

Conflicts Arising out of Efforts at International Cooperation in Education : A Case Study on the Confucius Institute

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Abstract

The Confucius Institutes, spread throughout the world, not only set off a new round of "Chinese fever", but also created a new model of international cooperation in education. More and more people know about the institute; at the same time, due to political factors, economic interests, cultural differences, communication, conflicts seem inevitable. In this paper, we will study cases of academic conflict which occur during the running of the Confucius Institute. We shall analyse why these conflicts arise, and examine options for resolving them.

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ปัญหาที่เกิดขึ้นในการร่วมมือด้านการศึกษา : กรณีศึกษาสถาบันขึ้นจืด

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บทคัดย่อ

สถาบันขึ้นจืดที่กระจายอยู่ทั่วโลก นอกจากจะทำให้มี "ค่านิยมในความเป็นจีน" เกิดขึ้นแล้ว ยังเป็นการสร้างแบบแผนความร่วมมือด้านการศึกษาในระดับนานาชาติอีกด้วย ซึ่งถือเป็นของสถาบันขึ้นจืด ได้เป็นที่รู้จักกันอย่างกว้างขวาง ในขณะเดียวกันก็ได้มีความขัดแย้งเกิดขึ้นเนื่องมาจากปัจจัยทางด้าน การเมือง ผลประโยชน์ทางเศรษฐกิจ ความแตกต่างระหว่างวัฒนธรรม การสื่อสาร และความขัดแย้งด่างๆ บทความนี้เป็นการศึกษาความขัดแย้งทางด้านวิชาการที่เกิดขึ้นในระหว่างการดำเนินงานของสถาบันขึ้นจืด โดยจะวิเคราะห์ถึงสาเหตุสำคัญที่ทำให้เกิดความขัดแย้งและเสนอแนวทางในการแก้ไขปัญหาดังกล่าว

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Since the world's first Confucius Institute was inaugurated in Seoul, South Korea in November 2004, we have witnessed the proliferation of "Chinese fever" worldwide. By November 2009, there were 282 Confucius Institutes and 274 Confucius Classrooms established in 88 countries and regions. 282 Confucius Institutes currently operate in 84 countries, of which 70 are in 27 Asian countries; 21 in 15 African countries; 94 in 29 European countries; 87 in 11 American countries, and 10 in two Oceanic Countries. 274 Confucius Classrooms are located in 28 countries, of which 27 are in 10 Asian countries; 4 classrooms are in 4 African countries; 34 are in 7 European countries; 205 are in 6 American countries, and 2 are in 1 Oceanic country. In the states of Myanmar, Mali, the Bahamas and Tunisia there are Confucius classrooms, but as yet no institutes. (Hanban, 2010a)

In just five years, Chinese language and culture have reached every corner of the world thanks to the work of the Confucius Institute. The Goethe Institute and the Instituto Cervantes, which have the same mission of promoting the national language and culture of Germany and Spain respectively, are far behind in this regard. Indeed, the rapid development and the wide geographical distribution of the Confucius Institute have allowed it to catch up with the historical British Council and the French Union. One of the reasons the Confucius Institute has spread so fast all over the world is its unique modus operandi: This non-profit organisation promotes Chinese language and Chinese culture by awarding high achievers at the institute's headquarters in Beijing, and by Chinese and foreign universities acting as co-hosts for international cooperation in education. The approach is different from traditional education exchanges between overseas students, different from education abroad, and different from the "Sino-International cooperative education projects" whose purpose is to import high-quality educational resources from outside China. "Going out" and "foreign cooperation" are the two main features of the approach: "Going out" means the establishment of Confucius Institutes in foreign universities and promoting Chinese language and Chinese culture locally. "Chinese-International cooperation" means the sharing of investment funds, locations, staff, and teaching resources, etc.

All communication and efforts at cooperation are accompanied by contradictions and conflicts. The Confucius Institute, enacting a new pattern of international cooperation in education, did not enjoy a long period of preparation, adjustment, and pilot studies before being launched throughout the world. All kinds of academic and cultural activities were rapidly put together and, fortunately, brought gratifying results; at the same time, it also lead to some suspicion and criticism. Some

brought "China threat" theory up again; some espoused Chinese "cultural aggression", and some fabricated a "Confucius conspiracy". As a newly emerging force, the Confucius Institute's definition and its implications have not been widely understood and accepted. Even in those foreign universities acting as hosts of the institute, there are teachers and students who think that the institute promotes Confucianism. On the other hand, the booming trend of the Confucius Institute, with the rise of China's comprehensive national strength, is bound to alert the wary and awaken the vigilant abroad. The more complex issue regards differences in ideology or political persuasion expressed by all societies, economies and cultures.

