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Confucius Institutes as a Tool for Promoting China's Interests

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Confucius Institutes (CI), established at universities outside China, are intended to promote a positive image of the country in the world. CI branches are becoming an integral part of the establishments at which they operate, so the universities are in part responsible for the content disseminated by CI. CI branches are not allowed to present topics controversial from China's perspective. Most universities accept this, because Confucius Institutes allow them to expand their educational offer. However, some establishments, for example in the U.S. and Sweden, have acknowledged that CI activity is at variance with their mission and cancelled contracts with their Chinese partner. Following these examples, Polish institutes of higher education should evaluate their own cooperation with Confucius Institutes.

The main goals of Confucius Institutes (CI), which operate at universities outside China, are to teach Mandarin, disseminate Chinese culture, and promote a positive image of China globally. There are also Confucius Classrooms, most of which have been established at primary and secondary schools. By the end of 2017, more than 500 CI branches and 1,100 Confucius Classrooms were operating in 146 countries. Most were in the U.S. (629 institutions), the UK (186) and Australia (83). Poland has five CI branches, at Wrocław University, the Jagiellonian University (Kraków), the Adam Mickiewicz University (Poznań), Gdańsk University, and Opole University of Technology. In 2018, the CI based at the Jagiellonian University opened a "Point of Confucius Institute" at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS) in Warsaw.

CI Characteristics. Confucius Institutes compare themselves to other foreign institutions such as the British Council (with approximately 115 branches globally) and the German Goethe Institute (160 branches), which aim to popularise the language and culture of their home countries around the world. The British Council and Goethe Institute are supervised by their respective governments and are non-profit organisations, functioning abroad without links to any institution in the host country. CI branches are organised on a different basis. They are based on trilateral agreement between a given university in the host country, a Chinese institute of higher education, and the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*). This latter is an institution within the structures of China's Ministry of Education responsible for governing and administering CI branches. Its president and board members are appointed by the Chinese State Council. Based on the agreement, a foreign establishment provides its CI branch with an office, personnel and financing. Some of the resources for start-up and activities are provided and accounted by *Hanban*. To establish a CI branch, a foreign university also has to accept the "Constitution and By-laws of Confucius Institutes". They include obedience to local laws but with respect to Chinese regulations. Authorities of the host institute are responsible for the interpretation of these regulations, and for settling any disagreements that may arise. The regulations state that the person in charge of managing a CI branch should be knowledgeable about China and fluent in Mandarin. Practically, this means that any given CI branch has two leaders: a Chinese citizen and a representative of the host institution. Once established, a

CI branch becomes an integral part of the foreign university at which it is based. In this way, universities assert the credibility of the CI and take part of the responsibility for the content that is disseminated.

Methods of Operation. CI branches provide institutes of higher education with Mandarin classes, student and scholar exchanges, and free access to educational materials and publications about China. For universities, this is of great help in broadening their educational offer and reaching out to new students. For example, the City of Chicago decided that Confucius Classrooms would be responsible for teaching Chinese in the local authority schools. Confucius Institutes also provide state Mandarin language exams. They organise exhibitions, concerts and conferences on culture and tradition, but also on the situation in contemporary China.

CI activities are diversified, depending mostly on the region in which they work. In many countries (mostly African or Asian), they offer complements China's bilateral relations. High-level visits are supposed to highlight the CI's achievements, or to coincide with the opening of new branches. Examples include the agreement on the new CI in Gambia, signed during Gambian President Adama Barrow's meeting with Xi Jinping in Beijing, December 2017, and deputy prime minister Zhang Gaoli's visit to Sudan in August 2017.

In U.S. and European states, CI goals are slightly different. In these countries, Mandarin courses and the popularisation of content about China are intended to counterbalance negative information presented in public debate. By its selection of topics and dissemination of positive (or neutral) information, CI branches seek to prove that critical opinions are unjustified and cooperation with China is nothing more than an opportunity for all sides. An example of this approach was the presentation of a Chinese-Hungarian dictionary, prepared by a CI branch, to prime minister Li Keqiang's during a visit to Hungary in 2017. In Poland, CI branches in Opole and Gdańsk have organised seminars and meetings on the positive aspects of the "Belt and Road Initiative".

CI branches present the situation in China subjectively. Ethnic and cultural diversity is promoted, but only in a manner approved by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and in such a way as to focus on the domination of the Hans. Stereotypical elements of Chinese culture (such as tea making and calligraphy) are emphasised. Issues such as the Uyghur minority, ethnic Tibetans (in the context of their native languages), the events of June 1989, and Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize, equally aspects of contemporary China, are absent from the CI programmes. Chinese language teachers working at CI branches are prepared to avoid questions on controversial issues. Links and topics presented on CI websites refer to information domains dominated by positive information on China.

International Reaction. Such activities raise concerns, especially in the United States, where CI branches are accused of disseminating propaganda. Preparations for a draft law requiring CI branches to be registered as foreign agents began in March, and have since progressed. One of the reasons for this was the establishment of CPC cells by Chinese students at American universities, and pressure to change course matter considered controversial from China's perspective.

In August 2018, the University of North-Florida terminated its four-year-old agreement with its CI branch, stating that CI activity was incompatible with the university's mission. In the same month President Donald Trump's administration introduced a ban on Pentagon funding for university projects involving Confucius Institutes. Other universities had also withdrawn from cooperation with CI branches, citing a variety of reasons. The university in Pennsylvania claimed inconsistency with the university mission.. In Stockholm, CI procedures of operation were said to be inconsistent with those in Sweden. In Lyon, there were allegations of unacceptable interventions in the curriculum. In Stuttgart, the university withdrew from cooperation with the CI branch because of student protests and lack of funding. And, at the McMaster University in Canada, CI employment contracts were found to be inconsistent with Canadian law.

Conclusions for Poland. CI branches are tools of Chinese soft power, by which China's authorities seek to influence public debate in the host country, exploiting the credibility and authority of universities. Five Polish institutes of higher education established cooperation with CI branch not only for financial reasons, but also out of a desire to broaden their educational offer. However, concerns about sharing responsibility for Chinese content prevented the establishment of the CI at Warsaw University. The case at SWPS is specific, because the CI Point there is a sub-branch of the Jagiellonian University CI in Kraków (although the Warsaw CI Point is not fully bound by the rules which apply to the Kraków organisation). It is currently difficult to evaluate whether SWPS will be allowed to present comprehensive and reliable content on modern China.

Due to concerns about CI activities, one possible solution could be to limit branches to teaching Mandarin. However, *Hanban* approval of such a solution is unlikely. The same applies to the potential separation of CI branches from universities making them independent institutions. It is likely that *Hanban* disapproval was one of the reasons that some foreign universities cancelled their CI contracts.

A solution in Poland could also be to increase funding for university research on China, dissemination of information about contemporary the country, and language teaching. Such a programme could be based on EU funds, as in the case of the University of Łódź. In this way, the establishment of CI branches would be less important for universities as a means of improving their educational offer, gaining new students and intensifying academic exchanges with China.