

Confucius Institutes: Authoritarian Soft Power

One of the tools China has used to expand its international influence and promote its model of governance is the fast-growing network of Confucius Institutes. The institutes, which provide instruction in Chinese language and culture, typically operate as partnerships between Chinese universities and a university in the host country, with the latter supplying a site and other facilities, and the former providing the staff and teaching materials. The centers are supervised by the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), which sets their guiding principles, budget, and curriculum.¹ The council is composed of representatives from 12 state ministries and commissions, including the ministries of education, foreign affairs, and culture.² The Confucius Institutes initiative describes its purpose as “enhancing intercultural understanding in the world by sponsoring courses of Chinese language and culture, so as to promote a better understanding of the Chinese language and culture among the people of the world.” However, some observers have raised concerns about the potential effects of Chinese state influence on academic freedom in the host countries. A set of draft guidelines for the institutes suggests that Chinese authorities would require them to comply with political directives on sensitive issues, such as Taiwan’s international status or historical inquiry related to persecuted ethnic and religious minorities: “Overseas Confucius Institutes must abide by the One-China Policy, preserve the independence and unity of the People’s Republic of China, and ... refrain from participating in any political, religious or ethnic activities in the country where they are located.”³ The network has expanded rapidly since the first institute opened in Uzbekistan in 2004.⁴ There are now more than 295 of the centers in 78 countries, with a total of 500 set to be established before 2010. The existing institutes include more than 20 in Southeast Asia,⁵ over 40 in the United States,⁶ and more than 70 in Europe.⁷ Others have been founded in African countries, including Zimbabwe and South Africa.⁸ The project has entailed the deployment of more than 2,000 staff members,⁹ and more than 300,000 sets of textbooks and audio materials worth over \$26 million.¹⁰

¹ Michael Hsiao, “Transformations in China’s Soft Power toward ASEAN,” *China Brief* 8, no. 22 (November 24, 2008), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34168&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=168&no_cache=1.

² “About Hanban,” Office of the Chinese Language Council International, North America Office, <http://www.hanban.ca/hanban.php?lang=en&x=11&y=10>.

³ “Guidelines for Establishing Confucius Institutes Abroad,” website of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Japan, June 12, 2006, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cejpc/chn/lxsjl/hyjx/t257515.htm>.

⁴ “Selling the Sage of Qufu,” *Economist*, July 6, 2006, http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_STQTRQV.

⁵ Hsiao, “Transformations.”

⁶ Yang Qingchuan, “Booming Confucius Institutes Enhance China’s Soft Power,” Xinhua, November 2, 2008, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-11/02/content_10294081.htm.

⁷ “College ‘Helps Dragon Economies,’” British Broadcasting Corporation, February 4, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/7225943.stm.

⁸ “Zimbabwe: University to Teach Chinese,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2006, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE4DB1F3EF931A3575AC0A9609C8B63>; “News from the Schools, July 2007,” *Economist*, July 25, 2007,

http://www.economist.com/business/globalexecutive/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_JQNGRPD.

⁹ Hsiao, “Transformations.”

¹⁰ “Chinese Education Minister Vows to Maintain Sound Development of Confucius Institute,” Xinhua, December 12, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-12/12/content_7235893.htm.