

Confucius Institutes and the Promotion of Chinese Language and Culture

A Case Study

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1 Introduction¹

This chapter seeks to evaluate the presence and actual impact of the Confucius Institute (CI) in Africa, with a case study of one of them stationed at the University of Ghana. Over the last three decades, the economic reforms in China have contributed to its meteoric rise to become one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Benewick and Donald 2009). The rise of China has received a lot of international media attention (Li Zhang 2010). Its global image has previously been weak owing to negative Western and global media coverage and a lack of a global understanding of its political system and culture. Promoting its global image is also strategic in propelling it to its desired global status as a peaceful and responsible power (Medeiros 2009). The media depicts China as an economic and military power, which qualifies it to challenge the existing global order (Shin and Eisenman

1 The authors thank all who played major roles in facilitating our research. These include members of the Education Pillar of the Afro-Sino Centre for International Relations (ASCIR), Accra, where there is an ongoing project to evaluate CIs in Africa. We are grateful to the staff and students of the CIUG who took great interest in our research. The first author thanks Prof. Clement Appah, who invited him to the CI Open Day in April 2023. Prof. Appah subsequently became the Ghanaian director of the CI. We are also grateful to two reviewers of this chapter. While we did not always agree with some of their suggestions, many others were very useful in helping us address some loose ends in this chapter. We thank the editors of the book for this great initiative to do a monograph on New Silk Road narratives.

2012). The rise of China's economic power has increased its political influence in many parts of the world, particularly Africa (Wu 2016). With this rise, China has increasingly acknowledged its position as a global power with a need to rethink and remake its image in the international system. The establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) (kǒngzǐxuéyuàn) in various countries (Xiaolin 2008) is one of the routes through which China has been promoting its global image. Expectedly, CIs have been the subject of critical scholarly engagement, especially in Africa, where such Chinese cultural institutes have been established in recent years. However, available evidence-based studies on CIs in Africa and their impacts are limited and non-exhaustive (Li 2021). In this chapter, we address this lacuna by doing a case study of the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana (CIUG).

The establishment of CIs is a growing part of China's economic and political presence around the world. The first Confucius Institute in Africa was established at the University of Nairobi, Kenya in 2005 (Wheeler 2013). Since then, CIs have surfaced in countries across every region of the African continent. Specifically, countries such as South Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt, Cameroon, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Morocco have Confucius Institutes in their institutions of higher learning (Procopio 2015). These CIs are an aspect of what the Forum on Africa-China Cooperation (FOCAC) described as "cooperation in the field of development." The objectives of the Institutes were aimed at enhancing the overall goals of FOCAC, which seeks to not only enhance cooperation in the medical and tourism sectors and ensure environmental protection but to also contribute towards educational cooperation for the development of human resources, science and technology exchange, and exchange in academia (Bodomo 2020).

However, there is a school of thought that is skeptical of CIs. Critical voices argue that the CIs are a tool used by the Chinese government to spread propaganda in the world under the guise of teaching (Hubbert 2019). There are also concerns that the CIs are avenues and channels used by the Chinese government to curtail the freedom of speech on campus and spy on students (Jakhar 2019). Put differently, CIs are criticized as operating as an intelligence-gathering agency, as opposed to being a body used to teach and advance cultural exchanges. Moreover, there are concerns that topics such as Taiwan, Tiananmen, and Tibet are not covered in CIs, which leads one to assume that China is using the Institutes to suppress knowledge and freedoms of thought and speech (China: Government Threats to Academic Freedom Abroad 2019). According to Human Rights Watch, "Confucius Institutes are extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds, and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration." Because of these concerns, CIs have been closed in some parts of the world, mostly in more developed countries, with investigations going on in Australia and Japan to determine whether the Institutes

broke the law or constitute a threat to national sovereignty and security (Taiwan News 2019; Kawasima 2021).

