

Confucius Institutes: Chinese Soft Power in Thailand

Juthatip Klaitabtim¹

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, Kasetsart University, Thailand

Email: fsocjtk@ku.ac.th, © Authors

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Abstract

This research aims to study 1) the implementation of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Thailand, and 2) to verify that Confucius Institutes are the Chinese soft power in Thailand. It is qualitative research adopting documentary research and in-depth interviews. The results of this research indicate that 16 Confucius Institutes have successfully established and promoted the Chinese language and culture. The implementation of CIs in Thailand consists of Chinese language teaching, cultural activities, International Chinese language scholarship, Chinese Language Proficiency Tests, and Chinese volunteer teachers. CIs in Thailand become the first largest CIs in Southeast Asia based on the number of CIs. From 2006-2021 more than 2,000 cultural activities were organized by CIs.

The research also reveals that Confucius Institutes are the Chinese Soft Power in accordance with Joseph S. Nye's concept of "soft power". CIs in Thailand have been regarded as an instrument for promoting and disseminating Chinese culture and values. Chinese soft power portrayed by CIs has operated through cultural cooperation at all levels; government, educational institutes, and individual levels. The Chinese language has increasingly influenced in Thailand. China successfully uses CIs as an instrument to cultivate its soft power in Thailand. Consequently, Chinese soft power under the implementation of CIs has played a vital role in enhancing friendship and collaboration between Thailand and China. Moreover, Confucius Institutes help to promote mutual understanding and friendship between people of the two countries.

Introduction:

Over a decade, China has increasingly played a vital role in the international economy and politics. Although China has pursued its national interests through the exercise of "soft power", the fear regarding China's threat has been widely debated. The rising China has raised concern in the United States. China's threat initiative by the United States portrayed China

as a "public enemy" or a "common enemy" of the global community (Tangyuenyong, 2017). In response to this critique, Chinese policymakers propose the idea of "peaceful development" and "harmonious world". The Chinese leader, President XI Jinping has realized that soft power and national image building are essential for Chinese foreign policy. China's effort to disseminate Chinese language and culture turned to the establishment of Confucius Institutes (Cis).

The Confucius Institutes funded by the Chinese government have been established since 2004. The purpose of CIs is to promote Chinese language and culture. Since 2004, CIs have widespread increased across the region with a number of partnerships with universities in 146 countries, including in NATO member states. In 2020, there were 548 CIs at University and 1,193 Confucius Classroom (CCs) worldwide at primary and secondary schools. CIs have been regarded as part of Chinese soft power initiative. The CIs initiative takes on a number of measures which differentiate it from other cultural institutes because CIs become a structural unit of a host university, and employ a double directorship system (Confucius Institutes, 2022).

Recently, CIs have been criticized by Western scholars regarding the motivations, the procedures of installation in the host country and self-censorship over sensitively political aspect. In 2014 there were numerous scandals involving issues on censorship, academic freedom and the tough control exerted by Hanban (Office of Chinese language, Council International). As a result, Chinese soft power instrument under the Confucius Institute (CIs) has been criticized by Western medias and intellectuals as "sharp power". Several countries demonstrate deep anxiety regarding rising China's economic and military power in recipient states, especially in United States and other western countries. From Western scholars' point of views, the Chinese government implements these sharp power instruments aimed at taking tight control over the public opinion. The executive summary of Chinese soft power and its implications for the United States noted that, "China in recent years has been pursuing national interest through its exercise internationally of soft power and economic power". However, these critiques have not deterred China's efforts to spread its soft power internationally. President Xi Jinping has launched a presentation of a "lovable" image of China that would create the balance between confidence and humility as a tool to win over friends. (Repnikova, 2022).