Case I

There was a Chinese language contest at Confucius Institute A, and a representative of one of the high schools involved did not rank highly. After the contest, the student's parents, with the teacher as a joint author, published an article in the local newspaper under pseudonyms, wantonly criticising and attacking the Confucius Institute. The article obviously impacted negatively on the Confucius Institute.

This particular contest attracted many schools in the surrounding area; many teachers and directors of the Confucius Institute were invited to act as judges. This ought to have been a wonderful chance to expand the institute's influence, but because of the differences of opinion, things went the other way. After an inquiry, it was made clear that the parents of the student in question had repeatedly made unfriendly remarks in the local media pertaining to mainland China; losing the contest, therefore, gave this group an opportunity to voice their opinions. According to the "hidden rules" of this kind of contest, each school can "share" the ranking; but at this contest, Confucius Institute A did not "care" about the school's "honor", and this further contributed to the joint attack. It is said that it is better to have a known enemy than a false friend. Political provocation, political hostility, and suspicion seemingly cannot be avoided. However, on the basis of persisting on principle, we can still improve methods and approaches through unremitting efforts to establish a respectable image and reputation for the Confucius Institute, in order for it to gain understanding and acceptance.

In contrast to the case above, it is more common for conflicts to arise out of the different benefits offered by the Confucius Institute and by local Chinese teaching institutes. The Confucius Institute certainly cooperates with both Chinese and foreign universities by taking some of the Chinese major courses and Chinese elective courses.

But the main objective of the Confucius Institute is teaching the public. As a non-profit educational institute, it also receives support from its headquarters and from Chinese and local universities. The Confucius Institute has professional teachers, a rich archive of teaching resources, a strong team of volunteers, and is designed to stand out among the institutes in foreign countries, in which the good and bad are often intermingled. Initially, the establishment of almost every new Confucius Institute is problematic for local Chinese teaching institutes (like opening a Wal-Mart next to a small independent shop). The potential result of this unique academic market is an increase in the level of disharmony, which can be an obstacle to the furtherance of the Confucius Institute.

Case II

The local host university of Confucius Institute B has long had a Department of Chinese and a number of local teachers, but few students. They have also opened public language training courses, as the university's "tertiary industry" and as a sideline for the teachers. Following its establishment, Confucius Institute B opened these public language training courses under a relatively high standard of teaching, making use of diverse test books and courses, and offering a much lower tuition fee compared with the market price. In further self-promotion, it even opened a number of free courses. Students not only participate in a wide variety of cultural activities, but also have the opportunity to get a Confucius Institute scholarship to attend a summer or winter camp. The Confucius Institute also organised various Chinese tests (such as HSK, BCT, YCT, etc.). Under so many favorable conditions, students preferred the Confucius Institute rather than the Chinese Department; this change caused significant income loss for the Chinese Department and led to significant dissatisfaction with the Institute amongst the local teachers.

Case III

The foreign co-host of Confucius Institute C, has a Department of Chinese and a number of local teachers, too, but has not opened public language training courses. The leader of the local university thought highly of the great resources and high teaching standard of the Confucius Institute and so handed over control of all Chinese courses and some of the academic management to it. Thanks to the efforts of the professional Chinese teachers, the curriculum is becoming increasingly strong, teaching has obviously improved, and cooperation is positively harmonious. However, the teachers and volunteers have Doctor's degrees or Master's degrees, and Chinese is their mother

tongue, whereas most of the local teachers in the university are bachelor's graduates of the university. The HSK level of some of them is not even as good as some ethnic Chinese students. In such an environment, the differences are so evident that the local teachers became teachers' assistants instead of lecturers, and their role within academic management became less pronounced. It is natural that the teachers felt their status – and their future with the school – was threatened.

This kind of conflict, involving individual and group profit is often fatal, and is sometimes overlooked. Similarly, many Chinese people living overseas face criticism for the ways they make a living or otherwise do business, but they cannot understand where the fault is: They work hard, they get up early, gain through their own hard work, and provide high-quality services, so why are there still complaints? The Confucius Institute offers great teaching at a low-cost, and a large number of volunteers work in tough conditions.

In fact, the conflict here did not arise due to any interaction between the parties, but because one party was negatively impacted by the actions of the other party. Especially when this conflict is perceived by the local university, the relationship between the two becomes very delicate. Artificial friction and other barriers to cooperation are the result. In light of the conflicts seen in these two cases, the Confucius Institute needs to remember that its own position is to promote Chinese language and culture, and to make more people aware of China. The idea is to go out and form alliances, rather than to simply seize the market. Before developing a specific academic approach for a certain Confucius Institute, therefore, we should do more in-depth surveys about the Chinese training market, more detailed analyses of the target population by separating the target customers from the host university; or the institute could find a way to endorse joint training, increasing chances of collaboration and mutual benefit, or even surrender part of the profits. For example, in Case 3, the Confucius Institute offered generous scholarships to help Chinese teachers in the local university further their studies in China, and set up a regular teachers' training program for local Chinese teachers focused on local teacher training. The idea is to teach the man to fish for himself instead of capitalising on his ignorance.