In Africa, however, the increase in critical views around CIs has not led to any cases of closure. A key finding for the resilience of CIs in Africa may perhaps be linked to their impacts at the local level. For instance, CIs in different African countries have contributed to human resource development through training and the awarding of scholarships to young Africans. The Institutes have also been shown to facilitate educational collaboration and cooperation between universities in African countries and China (Hartig 2012). Additionally, CIs have provided employment opportunities for Africans with Mandarin-speaking skills (Wheeler 2014; KICD 2021). Our case study demonstrates some of the impacts of CIs mentioned here.

2 The Role of Confucius Institutes

Language is an important aspect of culture. Just like any other country, China has used its language as an important tool of foreign policy. Since the late 1990s, the government of China has popularized the Chinese language and culture in many parts of the African continent. The promotion and popularization of the Chinese language are geared towards enhancing the friendship and the economic and cultural cooperation between China and many African states. The use of language by China as a tool of foreign policy became clearer in 2004, when the China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Hanban) launched the Confucius Institute (Chew 2007). The Confucius Institute defines itself as a non-profit organization to promote culture and the Chinese language. According to the Hanban, the primary objective for establishing the CIs is “meeting the demands of foreign Chinese learners and contributing to the development of multiculturalism and the building of a harmonious world.” Many people see CIs as the Chinese version of the British Council, Goethe Institute, Instituto Cervantes, and Alliance Française. However, Hartig (2018) posits that CIs are not equivalent to the institutes from Europe, since they differ in many aspects, particularly in their organizational form. China wholly operates the CIs. They are quasi-state actors acting separately from the formal state hierarchy on behalf of the state but with full government support. They usually serve the state interests and are subject to state regulation and control. This is because locally run offices receive their licenses from China, and the local partners act as joint ventures. It is, of course, still possible to compare the CI and these European institutes, since they all have as a remit the advancement of the languages and cultures of their respective governments/countries.

Since their establishment, CIs have grown exponentially and spread widely in Africa. According to Akhtaruzza, Berg, and Lien (2017), Africa has 46 CIs in 32 countries out of the 54 countries that make up the continent. The authors stated that South Africa and Kenya have the most, with five and four CIs, respectively; and Tanzania, Ghana, Egypt, Madagascar, Nigeria, Morocco, and Ethiopia are among the African countries with two CIs. However, the education cooperation between Africa and China did not begin after the establishment of CIs. Africa–China educational cooperation started back in the mid-20th century, when most post-colonial African countries established bilateral trade agreements with China. Such cooperation increased in 2000, when FOCAC was established. The emergence of CIs, therefore, is based on pre-21st-century educational cooperation between Africa and China, which was aimed at the exchange of resources, knowledge, and technology. Indeed, CIs have been noted to impact positively in African countries where they are established.

The Confucius Institute’s declared mission is “to strengthen the understanding, opportunities and bonds between individuals, enterprises, communities and institutions in their home country with the People’s Republic of China.” They do this by forging strategic alliances with business, industry, government, and other institutions with an interest in forging closer and more productive ties with China. Apart from teaching Chinese language and culture, they work with academic faculties and students to promote awareness and sound knowledge of China as well as developing programs to promote research about China within local universities (Ding 2008). Therefore, long-term relationship building has been stated as a key goal, with the understanding that friendship and the need to constantly create new fields of cooperation are necessary for stable partnership.

CIs in Africa do not only specialize in language and culture promotion but have worked on various technical cooperative projects with partner universities in China. For instance, in Kenya, where four Confucius Institutes and four Confucius classrooms are hosted, each partner university serves a unique function. For example, the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi (CIUON), established in 2005 in collaboration with Tianjin Normal University, focuses on state-to-state departments owing to its reputation of producing top government officials and a network of alumni in important strategic sectors, both in government and the private sector. CIUON has conducted short-term Chinese training courses for the Kenyan immigration department, Kenya Revenue Authority, and Kenya Airports Authority. It has also conducted short-term training programs for young diplomats at the Foreign Service Academy in Kenya.