In contrast to United States and other western countries, Thailand has perceived CIs in the positive

way and welcomed CIs extensively. In 2006, CIs have been established in Thailand and funded by the Chinese government aimed at advocating Chinese language and culture. The friendship between China and Thailand have hampered the development of CIs. Thailand has embraced Chinese soft power by expanding CIs throughout the country. By 2017, Thailand becomes a regional forerunner by hosting 16 CIs at Thai universities as follows: Chulalongkorn University, Kasetsart University, Khon Kaen University, Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Mai University, Bansomdej Chaopraya Rajabhat University, Mahasarakham University, Prince of Songkla University at Phuket, Suan Dusit University Suphanburi Campus, Betong Municipality, Prince of Songkla University, Burapha University, Confucius Institute at Assumption University, Maritime Silk Road CI Dhurakij Pundit University, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University and Maritime Silk Road Phranakhon Rajabhat University.

CIs in Thailand are an example of successful Chinese soft power witnessed from the establishment of 16 CIs at host universities in Thailand with over a million students studying Chinese language. This research aims to study the implementation of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Thailand and to verify that Confucius Institutes are the Chinese soft power in Thailand.

Research Question:

Are Confucius Institutes in Thailand the Chinese soft power or sharp power?

Research Methods:

This qualitative research employing secondary data, including Thai and English textbooks, official documents, academic reports, government publications and annual reports of CIs in Thailand. In - depth interview of 6 prominent scholars and executives were applied in the research. While the empirical data are Thailand-focused, this research scrutinize with a reflection on China's soft power at large.

Table 1

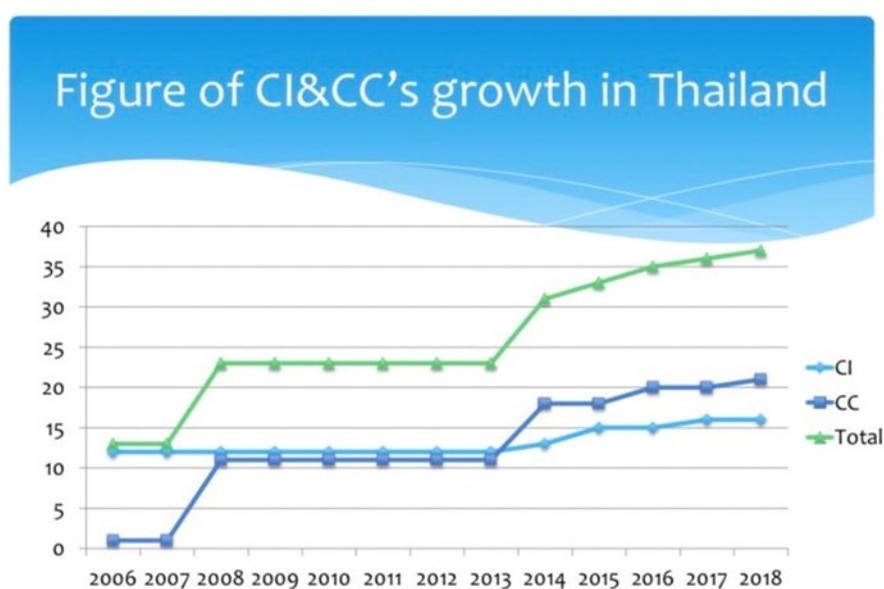
List of CIs in Thailand

CIs of Thailand (Chinese Partner)	Place	Established Year
Kasetsart University (Huaqiao University)	Bangkok	2006
Chulalongkorn University (Peking University)	Bangkok	2006
Khon Kaen University (Southwest University)	Khon Kaen	2006
Mae Fah Luang University (Xiamen University)	Chiang Rai	2006
Chiang Mai University (Yunnan Normal University)	Chiang Mai	2006
Bansomdej Chaopraya Rajabhat University (Tianjin Normal University)	Bangkok	2006
Maharakham University (Guangxi University of Nationalities)	Maharakham	2006
Prince of Songkla University (Guangxi Normal University)	Songkla	2006
Prince of Songkla University at Phuket (Shanghai University)	Phuket	2006
Suan Dusit University Suphanburi Campus (Guangxi University)	Suphanburi	2006
Betong Municipality (Chongqing University)	Yala	2006
Burapha University (Wenzhou University, Wenzhou Medical College)	Chonburi	2006
Confucius Institute at Assumption University (Tianjin Science & Technology University)	Bangkok	2014
Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine)	Bangkok	2015
Maritime Silk Road CI Dhurakij Pundit University (Tianjin Normal University)	Bangkok	2015
Maritime Silk Road Phranakhon Rajabhat University (Dali University)	Bangkok	2017