The Confucius Institute, is laying down a new pattern of international cooperation in education, is going to face more cross-cultural conflict. In his 1981 publication, *Primitive Culture*, the social anthropologist, Edward B. Taylor, defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Taylor, 1998)

Regardless of teaching philosophy, education systems, campus culture, human behavioral norms, ways of thinking, values, language and so on, international cooperation in education is permeated throughout with cultural factors, and is an integral part of cultural evolution. The teachers and students from different backgrounds are the focus of international cooperation. Specific to the Confucius Institute, there is cross-cultural communication all the time, not only among the Chinese and foreign directors, teachers and other staff, but also between Chinese teachers and local students. Varied and diffuse cultural elements will always confront each other. Here we refer to both conflicting cultural elements in local settings, and the conflicting cultural backgrounds of the people working within the Confucius Institute.

Case IV

The Chinese staff of the Confucius Institute interfered with – and overly criticised – the personal lives of foreign staff from a Chinese ethical standpoint; this caused great conflict and, as a result, further cooperation is threatened.

Case V

Most of the volunteers who are sent to Confucius Institutes through the Volunteer Chinese Teachers Program (Hanban 2010b) are recent graduates. Because their social and cultural environment has been completely changed through having been relocated, they often feel fatigue and misunderstanding and may have trouble acclimatizing. It has even led to the disruption of ingrained social and cultural values, causing an inability to deal with the new environment and erratic behavior. Owing to this culture shock, some young teachers have been sent back home. A young volunteer in Confucius Institute E suddenly felt like escaping the bondage of family and school; the volunteer did whatever she wanted without thinking about the consequences of her actions, but often felt alone, paralysed and helpless. She soon developed a mental illness and had no choice but to return to China.

The two cases above show the cultural dimensions of this conflict. With the vigorous development of the Confucius Institute, a large number of experts, scholars, teachers and volunteers are sent abroad; all of them face the challenges that come with living in a new social and cultural environment. In this metamorphosis, not promptly assimilating local behavior and customs, and failure to adapt to and integrate with the local socio-cultural environment, will result in problems at work, and possibly the change

could affect their psychological health. Besides the selection system, the Confucius Institute headquarters currently organises specialised training courses for directors, teachers and volunteers. One part of the course is training in cross-cultural skills, but weaknesses remain: There are serious time constraints, and the course is perceived as cursory and too theoretical.

Case VI

In order to develop the local teachers' skills, the Confucius Institute offered 100 scholarships to the Ministry of Education of Country A, selected from those senior students majoring in Chinese. The scholarships were granted in order to further the students' studies in China; after graduation, they came back to their home country and became Chinese teachers. In spite of such a timely response to the shortage of Chinese teachers, few colleges and universities responded at the scholarship conference for the Ministry of Education. The local dean of the Confucius Institute explained why: Teaching is a civil service position in Country A, with the opportunity of becoming a college teacher after graduation. Because they are to become civil servants directly after graduation, more students are selected for the scholarship and so more civil servants are "kidnapped" a few years later. Any university in country A sending students to study in China must have a complimentary government position waiting for the returning teacher, which means space is very limited. The Confucius Institute offered the scholarships with good intentions, but the official systems of control are compromised.

Case VII

Most the Confucius Institute's teachers and volunteers are from Chinese universities and hold majors in Chinese or Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. Some traditional academic philosophies – the approaches to teaching foreign students in China – sometimes seem unsuitable. Two teachers in Confucius Institute G espouse two extremely different teaching methods: One lectures all the time, does not consider how much information is getting across to the students, and just wants to complete the teaching plan. The result is that he might be satisfied, but the students complain incessantly. The other teacher applies the "student-centered" philosophy of "Happy Teaching" without analysis. He simply panders to the likes and dislikes of the students; teaching management is at a minimum.

The conflict between these teaching methodologies is more pronounced than the above-mentioned cultural conflicts because cultural adaptation and compromise alone are no solution. International cooperation in education means finding common ground while retaining variety and cultural independence: The goal is to achieve Harmony and Diversity simultaneously. The only way to realise this is to do in-depth comparative analyses of many educational philosophies, teaching methods and cultural systems. Through the continuous efforts of both parties, a cross-cultural team can be built which will act positively and lead us to true cultural collaboration.

In summary, the Confucius Institute, enacting a new pattern of international cooperation in education, has to face to all kinds of conflicts and difficulties caused by political, economic, and cultural factors. And the key to the riddle lies within: What hand forces the promotion of Chinese language? How can the Confucius Institute act most effectively in nurturing the local educators? As cultural missionary, how can the Confucius Institute most successfully bring its work to far flung states? All of these questions need to be both posed and puzzled over by everyone involved in this work.

Reference

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