The Confucius Institute at Kenyatta University (CIKU) was the second of its kind to be established in Kenya, in 2008, in collaboration with Shangdon Normal University; it specializes in curriculum development due to its reputation in

education and teaching programs and has since developed a Chinese curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Kenya.

The third is the Confucius Institute at Egerton University (CIEU), which was established in 2013 in collaboration with Nanjing Agricultural University. Their relationship is based on the two universities' specialization in agricultural research and development. Practical training by both Chinese and Kenyan experts takes place at the University's large farmland, known as the Agro science park, where they also host the Kenya–China joint laboratory for crop molecular biology, which is open to all students at Egerton University.

The Confucius Institute at Moi University (CIMU) was launched in 2015, making it the fourth in Kenya. It is the first Confucius Institute in the world specializing in textile engineering and fashion design. CIMU was established in collaboration with Shanghai-based Donghua University. Apart from offering training in textile and clothing courses, it also offers Chinese language and culture classes to students, local residents, and workers at the university affiliate textile company, Rivatex.

3 Impact of CIs in Africa

According to a study, “Behind the Rising Chinese Fever in Africa,” China has established 61 Confucius Institutes in 46 African countries. The first one was set up in 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya; three others have been established, making a total of four. South Africa, with six Confucius Institutes, has more institutes than any other country in Africa. The study found that “African agency in the CI model is not prioritized by the Chinese.” The study argues that, due to lack of oversight, limited input from host African universities, and prioritizing breadth over depth, “CIs fail to create equitable cultural exchanges with African host countries.” “CIs do not develop meaningful skills that make African students competitive in the marketplace which is why most aim to go to China: to truly learn. Further, students and faculty members alike express frustration about the collaborative elements of the institutions,” according to the study (Sawahel 2023).

Despite the above, we argue in this chapter that there are, indeed, significant impacts from the CIs in Africa. The first major impact of CIs in Africa is the educational training that Africans have undergone. The study focuses on impact from the perspective of capacity development in Africa and employment opportunities created as a result of Mandarin skills acquired and collaboration between Chinese and local actors through the CI. Many African countries have ambitions to achieve economic growth and follow the footsteps of countries such as China and European countries. Still, human resource development continues to be one of the major challenges. As a way of combatting this challenge, African countries have

accepted short-term and long-term training aimed at human resource development and capacity building for Africans. Through CIs and other related educational cooperation, China has supported Africa in science and technology, technical and vocational educational training, and higher education (King 2014). The results of such training have been carrying skills that have improved technological innovation and increased cooperation in agriculture, energy, and other enterprises. Moreover, CIs have enabled the students to go to China for training in information and communications technology (ICT).

A second positive impact of CIs is the number of scholarships awarded to Africans. As part of the training and equipping of Africans with knowledge and skills, many Africans have received scholarships in different fields (Niu 2014). The scholarships have equipped some Africans to build their human resource skills and capital to seize opportunities that lift their countries' economies. Specifically, CIs has enabled many Africans to learn Mandarin, which puts them in a better position to secure scholarships and jobs in Chinese industries.

Further still, CIs have increased cooperation between universities in Africa and China. Some of this educational cooperation has helped to facilitate the donations of teaching facilities and other equipment in African universities. Prestigious African universities in Lagos, Nairobi, Cairo, Makerere, Stellenbosch, Dar es Salaam, and Pretoria have received support and donations. Also, CIs have expanded the opportunities for students in these universities to undertake Chinese language study before proceeding to China for further education. Besides, the establishment of CIs has improved and enhanced the exchange of ideas and research, which promotes higher education in Africa (Hartig 2016).

