

“Nihao Kenniya!” Promoting intercultural communication between China and Kenya: The role of Confucius Institutes

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Abstract

The Chinese language is increasingly becoming popular because of the pride of place that China occupies globally. The popularity of the language has been rapidly facilitated by the establishment of the Confucius Institutes, which are mandated with the responsibility of introducing Chinese language and culture to non-Chinese population. The question is: has this move enhanced cross-cultural communication between Chinese and non-Chinese people. Kenya has three Confucius Institutes at the University of Nairobi, Egerton University and Kenyatta University. These three institutes offer various Chinese courses to Kenyans interested in acquiring competence in Chinese and understanding Chinese rich culture. Students who excel in these courses get a chance to proceed to China for further studies. The paper seeks to explore the role of Confucius Institutes in promoting intercultural communication between China and Kenya. 831 students of Chinese at Confucius Institute at Kenyatta University formed the target population. A sample of 120 students, selected randomly, filled in a questionnaire that was designed to help in assessing the role of the Confucius Institutes in facilitating cross-cultural communication. Data were analysed qualitatively and the results interpreted and discussed. The general finding is that Confucius Institutes are a bridge between China and Kenya and they are a useful vehicle in promoting understanding between Kenyan and Chinese cultures.

Key words: *intercultural communication, Chinese language, Confucius Institute, Chinese Culture*

1. 0. Introduction

Confucius Institute¹ (CI) is a Chinese government-affiliated organization responsible for promoting the Chinese language and culture globally (Hartig, 2010). CI was first launched in

¹ Confucius Institute derives its name from a Chinese philosopher named Confucius who lived in 500 BC and it is his philosophy, among other things, that Confucius Institutes all over the world spread. Thus, Confucius Institutes should be understood as a tool of cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics (Hartig, 2010).

Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan, but the first fully functioning branch was opened in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004. Since the establishment of the first overseas Confucius Institute, China has set up over 600 Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms around the world to promote its language and culture (Hartig, 2010). Majority of the CIs are in Asia, but approximately a third of all CIs are in the West and Central Europe. Confucius Institutes are under the auspices of Hanban.² Confucius Institutes were inspired by the set up of the Spain's Instituto Cervantes, Germany's Goethe-Institute, the UK's British Council and Alliance Francaise (Li, 2008; Ding and Saunders, 2006). However, while the Confucius Institutes are operated on campus at the host universities, the Western ones are independently situated outside the universities of the host countries (Hartig, 2011; Paradise, 2009).

In Kenya, as of 2014, there were three Confucius Institutes as of 2014. These are the Confucius Institutes established at the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University and Egerton University. The Confucius Institutes are set up and operated in a joint venture pattern based on the collaboration between a Chinese university and the host university. For example, the CI at the University of Nairobi (CIUON) was established in collaboration with the Tianjin Normal University in 2005; Kenyatta University Confucius Institute was established in December, 2008 as a joint collaboration with the Shandong Normal University, while Egerton University Confucius Institute was established in collaboration with Nanjing Agricultural University. These Confucius Institutes were established with the aim of promoting academic and cultural exchanges between Kenya and China. Thus, the question that this paper intends to answer is: has this move enhanced cross-cultural communication between China and Kenya. In addition, while many studies have focused their analysis of the Confucius Institute on the use of Chinese culture and the economic rise of China (Kurlantzick, 2007; Li and Vermer, 2010), few have set to explore the role of Confucius Institutes in promoting intercultural communication.

2.0. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design. 831 students of Chinese at Confucius Institute at Kenyatta University formed the target population. A sample of 120 students, selected randomly,

² Hanban is in charge of the placement of teachers, the development and distribution of teaching materials, and coordination of the partner institutions in China and abroad which run the Confucius Institutes (Hartig, 2010).

filled in a questionnaire that was designed to help in assessing the role of the Confucius Institutes in facilitating cross-cultural communication. Data were analysed qualitatively and the results interpreted and discussed.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Soft Power Theory (SPT) (Nye, 1990). According to Nye, “soft power” is an “invisible attraction that have others pursue the purposes you prefer by co-opting people instead of compelling them” (p.5). That is, if a country is able to influence others’ goal formulation by attracting them through wielding its intangible properties rather than carrying out any forms of mandatory or inducing means, then, it is apparent that the “soft power of a country plays an effective role in impacting what intentions others favour so as to obtain its expected outcomes” (Nye, 2004, p.7).

