



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 91 | January 6, 2011

## China's Confucius Institutes: Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones BY MARIA WEY-SHEN SIOW

**Maria Wey-Shen Siow**, East Asia Bureau Chief of Channel NewsAsia and previously a Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that while some may view China's Confucius Institutes as "the propaganda arm of the Chinese government.... These concerns are not completely unfounded, but may not be totally warranted."

Many observers view China's overseas Confucius Institutes as the most visible symbols of China's growing soft power, and a tool for the country to expand its international influence and advance its public diplomacy agenda. The institutes were first established in 2004, with the first institute opening in Seoul. The primary goal of these institutions is to promote Mandarin Chinese language learning. Other functions include promoting Chinese culture and developing positive opinions of China within a global setting. Modeled along the lines of Germany's *Goethe-Institut* and France's *Alliance Française*, there are currently 320 Confucius Institutes in 96 countries with over 230,000 registered students. Apart from language classes, the institutes organize a wide variety of cultural activities ranging from music, calligraphy, cooking, and traditional Chinese medicine to hosting talks on China's economy, history, culture and society. China aims to open one thousand Confucius Institutes by 2020.

Confucius Institutes have been viewed by some as the propaganda arm of the Chinese government, and concerns about the institutes projecting political undertones have been raised. These concerns are not completely unfounded, but may not be totally warranted. What the institutes have successfully achieved to date is that they have projected Chinese language and culture far beyond China's shores. They have also catered rather effectively to the growing worldwide demand for knowledge and insights about China. Through various programs and events, Confucius Institutes have allowed many to gain a better understanding of a country that only a few decades ago was largely perceived as mysterious and indecipherable. This ongoing outreach on China's behalf not only helps eliminate stereotypes, but will also lead to a better and more nuanced understanding about the Asian giant.

By partnering with host educational institutions around the world, Confucius Institutes have also succeeded in raising the standards of Chinese language teaching and research within those host institutions. Furthermore, host educational institutions have improved their capacity to offer a globalized education through exchanges and cooperation with Chinese educational institutions. Given time, many Confucius Institutes are expected to turn into centers for research and development, the dissemination of Chinese language teaching resources, and focal points for Chinese language tests and examinations. Confucius Institutes have also scored highly by largely focusing on language and culture, and steering clear of politics and ideology. Even though the institutes are named after the country's most renowned philosopher and thinker, the study of Confucianism is hardly ever on the agenda. Confucius-related courses are held only if there is public interest and demand.

However, given that so many institutes have been set up in a relatively short period of time, the question of quality versus quantity has been an issue that the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (*Han Ban* for short)—the central body in charge



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of Confucius Institutes worldwide—is grappling with. Some institutes are said to be one-room offices with a sign and no programs, while others are struggling to remain viable. Moreover, the partnership arrangement between a Chinese institution of higher learning and a foreign counterpart is riddled with problems. These include patchy support from participating institutions as they too are required to financially contribute to the arrangement. There are also cases of having too many project bosses which in turn lead to difficulties in coming to a consensus. In some instances of directors dispatched from China, there is a lack of understanding about local conditions and circumstances.

*Han Ban* has acknowledged that some institutes “do not have sufficient space for operation” while others “need vigorous efforts in marketing and fund raising.” In addition, there is also a need to broaden and increase the efficiency in the utilization of funds. *Han Ban* has also described as “unsatisfactory” the massive problems it faces in the shortage of qualified teachers, teaching materials and methodologies. The rapid growth of Confucius Institutes has meant that *Han Ban* has not kept pace with the best methods in teaching the Chinese language, especially to non-English speakers. Teaching materials in Russia, for instance, were said to be unhelpful as they were mainly translated, sometimes poorly and inaccurately, from English. Even in the United Kingdom, teaching materials were described as “awkward and inapplicable,” while in many Spanish-speaking countries, there is a shortage of textbooks.

To handle these problems, *Han Ban* is working on improving the quality of its teachers, training more local teachers, and developing multilingual and multi-media teaching resources. In the meantime, there has been an increased reliance upon volunteer teachers, mainly young graduates, or Chinese living in foreign countries, even though they are not qualified teachers. *Han Ban* has realized that poor teachers and teaching techniques have forced some students to either lose interest or drop out of courses altogether. It therefore encourages local initiatives such as textbooks, dictionaries and software that are designed at the local level. Other difficulties include the lack of measurable quantitative targets and standardization in financial management for individual institutes.

Given the myriad of problems identified above, it would be inaccurate to think that the institutes have the sway and influence that is commensurate with their numbers. From the beginning, *Han Ban* has been crossing the river by feeling the stones, to borrow a saying from former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to describe China’s reform and opening up process. But if *Han Ban* manages to fix these initial problems, the institutes could have greater potential to exert more influence.

*Han Ban*’s annual budget was only US\$145 million in 2009 so it would be false to state that China has been spending massively on these institutes. \$145 million is much less than the \$1 billion that the British Council spends annually in promoting its programs. \$145 million is also much less than the average cost of a Hollywood production; the production cost of *Avatar* was \$237 million.

Part of the explanation for *Han Ban*’s inertia in going all out might be due to its desire not to raise further alarm, especially given external concerns about China’s growing economic and military strength. It could also be an attempt to address internal criticisms that the country should spend more on domestic compulsory education especially in its rural areas, rather than pump money into helping foreigners learn Chinese.

If the concern about quality versus quantity does take root, it is doubtful if *Han Ban* will be able to set up one thousand Confucius Institutes by 2020. Senior Chinese leaders have spoken of the need to develop new institutes in an “active yet orderly way.” In the short term at least, it is unlikely that Confucius Institutes will deviate from language and cultural promotion, due to the need to build trust, coupled with *Han Ban*’s desire not to jeopardize initial successes.