As mentioned above, CIs have provided employment opportunities for Mandarin-speaking Africans (Wheeler 2014). Our research indicates that, to overcome the language barrier among members of the business community involved in the Afro-Chinese trade in Africa, wisdom demands that the sector employs individuals who have Mandarin language skills. The language skills of a select population of Africans with equal knowledge of local dynamics has created demand for an elite class of workers in many Chinese-owned companies, which rely on these new skilled workers as interpreters and navigators in local communities. Also, in some countries, Mandarin Chinese has been introduced to be taught at High School and Upper Primary levels. For instance, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) introduced Mandarin Chinese as a subject that students need to study (KICD 2021). The move to incorporate the Mandarin language as one of the standard subjects confirms that China's soft power (Nye 2017) is growing on the African continent.

Despite the impacts of CIs in Africa, as described above, we believe that knowledge of the broad impacts of these Chinese language and culture institutes is quite limited, and more is needed to build on what is available. With CIs gaining ground

in terms of expansion and reach as critical cultural infrastructure in Africa, there is a need to engage critically and in a comprehensive manner with the examination of their impacts on the continent. With this in mind, we did a case study of the CI at the University of Ghana, Legon (CIUG) to see what impact it has through participatory observation.

In terms of methodology, we took a mainly qualitative approach, using participant observation and relying on both primary and secondary data sources. Secondary sources included information from the official website of the CI at the University of Ghana highlighting its programs, partnerships, and impacts. Secondly, in April 2023, two of the authors attended a daylong event at the institution and made personal observations that were used for the assessment of impacts at the local level and beyond. As a third aspect of the methodology, one of the co-authors works at the University of Ghana and is in constant touch with the CI; therefore, his personal observation provided valuable insights on the Institution. Fourthly, in July 2023, two of the authors presented the results of the study at the university and interacted with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the Chinese director of the Institute, faculty members in the Department of Modern Languages, and students of the CIUG. Lastly, the authors were able to obtain primary data on the rates of employment of graduate and postgraduate students from the CI at the University of Ghana.

4 The CI at the University of Ghana

Information about the CI at the University of Ghana, Legon (CIUG) is listed on its website: <https://www.ug.edu.gh/confucius-institute/welcome-to-confucius-institute-university-of-ghana>. We notice that it was founded in 2013:

The University of Ghana, in cooperation with the Zhejiang University of Technology and the Confucius Institute Headquarters in China, established the first Confucius Institute in Ghana in 2013 to promote the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture in Ghana. Since its formation in 2013, this approximately 10-year old institution ... has worked tirelessly by seconding a large number of academics from various universities in China to Ghana for educational cooperation with several educational institutions. Through this cooperation, many Ghanaians in businesses, government agencies, universities, and basic schools have had the opportunity to visit China to study the Chinese language or experience Chinese culture. It has trained thousands of Ghanaian students, thus earning the status of a Global Model Confucius Institute. Thus, while the CIUG is similar in many of its functions to other CIs, it stands out as a Global Model CI, one of the measures used to show how well a particular CI has performed its functions. Currently, the CIUG in cooperation with

universities, basic schools, and enterprises and beyond has established eight teaching sites and four special Chinese language programs. The scope of the Institute's delivery has radiated from the capital of Accra to its surrounding areas. (CIUG)

From these descriptions, we see that the impact of the institute is not only being felt in the capital city, where it is located, but in other parts of Ghana. As the Institute itself self-assesses, it still strives to:

Enhance the understanding of the Chinese language and culture among Ghanaians. Strengthen economic, educational, and cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and Ghana. Promote friendly relations between China and Ghana and the multi-cultural development between China and Ghana. (CIUG)

Aiming at a critical assessment of whether the CIUG is delivering on the goals above, we attended a day long activity at the Institute, at their invitation. This activity involved a Chinese language and culture competition by students and graduates of the Institute during an International Chinese Language and Culture Day in April 2023. The activity involved many contestants. Each had to speak Chinese for some minutes before performing a Chinese cultural activity such as kung fu or tai chi. This day long event is further described in detail below.

