

**Institutional Responses to Environmental Pressures:
Confucius Institute Closures in the United States**

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Abstract

In 2004 China began establishing Confucius Institutes at universities around the world with the aim of promoting Chinese language and culture. At their peak, more than 100 operated at universities in the United States. Questions surrounding Confucius Institutes have existed since they first began to proliferate, and in 2018 the federal government responded to those concerns with policy changes tied to federal funding to encourage the closure of Confucius Institutes in the United States. This paper uses critical discourse analysis to examine how the language of university press releases relays the ideological and power dimensions involved in the decision to close a campus Confucius Institute in the United States and how the language used in university issued press releases reflects the broader discourse surrounding Confucius Institutes and U.S.-Sino relations.

Keywords: Confucius Institutes, higher education, critical discourse analysis, power, resource dependence theory

Introduction

In 2004 China began establishing Confucius Institutes (CIs) at universities around the world. By 2011, China had established more than 400 CIs to help shape its image abroad, including 70 in the US. Because they are funded in part by the Chinese government, overseen by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), and staffed by faculty from Chinese universities, concerns

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surrounding academic freedom, intellectual property theft, and pro-Chinese propaganda have been voiced by CI critics. Mounting political pressure and rising tensions between the US and China in recent years has led to the closure of CIs housed on university campuses across the US.

Previous research on CIs focuses on the motivations of the Chinese government, messaging surrounding CIs, the institutes in various global contexts, and curriculum and programming offered. This study seeks to examine how the language of university press releases relays the ideological and power dimensions involved in the decision to close a CI in the US following national government policy intervention. As concerns around foreign influence in higher education grow globally, national policy decisions based on those concerns will shape how universities around the globe are forced to respond. Already, Sweden has taken the steps to close all of the CIs within its borders, and pressure is mounting for other countries to follow suit (Myklebust, 2020).

Contributions

This research contributes to the field of comparative and international higher education by beginning to explore how the global political landscape and resulting national policy decisions can have a direct effect on global partnerships within higher education.

Background and Context

The first CI in the US opened at the University of Maryland in 2004. Since then, CIs have opened at campuses across the US with most states housing at least one. In their early years, CIs were inconspicuous. Using staff from partner universities in China and funding from Hanban, they provide universities and surrounding communities with access to Chinese language instruction to meet increasing demand for Chinese language skills at a cost lower than a full academic department.

Early concerns surrounding CIs were related to academic freedom and came from faculty (Redden, 2012). In 2014, the AAUP issued a report naming their concerns about CIs (American Association of University Professors, 2014). The pressure to close CIs has continued consistently since,

growing to include stakeholders both in and outside of academia (Evans, 2020; Pence, 2018; Redden, 2018). In August 2018, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was passed and included a directive that restricts the use of certain Department of Defense funds at institutions hosting CIs. Since the passage of NDAA, many CIs have closed—most at universities not receiving any Department of Defense funds.

Literature Review

Though CIs are relatively new, China is not the first country to launch language and culture institutes in foreign countries. European nations have been establishing similar institutes since the late-1800s (Cai, 2019). The research on these institutes comes primarily from political science and uses soft power as the theoretical framework. Soft power—a term coined by Joseph Nye (1990)—is related to a nation’s ability to control the actions of others without force or coercion. While soft power can be understood in relation to environmental forces and their role in institutional decision making in higher education, it is more relevant to the understanding of countries’ motivations in the formation and dispersal of CIs and similar institutes than institutions’ decision to shutter them (Cai, 2019; Cichosz & Zhang, 2014; Hartig, 2012; Lien & Oh, 2014; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Wu and Zha (2018) proposed a new typology for analyzing the diffusion of innovations in higher education internationalization. In their typology, they categorize cross-national interactions between systems as inward-oriented and outward-oriented. Like soft power, this typology is useful for understanding China’s motivations for the establishment of and other countries’ motivations for adoption of CIs is not an ideal fit for this study. While existing literature extensively covers the motivations of the Chinese government, messaging surrounding CIs, the institutes in various global contexts, curriculum and programming offered, and motivations for housing a CI, a gap remains in understanding the closure of these once-popular organizational fixtures.

Because of the resources at stake and the power dynamics at play in the decision to shutter CIs, resource dependence theory (RDT) provides the most appropriate framework for this analysis. RDT posits that organizations are interdependent, and that interdependency coupled with uncertainty leads to a focus on survival. Additionally, patterns of dependence lead to power dynamics that influence organizational behavior (Pfeffer, 1987). Higher education institutions are dependent on national governments for funding, and the uncertainty caused by the passage of legislation tied to funds leads to uncertainty that causes institutions to act.

Data and Methodology

The data for this study is comprised of university-issued press releases related to the closure of their respective CI. University issued press releases were chosen because press releases are meant to be understood as coming from the institution. Press releases are publicly available, widely used, and have a distinct form and function. The press releases in this study are those from the University of Chicago, North Carolina State University, and the University of Oregon.

This study employs Fairclough's (2015) approach to critical discourse analysis to analyze the press releases issued by universities in relation to their decision to shutter their CI. Fairclough outlines a ten-question process for describing the text being analyzed followed by interpretation and explanation. The questions in the process focus on vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures. This study follows that process.

Initial Findings

Despite broader discourse involving discussions surrounding academic freedom, free speech, and China's growing economic power and rising star in global politics as well as letters from both the American Association of University Professors and University of Chicago faculty, both the University of Chicago and North Carolina State seem to go out of their way to avoid mentioning any of those concerns as if there is a fear of repercussions for stating the real reasons for the closure decision.

In contrast, the language of the University of Oregon's press release related to the closure of its Confucius Institute relates ideological and power dimensions involved in the decision. The United States federal government, through legislative action and access to federal dollars, chose to exert its power over institutions of higher education in their relationships with China, a nation on increasingly unfriendly terms with other global powers.

Author Note

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