend, and have suggested that the Obama administration open at least four US culture centers in China to redress the imbalance and the disparity in cultural and political influence that the Confucius Institute can bring. Confucius Institutes seem to pop up overnight around the world and have become a distinct symbol of "China Rising."

Ironically, among the few countries left without a Confucius Institute, one nation stands out: China, the homeland of Confucius.

In fact, the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), the organizer of the Confucius Institute, has established many Chinese language-teaching institutes in Mainland China that are similar to Confucius Institute. Many universities in China also offer courses in Chinese instruction. But none of them use the name "Confucius" to promote their programs. This is not a coincidence. The phenomenon actually reflects the Chinese government's usual pattern when carrying out practices of cultural diplomacy.

Chinese cultural diplomatic activities pay close attention to the views of foreign public, but rarely consider the views of their own people on the subject. For example, the figure Confucius, the Peking Opera, and the art of Kung Fu, symbols of Chinese culture in the eyes of foreign public, in fact are not popular in China's mainstream culture.

More specifically, although the Chinese government is using Confucius to promote Chinese culture, the Chinese public often makes fun of the notion of Confucianism. Recently, a film describing Confucius's life ended up being a big flop at the box office. Although many big movie stars acted in the film, people were still not attracted to the movie. This was in part because Chinese people tend to feel that the theme of the movie and the thoughts of Confucius are so old-fashioned and pedantic that they do not fit into China's current social needs.

The Peking Opera also faces the same situation. On the one hand, the government regards it as China's national essence, and you can find the silhouettes of Peking Opera actors displayed in many documentaries of China. However, on the other hand, only a small number

of Chinese are still listening to the Peking Opera. China's mainstream population has no interest in or even knowledge about the Peking Opera.

Both historically and in the present, all successful cases of cultural diplomacy are powered by the cooperation between the government and its people. For example, Japanese government's manga diplomacy is strongly supported by Japan's domestic manga enthusiasts and Japanese cartoon industry. Also, supporting the success of the United States' basketball diplomacy is the large basketball population and American people's great enthusiasm for basketball.

In stark contrast, when the Chinese government is vigorously promoting Confucius Institutes around the world, many Chinese rarely bother about the development of Confucius Institute. The negatives are obvious: first, foreign publics often find that the China presented in the context of governmental Cultural Diplomacy is far from the real one, and such difference always leads to doubts about the purpose of cultural diplomacy. Many would also argue that Chinese cultural diplomacy activities are nothing but political propaganda. More importantly, even though the Chinese government is willing to spend money on cultural diplomacy, without its own public's participation and enthusiasm, such diplomacy activities cannot be kept up for long. After all, the government's power is limited, and the force of cultural diplomacy actually comes from the power of the people.

In fact, the starting point of public diplomacy is the recognition of the public's influence on the country's foreign policy. I think public diplomacy's "public" refers not only to foreign publics, but also the domestic population. When public diplomacy's aim is to influence the other country's foreign policy by engaging the foreign public, we must also take into account the domestic public's impact on those public diplomacy activities. In other words, public diplomacy activities would be unsustainable if they cannot receive domestic backing.

Therefore, if the Chinese government wants to find the strength to sustain the Confucius Institutes, it must attract the support of its own people first.

---

**Chen Chen** is a master's candidate in the Public Diplomacy program at the University of Southern California. His studies focus on the public diplomacy in East Asia. He is originally from Northeast China and received his B.A. in Broadcasting Journalism from Tongji University in Shanghai. Prior to being a USC graduate student, he worked for China Central Television as a reporter in Beijing.

---