The Soft Power Theory may be premised on two properties: the Chinese language and the traditional culture of China. The Chinese language and the Chinese culture are regarded as the most crucial “soft power assets” by most Chinese leaders and scholars (Hooghe, 2010) Therefore, since Confucius Institutes are Chinese government-affiliated organization primarily responsible for the global promotion of the Chinese language and culture to project China’s soft power (Hooghe, 2010), the SPT is a relevant framework of analysing the role of CIs in the promotion of intercultural communication between China and Kenya. In addition, the SPF is relevant since Chinese language developers have recommended appropriate strategies aimed at a linguistic rise as a source of “soft power” compatible to China’s economic rise.

4.0. Research Findings

This section qualitatively analyses the respondents’ responses. Figures are also employed to distinguish between the different variables used in this study.

Question 1: Chinese language has become popular globally. Why do you think this is so?

The respondents noted that Chinese has become famous because it is the most spoken language in the World with over 1.3 billion people. Therefore, due to the need to communicate with Chinese

speakers, the Chinese language has become so popular both locally and internationally. In addition, Chinese has become popular because of the desire by the Chinese people and the Government to make the rest of the world know their language through the various Confucius Institutes set up by the government. Further, one of the respondents noted that the popularity of Chinese has been due to the strides their economy has made. He argued that:

Chinese is the 'factory of the world' thus crucial to understand the language and do business with them. Secondly, the sheer numbers of the Chinese population has made them a prime market to get customers for your products and also as tourists. To achieve this one has to understand the language; thus, the popularity.

Similarly, another respondent argued that trade / business has been a major factor for Chinese popularity. That is, on the one hand, as Chinese migrated to other countries for business, they consciously or unconsciously brought their language along. On the other hand, some foreigners interested in doing business with Chinese people, are forced to learn Chinese in order to overcome the language obstacle. The respondent opined:

[W]e cannot talk about Chinese language and overlook the business perspective of it. Many international and multinational companies are based in china due to the mass production and lower price of the same owing to their 'cheap' labor and other factors. Hence business enterpreneurs also prefer to learn a little or enough Chinese to enable them run their errands within and outside china.

Another respondent concurred and noted that Chinese has become popular because of their products, factories, industries, technology and influence. As a result, everyone is willing and ready to learn the language and understand it for business purposes.

Question 2: When did you enroll for your Chinese programs?

The respondents enrolled for Chinese programmes at different years as shown in Figure 1 below. One respondent, however, informed the authors of this paper that he is Chinese native speaker, who was introduced to the language when he was a baby, my family members taught me to speak some Chinese.

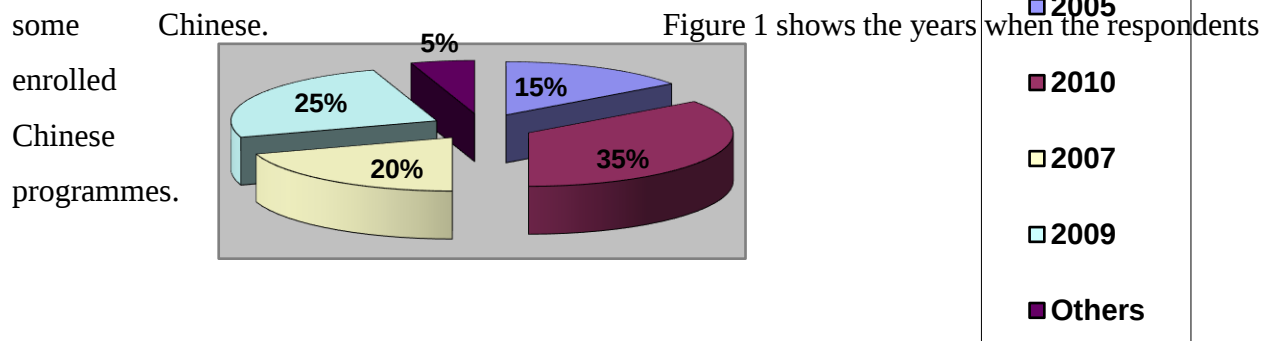


Figure 1: Years of enrollment for Chinese programmes

Question 3: Where did you study Chinese?

