

Germany's goethe vs china's confucius institute



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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore why the outcomes of the work of the Goethe Institute of Germany and the Confucius Institute of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been so contrasting in terms of establishing cultural and social influence. The paper begins by examining the origins of both institutes and their aims in the context of soft power. Soft power is critically examined as a governmental imperative in a globalised world, and it will be shown how cultural institutes have a role in its formulation and exercise. The next section examines the institutes' structure and governance, and how these have been crucial determinants of their success. Finally, the findings reported in this paper are drawn together and summarised in the Conclusion.

The origins and aims of the Goethe Institute and the Confucius Institute

The Goethe Institute was established in 1951 in what was then West Germany, with the aim of rebuilding respect for and the reputation of the German language and culture following the Second World War. It originated primarily as a language-learning organisation, for which purpose it established dedicated “reading rooms”, but as it developed it expanded its remit to encompass the propagation of German culture and the holding of social events. By 2015, the Goethe Institute had 159 centres worldwide (Goethe Institute, 2015a).

The aims of the Confucius Institute are remarkably similar to those of the Goethe Institute, although emergent from contrasting origins. It was established in 2004 with the aim of ameliorating concerns felt around the world outside the PRC about the country's headlong economic growth and <https://assignbuster.com/germanys-goethe-vs-chinas-confucius-institute/>

rapidly increasing military power. Like the Goethe Institute, the Confucius Institute aimed to facilitate language learning, but expanded its activities into the cultural and social sphere. By 2015, the Confucius Institute operated in more than 480 locations worldwide, using facilities on university campuses (UCLA Confucius Institute, 2015).

Both institutes began with difficult yet auspicious origins; both Germany and the PRC had reputations to build from a low base, but both Germany and the PRC are countries with rich cultural heritages capable of attracting significant degrees of interest from people in the outside world.

The approach of both institutes, however, is essentially top-down, with a strategy of imparting knowledge about their cultures in their subject locations as something differentiated and separate, rather than attempting what is conventionally regarded to be meaningful cultural influence through immersion and integration (Christians, 1997), calling into question the likely effectiveness of the institutes in achieving their stated aims. Given those aims, it is appropriate to conceptualise them as agencies of government, which is essentially concerned with the exercise of power (Dowding, 1996).

Historically, governments have achieved their aims through “hard” power; typically the maintenance of armed forces and commercial strength underpinned their diplomacy (Dowding, 1996). Nye (1990) notes, however, that advancing globalisation has increased the financial cost and political consequences of the use of hard power, as exemplified by the PRC, whose military strength and commercial influence have had increasingly negative consequences in terms of international relations and trust. Military and

commercial strength are, in themselves, insufficient in assuring international influence in an age where societal opinion matters, and such opinion is instantaneously shared through social media which frequently imports environmental, social and moral considerations (Nye, 2004). In response to the reduced influence of hard power, governments have turned to “ soft” power - the use of co-option rather than coercion (Nye, 2004) - in order to achieve their strategic aims. An important means of exerting soft power is through the use of culture. However, while a country may possess attractive cultural features, they will not be influential if those features are not widely known or appreciated (Mattern, 2005), and cultural institutes are seen as a means by which such knowledge and appreciation may be established and international trade enhanced. There are drawbacks to this approach; Ferguson (2003) notes that soft power has its contradictions. It is, for example, quite possible for a section of society to be unproblematically using Microsoft software to write anti-US campaign material while drinking Coca Cola in a Macdonald’s restaurant. Soft power also has its limitations; Blechman (2004) notes that it cannot be mobilised to achieve specific policy goals, although a core strength of soft power lies in its essential organically democratic nature, in that individuals and groups can influence the policy it sets out to achieve (Van Ham, 2005; Moravcsik, 1997). It is also the case that the attractiveness of a culture is determined not by its purveyor, but rather by its recipients (Fan, 2008).

It is, therefore, the case that soft power is not a direct replacement for hard power, although it does have value in forming and legitimising policy, and in establishing the environment in which policy may be pursued. Given that

policy is mediated through the essentially top-down phenomenon of government, it is not unreasonable to posit that, counter to Christians' (1997) thesis of social influence, the top-down nature of the institutes does not render them unfit for purpose, but they rather have a model of influence that reflects the approach of the state governments that are their ultimate sponsors.

The relative success of the Goethe Institute and the Confucius Institute, and the effect of their structure and governance

Having established the criteria by which the institutes' success may be measured - that of the establishment and exercise of state soft power, and what the limitations of that soft power are - this section explores how successful the Goethe Institute and the Confucius Institute have been in achieving their aims.

There is considerable evidence to support the contention that the Goethe Institute has been generally successful in achieving its aims. The reputation of Germany has been significantly rehabilitated from its low point at the end of the Second World War, and that country is today widely respected and admired. This may be as much to do with, inter alia, the harmless jollity of the Munich Oktoberfest, the international popularity of German Christmas markets and Germany's high-quality industrial products as the effect of the Goethe Institute, although the evidence for the influence of the Goethe Institute is clear in data that shows that people outside Germany who come into contact with the institute hold a higher opinion of Germany than those who do not (The Economist, 2015). It is reasonable to assert, therefore, that

the Goethe Institute has achieved the aim of being of some influence in the favourable propagation of German culture.

