

# The fall of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms? An analysis of closures and future directions

Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs) have been around for almost 20 years. These Chinese language and culture centres, set up in universities and schools respectively, have a global presence. In the years following the opening of the first CI in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, their numbers increased rapidly, as did their geographical coverage. In the years 2008 to 2015, for example, there was an average annual increase of 37 CIs and 122 CCs, and an average annual increase of almost nine countries and regions hosting them, according to my analysis of CI Annual Development Reports. The latest available official data says that there were 550 CIs and 1,172 CCs in 162 countries and regions as of the end of 2019. This is impressive, especially when compared to much longer established language and culture promotion bodies. The Alliance Française, the oldest such body, established in 1883, has 834 centres in 131 countries, while the British Council, established in 1934, has offices in more than 100 countries.

The CI's and CC's links to the Chinese government and physical location on university and school campuses attracted controversy from their early days. Some academics, media commentators and members of the public raised concerns that they would influence teaching and research on China, promote the Chinese government's views, restrict discussion of sensitive issues and conduct espionage. But despite these concerns they were largely welcomed by schools and universities as a means of enhancing Chinese language and culture education. They conducted numerous Chinese language classes and cultural events, and supported existing Chinese language courses at universities and schools through provision of teaching staff and learning and teaching materials. CI staff and some academics also argued that these concerns were unfounded and did not reflect how CIs and CCs actually operate.

In more recent years however, concerns about CIs and CCs have grown stronger, and there has been an increasingly negative reaction to them. Media reports about the closure, impending closure or review of CIs and CCs have become common. Does this signal the end of CIs and CCs? Will they last another two decades, or will they disappear?

This article aims to answer these questions by analysing data on the closure of CIs and CCs. It maps out the scope and scale of closures, explains the reasons behind them, outlines China's reaction to closures and finally speculates about the future of CIs and CCs.

## **Data on CI and CC closures**

The most complete list of closures that currently exists is that compiled by the website associated with the documentary film *In the Name of Confucius*. This documentary was written and directed by Doris Liu, a first-generation Chinese immigrant filmmaker and journalist based in Toronto, Canada. First released in 2017, it is about the controversies surrounding CIs and CCs. It focuses specifically on the experiences of former McMaster University CI teacher Sonia Zhao, who filed a complaint with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario on the grounds that working at the CI meant that she had to conceal her membership of the Falun Gong.

The section of the *In the Name of Confucius* website labelled 'Cutting Ties With Confucius Institutes' contains a regularly updated list of CI and CC closures. The website is obviously critical of CIs and CCs, and presents closures as something to celebrate. The accuracy of the list is limited in that it indicates the number of universities, school boards or other bodies which have closed CIs or CCs, and this does not always equate exactly to the number of CIs and CCs which have closed. For example, it lists the New South Wales (NSW) government as a single entry in the section on Australia, when in fact the CI in the NSW Department of Education was closed along with the 13 CCs it oversaw in the state's schools. Despite such limitations, there is no other consolidated list of CI and CC closures worldwide, and so this is what I use as the basis for my analysis. An inspection of this data reveals several interesting points.

## **Closures are geographically uneven**

The first of these is that closures have been confined to certain regions of the world. A total of 11 countries have closed CIs and/or CCs: Canada, USA, Australia, France, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. These countries are all located in North America, Australia and Europe.

There has been a general deterioration of relations between China and many of these countries due to trade and political disputes, as well as negative perceptions of

China brought about by its suppression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, actions in the South China Sea, clampdown on the Hong Kong protests and mishandling of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Hongying Wang, a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, this combination of factors has prompted these countries to take a harder line against China and strengthened the position of 'advocates of strategic competition and economic decoupling'.

Against this political backdrop there has been a reassessment of connections to and interactions with China especially those involving the Chinese government. Some governments have specifically targeted CIs and CCs. For example, the USA introduced the National Defense Authorization Act in 2018 which prohibits universities which host a CI from receiving funding from the Department of Defense for the Chinese Language Flagship program. In 2020, it also declared CIs to be a foreign propaganda mission, with then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying they were 'an entity advancing Beijing's global propaganda and malign influence campaign'. This was followed in March 2021 with the Senate's passage of the Confucius Act, which bars universities which host a CI from receiving funding from the Department of Education unless their CI agreement ensures academic freedom, no application of foreign law at the university and full authority of the university over teaching and research activities and employment practices of the CI.