95% of the respondents studied Chinese in Kenyan universities as shown in Figure 2 below. One respondent studied Chinese in Egerton University, but later went to Shandong Normal University for further studies. Three respondents studied Chinese at Kenyatta University Confucius Institute, but later went to Shandong University Jinan China. Another respondent studied a certificate programme at the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute and was later awarded a scholarship to Tianjin normal University. Four respondents studied at the University of Nairobi and later at the Tianjin Normal University, China. One respondent, however, claimed that he learnt Chinese from his parents before he joined a primary school in China as a 7 year old. The Figure below highlights the various places of study for Chinese for respondents of this study.

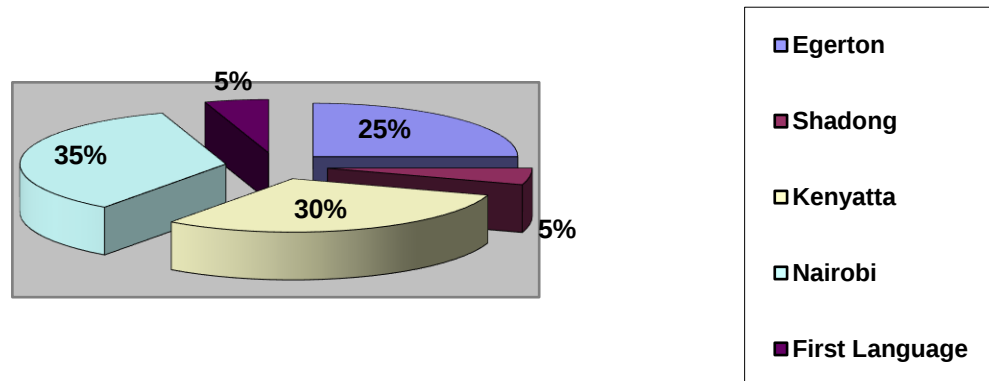


Figure 2: Places of study for Chinese

Question 4: What was your motivation for enrolling in Chinese programs?

- China's Economic growth and development;
- The strong ties between China and Kenyan government;
- The desire to learn and know Chinese. One of the respondents averred:

It started in 2004 when I was doing my attachment at the Museum and many Chinese clients

would come and the communication would go 'Neanderthal'. I then got a job at Cooperative Bank and the number of Chinese clients was increasing then I got a job offer at Standard Chartered Bank to help with the Chinese clients that was when I realized that I had to act fast on my career plan of having working knowledge of the language.

Another respondent argued:

The need to communicate coupled with the fact that there was a vacuum that needed to be filled in terms of communication gap between the locals and the heavy presence of the Chinese. The bid to realign myself with the trend also motivated me. Encouragement from Prof. Martin also goes to him.

- d) Job opportunities available in the teaching sector;
- e) To expose myself to Chinese culture;
- f) Out of personal interest;
- g) The fact that the program was fully sponsored.

Question 5: What stereotypes/myths about China had you heard before enrolling for Chinese programs at the Confucius Institute?

- a) Chinese are very short and aggressive. In particular, that Mao Zedong was small. However, the World's tallest man is a Chinese (from Inner Mongolia) and several of the NBA's tallest player come from China such as Yao Ming. Today's young Chinese are noticeably taller than their parents and grandparents generation.
- b) Chinese eat all types of food, like dogs, snake, frogs, snails et cetra;
- c) Chinese are either atheists or have many gods;
- d) Chinese make fake products and are not durable;
- e) Chinese are poor;
- f) Chinese do not like foreigners;
- g) Chinese are pugnacious; Kung fu and other Chinese martial arts;
- h) Chinese is the most difficult languages to learn in the world;
- i) All Chinese are good at Mathematics and sciences;
- j) Chinese women are very subordinate to men;
- k) Chinese people do not care about politics;
- l) Chinese get their names from dropping objects. That is, from the sound of steel dropped on the floor;
- m) Chinese look the same;
- n) Chinese hate the West or are taught/brain washed to hate the West.

- o) Chinese cannot speak English;
- p) Confucius Institutes are alleged to carry out espionage in terms of military, industry and politics in the host universities;
- q) Chinese names are monosyllabic, for example, Chen, Dan, Wu, Tin, Chun, Chin, Yon, Yo, Cao, Jin,

Question 6: What facts about China/Chinese people/Chinese products did you learn through your studies at Confucius Institute?