Source: Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2019

Figure 1

Number of CIs & CCs in Thailand from 2006-2018



Source: Global Database of Minzu University of China, 2019

During the establishment of CIs in Thailand, different cooperative models and conditions can be found, with a joint venture structure between a Chinese university and Thai partner. Obviously, all Thai-host universities have Chinese study department. The CIs in Thailand have two functions; Chinese language and culture governed by Office of Chinese language, Council International (Hanban). Hanban is an educational institute, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Education of China. All CIs in Thailand have been funded by both China and Thailand. Hanban has played a crucial role in providing the initial funding and pays for annual expenses within the duration of CIs contract. Hanban also provides textbooks, audio - visual materials and multimedia courseware for facilitating teaching and enhancing library collections. While the Thai host CIs supplied office, classrooms and libraries. The CIs in host universities are administered by Hanban. However, each CIs have their own decisions for teaching programs and cultural activities. Hanban is responsible for examining and approving implementation plans for annual projects, annual budgetary items and financial accounts of each CIS (Zhou, 2021).

The implementation of CIs in Thailand consists of Chinese language teaching, cultural activities, International Chinese language scholarship, Chinese language proficiency tests and Chinese volunteer teachers.

1. Chinese language teaching

CIs have provided Chinese language instruction and educational programs for Thai students and learners. Director of SEAMO Regional Center for Higher Education and Development points out that Chinese language is significantly influential in Thailand. Thai students aware of the importance of Chinese language. Thai learners realize that Chinese learning provide more opportunity for them to engage in job recruitment. Furthermore, Chinese language teaching fosters the cultural exchange and mutual understanding between people of China and Thailand. Chinese language has been widely welcomed by Thai witnessed from the increasing number

of Chinese classes in Thailand. The establishment of CIs into Thai universities and local community has impacted on the increase of Thai students studying Chinese language. Since 2010s Chinese language instruction in Thailand has been the 2nd popular language next to English. According to Hanban report the number of Thai students studying Chinese in 2015 has exceed 800,000 (Hanban, 2021).

Professor Fu Zhengyou, senior mentor of Confucius Institute, Chulalongkorn University represents that the increasing awareness of Thai people has affected in the appeal of learning Chinese. The popularity of Chinese learning has grown significantly which is demonstrated by the fact that all Thai-host universities have department of Chinese study. As a former CI director of Chulalongkorn University and has been in Thailand for 15 years, Professor Fu has the notion that the number of Thai students learning Chinese at the present time has increase to approximately one million. It can be said that CIs have great influence on Chinese language teaching in Thailand.

2. Cultural Activities

Cultural activities which organized by CIs in Thailand have related with Chinese traditions and arts. There are various activities such as Chinese New Year Festival, Chinese Poet's Day, Moon Festival, Chinese Painting Festival, Chinese Opera Festival, Guzhen Event, Chinese martial art Festival and Chinese Speech Contest.

3. International Chinese language scholarship

The CIs in Thailand have promoted friendship relations between China and Thailand through providing international Chinese language scholarship. CIs have provided scholarships to Thai students and teachers for studying Chinese language and conducting research. The scholarship composed of Confucius Institute Scholarships (CIS), CHINA-AUN Scholarships for ASEAN students, Belt and Road Initiative (BRS) scholarships and scholarships from Chinese government. In addition, there is a Chinese intern's program for teaching Chinese language in Thailand which collaborated between Suan Dusit University at Suphanburi Campus and Guangxi University.

4. Chinese Language Proficiency Tests

The Chinese Language Proficiency Tests can be categorized into four types as follows; HSK HSKK YCT BCT.

