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Confucius Institutes Worldwide Attempt to Boost Research and Involvement

The Confucius Institute program started in 2004. It is overseen by the Confucius Institute Headquarters (colloquially, Hanban), which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. The institutes aim to promote Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges. They operate in co-operation with local affiliate universities around the world, and financing is shared between Hanban and the host institutions.

The past decade witnessed a phenomenal growth of Confucius Institutes worldwide. By the end of 2013, 440 Confucius Institutes existed in 115 countries, with the United States taking the largest share at 23 per cent (or 100 in number). The United Kingdom follows with a total of 24, while Canada has 13.

These Confucius Institutes are, however, generally operating at the margins of their host universities, and are hardly a part of the mainstream research, teaching and service functions. In many cases, Confucius Institutes are in fact competing against existing structures of China Studies and Chinese-language teaching - the preexisting programs, centers and institutes that house China-related content. The Confucius Institutes' outreach activities often appear to be disconnected from the host universities' community engagement strategies and schemes. Perhaps in an effort to address these issues, the Confucius Institute Headquarters or Hanban recently announced three new major programs for Confucius Institutes worldwide. These include: the "Confucius China Study Plan," which focuses on research aspects of Confucius Institutes; appointments of permanent academic staff; and, the "Chinese Day" program connecting Confucius Institutes to their local communities. In particular, the "Confucius China Study Plan" will champion the research functions of Confucius Institutes. It will sponsor scholars associated with Confucius Institutes to undertake research projects in China for a period of two weeks to 10 months, provide doctoral scholarships, and support conferences and publications on topics related to China Studies. These new programs aim to transform

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Confucius Institutes into academic units and integral parts of their host campuses and local communities.

Between the goals and objectives spelled out by these new initiatives and the reality in which Confucius Institutes operate, there are a number of roadblocks. In all cases, Confucius Institutes involve a partnership between a Chinese university and a non-Chinese one, which can lead to a “clash” of university cultures. For instance, the partnership reveals differences in decision-making patterns. Chinese universities tend to feature a bureaucratic (and sometimes political) model of decision-making, characterized by a top-down approach and short time horizons. By contrast, Canadian universities are more likely to demonstrate a collegial model of decision-making, and are sometimes even characterized by “organized anarchy.” Decisions often come out of consensus, which requires a great deal of communication, consultation and discussion. It is crucial to raise awareness about these kinds of differences and carefully nurture the partnership as “unity with diversity” – itself a Confucian concept.

A number of questions remain as Confucius Institutes attempt to transform themselves:

1. What outcomes do non-Chinese partner universities expect to experience from hosting a Confucius Institute?
2. What are the partner universities' perceptions of the issues and challenges?
3. How can synergies be generated with respect to existing research and teaching structures in host universities?
4. How can teaching, research and service functions of the Chinese partner university benefit from the Confucius Institute?
5. How can the Confucius Institutes contribute to host universities' research functions/agendas, teaching and learning, community engagement efforts and branding?

These questions will need to form the basis for an ongoing research agenda concerning the changing role of Confucius Institutes.

Source

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