- a) Chinese are very kind, aggressive, hardworking, open minded, hospitable and polite;
- b) Chinese are the main producers of world best products in large percentage and good quality;
- c) That China has developed and is growing at a very fast pace;
- d) Chinese have high family values;
- e) Chinese are great investors;
- f) Chinese have 3 product ranges, that is, original, good copy and fake;
- g) China is the most populated country in the world with over 1.3 billion people;
- h) China is the 3rd largest country by area at 9,706,961 sq km ;
- i) In 2003, China became the third country to successfully send a person to space;
- j) The Great Wall of China is the largest man made structure in the world, stretching an incredible 8,850 kilometres (5,500 miles);
- k) Chinese use the lunar calendar;
- l) The capital city is Beijing, while the most populated city is Shanghai;
- m) 47% of the population live in urban areas;
- n) Women are encouraged to learn Tai chi;
- o) Kenyan cosmetic products are made in China, but are not readily available in the Chinese market since they are for export;
- p) The Chinese brands are authentic, affordable, and are of superior quality but the international brands tend to be compromised;
- q) The Chinese swear by Guanxi and saving face Mianzi if you are familiar with these two practice you will survive in a Chinese community;
- r) They are resilient in the way they do everything including following their culture;
- s) They are respectful and disciplined;

- t) They embrace mantras of Confucianism, for example, do to others what you want them do to you;
- u) Although faced with a BIG population, they have managed to lay down the necessary infrastructure, social amenities and health services;
- v) That the Chinese language has no alphabet;
- w) Chinese people have solid family units.

Question 7: In your opinion, how has Confucius Institute contributed to understanding China and Chinese culture?

The respondents noted that Confucius Institute is an important avenue towards knowing a lot about Chinese culture. A respondent noted that CI has taught many things about China and Chinese culture that he had never heard of before. He opined that:

CI is the major platform at which we as the Kenyan students learn Chinese language and culture and enlighten us more about china. On the other hand there a good number of Chinese teachers at the Confucius institute who we have a direct interaction with and who regular Chinese festivals hence deepen our understanding about China.

Another respondent noted that Confucius Institute did contribute a lot to the understanding of China and its culture. That is, culture is embodied in the language, and if one wants to learn a language well; he or she has to understand its culture.

The CI has not only successfully contributed to the understanding and knowledge about China, but it has also helped ease the burden to learn the Chinese language and culture. As noted by one of the respondents:

Chinese language is taught together with the culture so I got to learn so much about China and their culture. They also have cultural activities that help students experience their culture. Through teaching and learning of Chinese culture and language, it has brought awareness about China and Chinese language and culture.

Through the rapid expansion of Confucius Institutes globally, this has created understanding of China/Chinese language in over 100 million people overseas. Thus, Confucius Institute is a recognizable symbol of Chinese Culture, therefore, creating a buzz about Chinese language around the world.

Confucius Institutes promotes research activities of graduate students studying in China and abroad.

Further, the CI is committed to strengthening Sino-Kenya educational and cultural exchanges through specific programmes and consolidating and carrying on the friendship between Kenya and China.

Question 8: It is said that Confucius Institute is a bridge between Kenya and China. Do you agree? Give reasons.

All respondents agreed that Confucius Institute is a bridge between Kenya and China. They gave varied reasons for this:

- a) It is a platform upon which we can get scholarship to go to china for further studies be it certificate, diploma, under graduate or post graduate;
- b) CI has opened doors for Kenyan students to know China and Chinese language and culture.
- c) Confucius institutes are platforms for cultural exchange between two countries. For example, teachers come to Kenya and students go to china for the immersion bit of language study;
- d) Confucius Institute is designed as a bridge to reinforce friendship and co-operation between China and Kenya. This is because Confucius Institutes provide Chinese language teaching staff to the collaborating country;
- e) Confucius Institutes can play a key complementary role to enhance collaboration, exchange and knowledge between China and Africa. The joint venture is the most frequently adopted pattern since it helps both the Chinese and foreign sides involved build up the reciprocal relations in terms of educational, cultural and economic exchange and cooperation;
- f) CIs host Sino-foreign educational and cultural cooperative events and offer the information consultation in terms of Chinese education, culture, economy;
- g) CI not only promotes national languages and cultures, but also to facilitate international cultural exchange and collaboration to strengthen mutual understandings between the countries. In this sense, those cultural institutions can be regarded as the cultural diplomacy instruments of their countries.