- The HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) is an international standardized test to assess the Chinese language proficiency of non-native speakers. HSK test are organized globally on a regular basis. The test contents compound of daily life Chinese language, academic Chinese language and business Chinese language. Students who passed the test are awarded the relevant level of Chinese Proficiency Certificate.
- HSKK (Hanyu Shuiping Kouyu Kaoshi) is a Chinese Proficiency Spoken Test. It tests predominantly speaking skills. Students who passed HSKK will get HSKK certificate.
- YCT (Youth Chinese Test) is an international standardized test of Chinese language proficiency for young foreign students. The YCT consist of writing and speaking test. The writing test divide into four levels (YCT level I - IV). The speaking test divide from the YCT beginner level to YCT intermediate level.

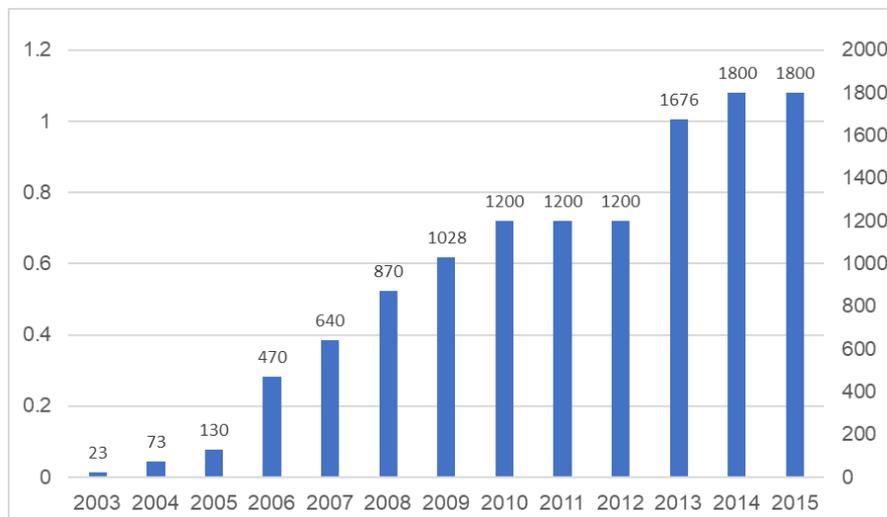
- BCT (Business Chinese Test) is an international standardized test designed to assess the Chinese-language proficiency of non-native speakers engaged in business activities. The BCT assesses Chinese-language ability in a wide range of business - related situations, daily life and social interactions. There are no restrictions on the candidates' age, education or time spent learning Chinese.

5. Chinese volunteer teachers

The lack of qualified Chinese language teachers becomes a major obstacle for Chinese teaching in Thailand. To solve this problem, Ministry of Education of Thailand has requested China to supply over a thousand teachers from China to help teaching Chinese language in Thailand (Trisanawadee, 2020). Professor Fu explains that China has dispatched over 1,000 Chinese language teachers annually to Thai affiliated university and provided training programs for Thai teachers. CIs also operate exchange program regarding Chinese volunteer teachers which dispatched to Thailand about 1,500 to 1,600 annually under the cooperation between Ministry of Education in Thailand and China. The increasing Chinese volunteer teachers represent the growing demands for Chinese language study.

Figure 2

Number of Chinese volunteer teachers in Thailand



Source: Chinese Cultural Diplomacy towards ASEAN Countries: Case Study of Confucius Institutes in Thailand, 2020

The above data indicates that over a decade the number of Chinese volunteer teachers have increased every year and reached to over 1,000 in 2009. However, volunteer teachers are directly employed by Thai universities, only a few of them hired through Hanban's project.

Confucius Institute Categories:

Confucius Institutes in Thailand can be categorized into 4 types regarding purpose of establishment.

1. Chinese language teaching - Confucius Institutes: CI of Chulalongkorn University, Kasetsart University, Kon Kaen university, Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Mai University, Bansomdej Chaopraya Rajabhat University, Mahasarakham University, Prince of Songkla University, Prince of Songkla University at Phuket, Burapha University and Suan Dusit University Suphanburi Campus.

2. Specific Confucius Institutes: CI of traditional Chinese medicine of Huachiew Chalermprakiet University and CI of business Chinese language at Assumption University.

3. CIs of Betong Municipality: the affiliated relations between Betong municipality and Chongqing university aimed at disseminating Chinese language and culture to Thai, Malaysian and other foreigner.