Australia's Foreign Relations Act of 2020 included a review of foreign interference on university campuses and the potential for the federal government to cancel CI agreements. The recently released report from the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, *Inquiry into national security risks affecting the Australian higher education and research sector*, recommends that universities make the details of their CI agreements public and ensure they have control over staffing, curriculum and academic freedom matters. The report also suggests that the Foreign Minister exercise her veto powers, granted under the Foreign Relations Act, over any CI agreement deemed not to be in the national interest.

## **Number of closures is small but likely to continue in some regions**

With the exception of Sweden, which closed all of its CIs and CCs, all of the countries mentioned above still have CIs and/or CCs. This leads to another point to

emerge from the data, that the number of closures is relatively small. A total of 113 universities, school boards and governments have closed CIs and/or CCs. The vast majority of closure of CIs occurred in the USA (89 out of 122), followed by Canada (5 out of 14), France (4 out of 22), Sweden (4 out of 4), Germany (4 out of 21), Australia (2 out of 14), Spain (1 out of 9), Denmark (1 out of 3), Netherlands (1 out of 3), Belgium (1 out of 7) and Switzerland (1 out of 2)<sup>1</sup>.

It is unclear whether the official figures for CIs and CCs include these closures, but if we assume they are accurate, then there are still many times more CIs and CCs still in existence as have closed. However, considering that CIs and CCs have become an issue in bi-lateral relations with China, it is reasonable to expect that closures will continue in these regions.

The tide also seems to be turning against CIs and CCs in some parts of Asia. For example, in 2020, India's Ministry of Education announced a review of CIs. Similarly, the Japanese government launched a formal inquiry into CIs—covering funding, structure, student numbers and influence on research on sensitive topics—in June 2021. In South Korea, an organisation called the Citizens for Unveiling Confucius Institutes (CUCI) was formed to pressure the government to close CIs. It held a protest outside the Chinese Embassy in June 2021. This growing negative reaction to CIs is not surprising given these countries have at times had troubled relations with China. So, while there have been no closures in Asia yet, they may occur.

## **CIs/CCs are secure and expanding in other regions**

Closures have not occurred in South America, Africa or the Middle East. In fact, new CIs are opening in some of these areas, including South Africa (new CI in September 2019), Argentina and Chile (new CIs in October and December 2020 respectively). It is also worth noting that outside of Australia, new CIs are opening in Oceania. A CI opened in Lae, the second largest city in Papua New Guinea (PNG), in February of 2021.

One explanation for this is that opinions towards China are largely positive in these regions, as demonstrated by recent Pew Research Centre Global Attitudes surveys. In 2019, for example, the latest survey to include countries in these regions, majorities or pluralities of those surveyed in the Middle East, South America and

sub-Saharan Africa held favourable views of China, while unfavourable views of China dominated in the USA, Canada, most of Europe and most of the Asia Pacific. These positive views likely stem from the high levels of Chinese investment and trade, development funding, availability of Chinese goods at affordable prices, scholarships for study in China and provision of vaccines and other medical supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the perception of China as a counter to the USA, evident in the Middle East, Africa and South America.

Another is that these regions often lack resources for Chinese language and culture education. As Falk Hartig, a scholar of CIs has explained, 'for many, if not most universities in Africa, Confucius Institutes are the first and often only contact point for people who want to learn the Chinese language or more about China in general'. In several African countries such as Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Cameroon and Nigeria, it was CIs which enabled Chinese language study to diploma and degree level, as detailed by Kenneth King's study. CIs also serve other functions in African countries. According to research carried out by Siyuan Li, CIs facilitate access to economic and technological relations with China on the national level and employment with Chinese companies locally and in China, or African companies seeking Chinese speaking employees, on the individual level. Consequently, there has been hardly any criticisms of them from the public or academic community.

In South America, Chinese as a foreign language only gained prominence in the mid-1990s and does not have a well-established presence in the education system compared to English or European languages. According to Evelia Romano, Yu Hwa Wu and Helena Liu's review of Chinese language education in the region, Chile relies heavily on Chinese government support through CIs, the Ministry of Education and the Chinese Embassy to run its Chinese language education in schools.

Similarly, Roie Yellinek, Yossi Mann and Udi Lebel's study of CIs in Arabic speaking countries in the Middle East and Africa (Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, UAE, Bahrain and Tunisia) concludes that CIs have been welcomed because they satisfy the demand of Chinese language education and improve the quality of education in the region. Like Africa, they have not faced criticisms in these contexts. It therefore seems likely that CIs and CCs will continue to exist and operate in these areas and their numbers may even grow.