Question 9: What do you think is the role of Confucius Institutes in Kenya and globally?

- a) The role of CI is to educate, enlighten and keep people informed of Chinese by creating great awareness all over the world and opportunities available for both Kenyans and the world in China and vice versa;
- b) To strengthen economic ties and social development in Kenya and globally;
- c) To enable Kenyans and the Global World to learn Chinese language and hence facilitate communication between China and Kenya;
- d) CIs acts as a resource centre where people can do enquiries on how to go to China, do business and other important issues of concern;
- e) CIs are seen to be an instrument of China's cultural diplomacy (Hartig 2010; Maslen 2007); and they are part of China's public diplomacy (d'Hooghe 2007)
- f) Confucius Institute helps in preserving China's 5000 years of culture;
- g) Its role is to be the link to china and also serve as an ambassador in terms of the language and culture;
- h) To popularize and spread the Chinese language and culture and also act as a bridge between the two countries;
- i) CIs are regarded as a tool for Chinese propaganda by projecting a good image about China;
- j) These institutes offer various Chinese courses to Kenyans interested in acquiring competence in Chinese and understanding Chinese rich culture;
- k) In addition to their basic role of promoting Chinese language and culture, Confucius Institute have also made significant difference in facilitating Sino-foreign relations by carrying out a variety of activities for cultural and educational exchange and collaboration between China and different countries in the world;
- l) Confucius Institutes attach importance to promoting traditional Chinese culture rather than project China as a modern country.

Question 10: What aspects of Chinese culture have you learnt through exposure to Chinese courses at Confucius Institute?

- a) To appreciate each other strengths and weaknesses, maintain order and offer equal opportunities for all to enjoy life and belong to the society;
- b) Respect for elders and seniors in work and society;
- c) They do not like apologizing (I have heard that in China there is a company that is hired to apologize on your behalf);

- d) Most Chinese are Buddhists;
- e) Cuisine: Rice and wheat products are the major foods in china;
- f) The largest festival — also called the Spring Festival — marks the beginning of the Lunar New Year. It falls between mid-January and mid-February;
- g) Holiday celebration;
- h) Mianzi and guanxi;
- i) The festivals, cuisine, tea, names, the Zodiac, characters, tones, pinyin. Shufa, taichi;
- j) The respect for the elderly;
- k) The reciprocal principle;
- l) The value for family;
- m) Chinese music;
- n) Chinese literature;
- o) Martial arts;
- p) Chinese medicine;
- q) Fashion.
- r) A series of Chinese traditional cultural activities such as writing calligraphy, films, Chinese painting, making paper cutting, making dumplings, doing Tai Ji and presenting Chinese tea culture;
- s) Contemporary cultural events such as the cooking classes and a variety of academic forums, speeches, seminars and exhibitions;

5.0. Conclusions

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Dear friend:

Greetings to you! I am researching on the role of Confucius Institutes in promoting cross cultural communication between Kenya and China. I am sending you this questionnaire so that you can fill it in and then email it back to me at your earliest convenience. I will appreciate it if I can get the feedback by Friday February 6, 2015. The information that you provide is for academic research purposes only and will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Type in your responses,

save the document as MS word document, then forward it to me. Feel free to be as detailed as possible.

Your name (optional)

Your sex

☐

Male

☐

Female

1. Chinese language has become popular globally. Why do you think this is so?
2. When did you enroll for your Chinese programs?
3. Where did you study Chinese?
4. What was your motivation for enrolling in Chinese programs?
5. What stereotypes/myths about China had you heard before enrolling for Chinese programs at the Confucius Institute?
6. What facts about China/Chinese people/Chinese products did you learn through your studies at Confucius Institute?
7. In your opinion, how has Confucius Institute contributed to understanding China and Chinese culture?
8. It is said that Confucius Institute is a bridge between Kenya and China. Do you agree? Give reasons.
9. What do you think is the role of Confucius Institutes in Kenya and globally?
10. What aspects of Chinese culture have you learnt through exposure to Chinese courses at Confucius Institute?