4. Maritime Silk Road Confucius Institutes are collaboration between network of university, governmental and private educational institute from China and Thailand. Dhurakit Pundit University is the cooperative unit of this group. Maritime Silk Road CIs consist of Dhurakit Pundit University, King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok and Phranakhon Rajabhat University.

It can be noted that some CIs organize business exchange program. CI at Khon Kaen University is successful in conducting China business trip for Thai entrepreneur and helps Chongqing Motorbike entered into Thai market. The two Maritime Silk Road CIs have become primary task of CIs in facilitating Thai enterprise and official to strengthen trade and

economic cooperation between China and Thailand. A variety of meeting such as "New Maritime Silk Road and Southeast Asia", "Belt & Road Initiative: Joint Conference of ASEAN CI", BRI and Great Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation were organized. The Maritime Silk Road Phranakhon Rajabhat University has cooperated with Chinese investors located at Thai - Chinese Rayong Industrial Zone. Under this collaboration, the CI has to provide Chinese language training for Thai employees. It can be said that the Thai government has been involved in those commercial activities organized at CIs (Zhou, 2021).

Analysis of Confucius Institutes: the Chinese Soft Power in Thailand:

According to Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power, soft power can be defined as the capacity of nation to achieve desired objectives through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Nye differentiated between hard and soft power, he articulated hard power as drawing on inducement (economic channels) and coercion (military threats). On the contrary, soft power is co-optive power and relies on attraction. (Nye, 2005). Soft power resources include culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Culture has frequently been regarded among the core foundations of soft power. Based on Nye's concept of soft power and the opinion of 6 scholars and executives profoundly affirm that Confucius Institutes are the Chinese Soft Power in Thailand.

China has pursued its national interests through the exercise of soft power with the image of a lovable China. Soft power transmitting has currently been a major concern of Chinese foreign policy. The intellectuals view that culture is the core resource of a state's power. China tends to emphasize on cultural dimension. Cultural power is notable in the implementation of the core Chinese soft power initiatives. As a result, Chinese leaders have expanded funding for the development of China's cultural soft power abroad.

The establishment of CIs has led China to engage with other countries including Thailand though promoting Chinese language and culture. It appears that Thailand is the successful area where China's use of soft power has been most significant. Chinese language and cultural activities employed by CIs have raised the appeal of Thai people of learning Chinese. As the Chinese cultural influence increase, the interest of Thai in studying Chinese as a second language expand. The current 16 CIs in Thailand represent that Thai people are interested in learning Chinese.

The research also reveals that China has made a successful effort to use CIs as an instrument to expand Chinese soft power in Thailand. The establishment of CIs can be explained that China uses soft power to increase China's attraction and appeal. Thus, soft power in this approach is associated with the establishment of CIs in Thailand. An analytical study of Chinese Soft Power based on Chinese language and culture finds that Chinese soft power under the implementation of CIs has played a vital role in enhancing friendship and collaboration between Thailand and China.

Associate Prof. Vorasakdi Mahatdhanobol, scholar at Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University asserts that CIs are the Chinese soft power in Thailand. The Chinese leader implements soft power for the purpose of elevating Chinese image in international communities alongside with its role as the rising economic major power. Chinese soft power under the implementation of CIs helps to promote mutual understanding between China and Thailand.

An analytical study of CIs in Thailand based on educational collaboration and cultural activities between China and Thailand indicates that the collaboration regarding Chinese language instruction has shown smooth and productive path with extensive official and unofficial relationship. The official channel initiated by both countries' public sector has been led by both countries' ministries of education, educational institutes, other governmental and non - governmental agencies. Consequently, China and Thailand relations

has become close (Trisanawadee, 2020). Moreover, the success of China's soft power in Thailand can be seen as the increasing number of Thai students studying in China. In 2010, Thai students were the fourth largest international student studying in China. After the Chinese government launched Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and announced its plan to increase scholarship and training program for students from the Mekong region (Nation, 2017). Later in 2018, Thai students were the second largest students in China with the number of 28,608 (Erudera, 2023). CIs as Chinese soft power in Thailand, has been widely welcomed by Thai. The cooperation between China and Thailand, in founding CIs into Thai local community provides the Chinese side with wider impact on Thai students interested in Chinese language and culture.