# **Closure rates are insufficient to end CIs/CCs in the near future**

A final point to emerge from the data is that it would take a long time for all CIs/CCs to be shut down based on current closure rates. The first closure occurred in 2013, at McMaster University's CI in Canada, and was followed by a further three closures in that same year. The years 2014 and 2015 saw four closures each. There was one closure in 2016 and three in 2017. Closures began in earnest from 2018 which saw 14 closures, followed by 27 in 2019 and 29 in 2020. Another 26 closed in 2021. This is an average of almost 12.5 closures per year. Most closures occurred from 2018 to 2021, with 96 closures, again predominately in the USA, giving an average of 24 closures per year for this period. At the time of publication, one CI had closed in 2022, and the University of Helsinki in Finland had decided not to renew the contract for its CI, which will see the institute close in January 2023.

This might suggest that CIs and CCs are on their way out, but based on these closure rates, it would take from 72 to 138 years for them to disappear completely. This is approaching the lifespan of the British Council and Alliance Francaise and would make CIs and CCs one of the longest established language and culture promotion institutions in the world. Closure rates would have to increase significantly for anything else to happen.

## **China's response to CI/CC closures**

China has of course responded to the closure of CIs and CCs. Some of these responses are typical of its reactions to criticisms of its domestic and international policies and actions. For example, when India's Ministry of Education announced its review of CIs, the Chinese Embassy issued a statement saying that it hoped that 'Indian relevant parties can treat Confucius Institutes and China-India higher education cooperation in an objective and fair manner, avoid politicising normal cooperation and maintain healthy and stable development of China-India people-to-people and cultural exchanges'. Similarly, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian called the USA's actions towards CIs a 'smear' on China which was 'demonising and stigmatising the normal operation of China-US co-operation projects'.

Beyond these typical denouncements however, China has also taken steps to modify

how CIs and CCs are managed. Early in 2020, the Office of Chinese Language Council International (commonly known as Hanban), China's language and culture promotion body directly under the Ministry of Education, renegotiated CI agreements with some Australian universities at their behest. For example, the University of Melbourne's agreement was changed to make clear that the university maintained the 'right to determine the content of the curriculum and the manner of instruction for all programs administered by the institute', and the University of Queensland's agreement similarly asserted that the activities of the CI and their content were to be 'solely under the University of Queensland's ambit and control'. In June of the same year, Hanban relinquished all responsibility for CIs and CCs. This was taken up by the Chinese International Education Foundation (中国国际中文教育基金会 *zhōngguó guójí zhōngwén jiàoyù jījīn huì*), a non-governmental organisation made up of universities and companies.

This is clearly an attempt to distance CIs and CCs from the Chinese government and assuage concerns about them. The *Global Times* quoted an unnamed analyst as saying this change 'will better facilitate Chinese language teaching overseas and disperse the Western misinterpretation that the organisation served as China's ideological marketing machine'. It also indicates that CIs and CCs are important to China, and it is willing to make changes to keep them.

## Conclusions and future directions

CIs and CCs are an exercise in external language spread—the promotion of the learning and teaching of a country's language beyond its borders. Such efforts are based on the premise that a country can, through language learning and teaching, 'foster a favourable image in order to ensure greater power for the state in international relations'. However, like any such efforts, the prospects of CIs and CCs are shaped through responses to them. As this article has shown, it is these responses that will determine their future direction.

To return to the questions I posed earlier, the spate of closures does not signal the end of CIs and CCs. The worsening of relations between China, North America, Europe and Australia certainly means that there are fewer of them in slightly fewer places, and that closures will likely continue in these regions. Closures may also occur in Asia for similar reasons. However, CIs and CCs are unlikely to disappear completely. Their future appears to be in South America, Africa and the Middle East, where the nature of relations with China means views of China have remained

largely positive and where CIs and CCs address the need for resources to support Chinese language and culture education.

<sup>1</sup> **The total number given for each country in this section refers to CIs only. It is based on a list of existing CIs on the DigMandarin website crosschecked with the list of closures on the *In the Name of Confucius* website. Consistent and accurate data for the number of CCs in each country is not available.**

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*Image: A statue of Confucius in Hunan, China. Credit: Rob Webb/Flickr.*