The same cannot be said, however, for the international reputation of the PRC. Comparing the reputation of the PRC to that of Japan (Germany's Far-Eastern equivalent in respect of post-Second World War reputation), it can be seen from the Chicago Council study (2009) that Japan has been successfully rehabilitated and has managed to withstand the concerns ensuing from economic success that the PRC is clearly failing to ameliorate. This contrast in outcomes is difficult to explain, given the similarities in the international interest in the rich cultural heritages of Germany and the PRC. Chinese culture, like that of Germany, has much to offer; Chinese food is popular throughout the world, as are Tai Chi, Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* (in a business context) and Confucian wisdom, yet the PRC is stubbornly perceived to be an economic threat around the world, and a military threat in East Asia (Paradise, 2009) - something that the Confucius Institute has apparently failed to counter.

Examination of the structure of these institutes offers insight into their contrasting success. A clear indication lies in their developmental histories; since 1951, the Goethe Institute has established 159 centres throughout the world (Goethe Institute, 2015a), while since only 2004 the Confucius Institute has established over 480 (UCLA Confucius Institute, 2015). Such comparatively headlong expansion on the part of the Confucius Institute unfortunately mirrors the rapid economic growth of its home country that causes so much international concern. Also, the name "Confucius Institute" implicitly suggests the copying of something that worked elsewhere -

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naming the institute after the country's internationally famous philosopher, a strategy that worked for Germany and so (it is thought) ought to work for the PRC. This strategy, however, also mirrors an important aspect of the PRC's economic success - the copying of products designed and developed elsewhere that has led to many intellectual property disputes around the world (Gregory, 2003). It thus appears that the structural paradigm of the Confucius Institute may be a contributory factor to its lack of success.

Further examination of the governance of these institutes offers insight with respect to their success. The Goethe Institute, while being a government-sponsored institution, is able to raise its own funds and is governed at arm's length, a status guaranteed in its constitution (Goethe Institute, 2015b). This arm's-length principle ensures that it is not controlled by government, but by a body of independent and trustworthy people who have the aims and interests of the institute, not the government, at heart (Cavaliero, 1986). By being governed in this way, the Goethe Institute is able to assert, transparently, its credentials and the authenticity of its objectives.

The Confucius Institute, however, is ultimately administered by and accountable to Kanban, the PRC government body responsible for the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. This need not necessarily be fatal to the Confucius Institute's international credentials, although significant damage in this respect is evident in that Kanban only sanctions the use of simplified Chinese character writing within the Confucius Institute, which is widely interpreted to be an attempt to limit Taiwanese cultural influence, as within Taiwan writing using traditional Chinese characters is the norm (Ding and Saunders, 2006).

It may be possible to rationalise this Chinese written character dilemma on grounds of expediency, as Chinese writing is difficult to master and, if the use of both forms were to be employed, the result would be unnecessarily confusing for students. Clearly the Confucius Institute had to make a decision in this regard, and it is not unreasonable to expect that, as it is an organisation that originates within the PRC, it would select the predominant Chinese character style of that country. Other concerns come into play, however; the Confucius Institute has no independent control over the choice of textbooks and educational materials that it uses in its cultural activities; Kanban has complete control in this regard, leading some host schools and universities to express concern about the Chinese history propagated by the Confucius Institute differing from that taught in regular classes (Patty, 2011).

Apologists for the Confucius Institute may find rationalisations for these concerns, but the factors concerning its structure and governance have been sufficient in combination to endow it with the status of a PRC-government overseas 'stooge'. Such concerns have resulted in the University of Chicago and Pennsylvania State University expelling the Confucius Institute from their campuses (Foster, 2014).

The work of the Goethe Institute is not the only cause of Germany's post-war rehabilitation, but its positive influence is determinable, and has been facilitated by its measured growth and arm's-length governance. Any positive influence that the Confucius Institute may have had is more difficult to establish; despite its rapid growth, its apparent attempt to reproduce the success of others elsewhere and the negative aspects of its structure and governance appear to act in its detriment.

Conclusion

This paper has set the limits of what the success of cultural institutes looks like within the context and limitations of soft power. The top-down nature of the institutes has been examined as a possible drawback when set against the immersive qualities that typically lead to meaningful cultural influence; however, this was found to be less of a disadvantage in terms of cultural theory than an honest approach taken by bodies that are essentially agencies of government.

This paper set out to examine why the outcomes of the work of the Goethe Institute of Germany and the Confucius Institute of the PRC have been so contrasting in terms of establishing cultural and social influence. It has been established that the Goethe Institute has been successful in its contribution to meeting Germany's soft-power aims, while the Confucius Institute has had indeterminate positive influence and its negative influence has been made clear. The reasons for these contrasting outcomes can be summarised as follows. The Goethe Institute's growth has been evolutionary whereas the growth of the Confucius Institute has been explosive, mirroring the economic growth of its home country which is in itself a cause of the PRC's reputational difficulties that the institute is ostensibly attempting to ameliorate. Similarly, the Confucius Institute's name appears to represent and attempt to reproduce that which worked elsewhere, mirroring a concerning facet of the PRC's problematic intellectual property issues within its industrial sector. Finally, the Goethe Institute is governed at arm's length, whereas the PRC has direct control over the governance of the Confucius Institute, a significant factor in its loss of reputation and fundamental incompatibility

with the principles of academic freedom and independence that are so valued by its host universities.

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