Analysis of Sharp Power through the Implementation of CIs in Thailand:

The concept of sharp power emerged in November 2017, when Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, the authors of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) Report described the meaning of "sharp power". Sharp power is the use of manipulative diplomatic policies by one country to influence and undermine the political system of a target country. According to NED report, Russia and China are authoritarian states, which use sharp power to manipulate their target states. The NED report also points out that the Russian state-sponsored RT News Network and the Chinese state-funded "Confucius Institute" are examples of sharp power. Since 2018 the term of sharp power has been widely used in articles, academic books, official government reports and media. In 2022 Kalpit A. Mankikar, the author of *China's Sharp Power: Blunting the World's Edge or a Moment of Global Awakening?*, gives the definition of sharp power. Sharp power is the ability of state to alter the behavior of other states through the manipulation of culture, education systems and the media to further its interests to curtail free expression.

Many scholars observed that China's soft power tools has grown dramatically. The Chinese soft power includes people-to-people exchanges, wide ranging cultural activities, educational program become challenging threat. They indicated that China has used cultural resource not only to attract others and promote its global image, but also to manipulate and pressure others. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig criticized that Chinese soft power in the spheres of media, culture, think tanks and academic is not attraction or persuasion but aims at distraction and manipulation (Walker and Ludwig, 2017).

Amid the China's threat discourse, the negative perception of China among countries in North America and Europe has led to perceive Chinese sharp power. Confucius Institute have been criticized by Western intellectuals as China's sharp power which aimed to influence and undermine the political system of a target country. However, the discourse of Chinese sharp power has been disregarded in Thailand. There was no relations between CIs implementation and sharp power. There were neither evidence nor anxiety regarding espionage and intelligence. The CIs implementation which related to self-censorship, undermine Thai political system and socialist ideology have not been found in Thailand. The Thai government is committed to facilitate the establishment of CIs in order to pursue the bilateral arrangement of China-Thailand comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Moreover, Thai government and Thai people have not perceived Chinese soft power as a threat to Thai security. The attitude of Thais towards CIs can be illustrated in a positive way. Since 2001 the Office of the Basic Education Commission of Thailand has officially certified Chinese as a second language choice, the China's influence on Thai education has grown remarkably. It can be said that Thai CIs are more privileged than those in other ASEAN countries, in term of registered students, Chinese Language Proficiency Test Participants, local teachers training, variety of courses and cultural activities (Wu, 2018).

The Minister Counsellor, Office of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation at Royal Thai Embassy Brussels shares that there have been neither socialist ideology propaganda nor critiques about CIs mission in Thailand. The anxieties regarding CIs operation as a sharp power have not be found. He also affirms that the courses administered by CIs provided opportunities for Thai students to obtain standardized and professional which contribute to people - to - people relations with China. It can be said that people to people exchanges bring mutual understanding and subsequently can overcome political scandals and even oppose to the agenda of Chinese sharp power. Therefore, Confucius Institutes can be regarded as Chinese soft power acting in accordance with the official Chinese government.

Similarly, another Thai scholars also insist that there has been no scandal regarding the use of manipulative diplomatic policies by China in Thailand. There was no relations between CIs implementation and sharp power. Admittedly, the Chinese sharp power scandals can not be applied in the case of Thailand. All in all, China has done a great achievement in cultivating its soft power in Thailand.

Conclusion:

According to the concept of soft power, CIs have proven to be Chinese soft power in Thailand. China has used CIs as an outstanding instrument for disseminating and cultivating soft power in Thailand. China's initiative to enhance Chinese soft power through the establishment of CIs in Thailand turns into a great success. The Chinese languages teaching, cultural activities, International Chinese language scholarship, Chinese Language Proficiency Test and training course for Chinese volunteer teachers under the implementation of CIs has fostered and promoted Chinese soft power in Thailand. It appears that Thailand is the successful area where China's use of soft power has been most significant.

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