The CIUG has striven to meet the needs of Ghanaians with regards to learning Chinese language and enhancing the understanding of Chinese culture as well as strengthening economic, educational, and cultural exchanges and cooperation between Ghana and China over the years. As mentioned above, the program was attended by several guests from Chinese enterprises in Ghana, a representative from the Chinese Embassy in Ghana, the registrar of the University of Ghana, several heads of departments at the University of Ghana, heads from some private and international schools in Ghana, and friends of some media houses in Ghana. The program welcomed about 300 spectators. This program featured 19 University of Ghana Chinese language students, who competed and showcased their knowledge and proficiency in the Chinese language as well as their talents and skills in Chinese cultural arts through performances such as singing, dancing, poetry, acting, kung fu, and speeches in Chinese. Each contestant had three minutes to deliver a speech and three to five minutes to perform a cultural act. The panelists rated the contestants, with 100 being a perfect score (the third author of this chapter was one of the judges). The average score of the judges was taken and, per the total score, awards were given. The contestants walked away with several prizes, such as mobile phones, Bluetooth speakers, headphones, power banks, and many more.

The April 2023 observation was followed up by a visit in July 2023, during which we presented our research at a seminar at the University of Ghana Modern Languages Department. We discussed our research with many stakeholders, including lecturers and students. The Director of the CI agreed with many of our findings and suggested that they intend to upscale the activities of the CI by taking it beyond the confines of the capital city, Accra.

Further to all this, we obtained critical data showing employment rates of graduate and postgraduate students from the years 2013 to 2022, as in the table below. This shows that there is a gradual rise in employment, which indicates that the CI not only has a significant impact on its graduates but is also making considerable contributions to the employment sector in the country.

Year	Students Graduated	Further Studies (Postgraduate)	Employment
2013	24	2	22
2014	36	6	30
2015	72	N/A	72
2016	81	14	67
2017	74	4	70
2018	63	8	55
2019	43	7	36
2020	72	4	68
2021	124	18	116
2022	140	7	140

While it is evident that CIUG is delivering on its goals, they are, in the most part, China-focused goals and help deliver Chinese foreign policy goals to a large extent and very little in terms of Ghanaian foreign interests and cultural profile. In the grand scheme of things, China's soft power in Africa is on the rise, and, through language and culture being offered by the CI, it will be able to influence politics and economics in its favor. If it goes unchecked, African countries, including Ghana, may become too dependent and lose their leverage as the asymmetry in the relations widens.

5 Critical Evaluation and Proposals for Improvement

The students appeared to us to have a relatively high level of Chinese language fluency and cultural understanding; this shows that the Institute is fulfilling its functions well. Moreover, data shows that Mandarin skills and human resource development in the form of scholarships, campus recruitment drives, and technical and social cooperation between governments, universities, business, and people have also created job opportunities and improved the human capacity in Ghana. The constant rise in enrollment suggests that Ghanaians see the value of the CI and what it has to offer. Language and culture go hand in hand; therefore, it may be deduced from the enrolment data that there is a general rise in and appreciation of Chinese language and culture in Ghana.

However, one may ask: what else can the Institute do to further strengthen the implementation of its mandate? The CIUG can provide more scholarships for students to study abroad in China. Environment plays an important role in the acquisition of a language for the learner, that is, most language learners who find themselves among the native speakers of the language can improve upon their language skills, especially their listening and speaking skills. The CIUG can assist more students in acquiring scholarships to China for short-term and long-term courses, which will not only boost and motivate them in learning the Chinese language but also give them the opportunity to practice and communicate frequently with native Chinese speakers.

The CIUG can also give grants for more research work. However good a thing or an initiative is, it could still have flaws that need to be eliminated. The study of the Chinese language in Ghana has developed over the years as more students take interest in the language. However, since the Chinese language is not the native language in Ghana, it comes with challenges that need to be addressed. Researchers have paid attention to development in Chinese studies in Ghana; therefore, if grants are made available for these researchers to undertake research work, most of the challenges faced with teaching and learning Chinese language can be identified and addressed. Indeed, a competitive scholarship or funding scheme can be established and selected scholars sent to China for summer camps to improve their understanding of Chinese culture. Understanding the culture of the language an individual is learning is an integral part of the learning process that can also help the learner to better connect with the native speakers of the language. Hence, the CIUG can help students master the Chinese language by sending them to China for summer camp programs, which will focus on educating students about Chinese culture and how it connects with the Chinese language.

Further still, the CIUG can train more local Chinese language teachers to help in teaching the language across the nation. More schools in Ghana are becoming

interested in adding Chinese language to their curriculum; however, there are not enough teachers available to assist with the teaching of the language. The CIUG can train more students to become Chinese language teachers in the various schools and at the various educational levels of the country. Training local teachers in the Chinese language is more helpful, since they will be able to relate and use both English and local languages to explain some structures or words that might be difficult to explain for the native Chinese teachers themselves.

Finally, sustainability is an important consideration, so the CIUG can organize more of the kind of cultural activities that we witnessed on April 21 2023 for students and learners of the Chinese language to experience and familiarize themselves with the cultural context that goes along with the language. These activities, which should not be only once in a while, will allow students learning in Ghana to experience Chinese culture even in Ghana, as well as embracing the diversity or differences between the Ghanaian and Chinese cultures.

Even though the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana is collaborating well with Zhejiang University of Technology and the Confucius Institute headquarters in China to promote educational cooperation, the collaboration is far more one-sided, with the Chinese cultural economic and political agenda taking center stage.

First, granted that the CIs were established to promote Chinese language and culture, African partners still need to utilize the CIs' structures to promote African languages and culture in the opposite direction if, indeed, the collaboration is to advance the African cultural profile as well. While some African countries, like Kenya and South Africa, are trying to exploit the Africa–China cultural cooperation to promote their national brands through tourism, more needs to be done in the context of CI and African culture. Rather than emphasizing Chinese language and culture, educational exchanges should explore student exchanges where Chinese students are facilitated to come and learn African culture and languages, too.

Secondly, the power disparity between Chinese actors and African recipients promotes patronage where Chinese actors dictate the agenda, roles, and goals of CIs. This may not be sustainable, as it limits the extent to which genuine interaction happens. There is the danger of withdrawal once the dominant actor achieves their objectives or when the recipient senses ulterior political and economic motives threatening the relationship. The principle of co-directorship at the helm of CI in some African countries is one way to enhance mutual learning and promote a two-way communication and promotion of African ideas, perspectives, and interests in the CI arrangement. According to Buckle (2012), the more distance there is between the agent of cultural diplomacy and the political and economic agenda, the more sustainable the program. Moreover, the more interactive and two-sided the exchange, the more likely the program is to be sustainable.

Third, African learning institutions hosting CIs should promote mutual learning and innovation by imputing African expertise, theories, concepts, and perspectives at the heart of CIs hosted in their institutions. African culture and Chinese culture differ from one other in many aspects, and institutions of higher learning should be at the forefront in promoting the normative and ideation resources that advance African political values, philosophy, and moral appeals.

6 Conclusion

As Bodomo (2009) and subsequent work continues to point out, there is much asymmetry in Africa–China relations. We have shown in this chapter a short description of the presence of CIs in Africa and their impact, with a case study as empirical evidence that one of the two partners, China, is doing all it can to promote its language and culture in Africa, while the other partner, Africa, is apparently silent. As mentioned by Adeli and Ammann (in this volume), with regard to the “roles of narratives” in the cultural aspects of the BRI, the narrative surrounding the CIs are of an asymmetrical nature. Apart from efforts by individuals to teach African languages and cultures in China, including the first author of this paper, who started an African Studies program (that taught Swahili, Hausa, Akan, and Dagaare) at the University of Hong Kong in 2008, we are not aware of any African government program to teach Africa languages and cultures in China. This must change, and we propose the establishment of African cultural institutes in China (Bodomo 2022), which we may choose to name after our political heroes and intellectuals, giving us names such as Mandela Institute, Nkrumah Institute, and Nyerere Institute.

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