

Teaching Chinese to the World: The Political Economy of Confucius Institutes

Kenneth King

The Education University of Hong Kong

(University of Edinburgh & former Distinguished Visiting Professor, HKU)

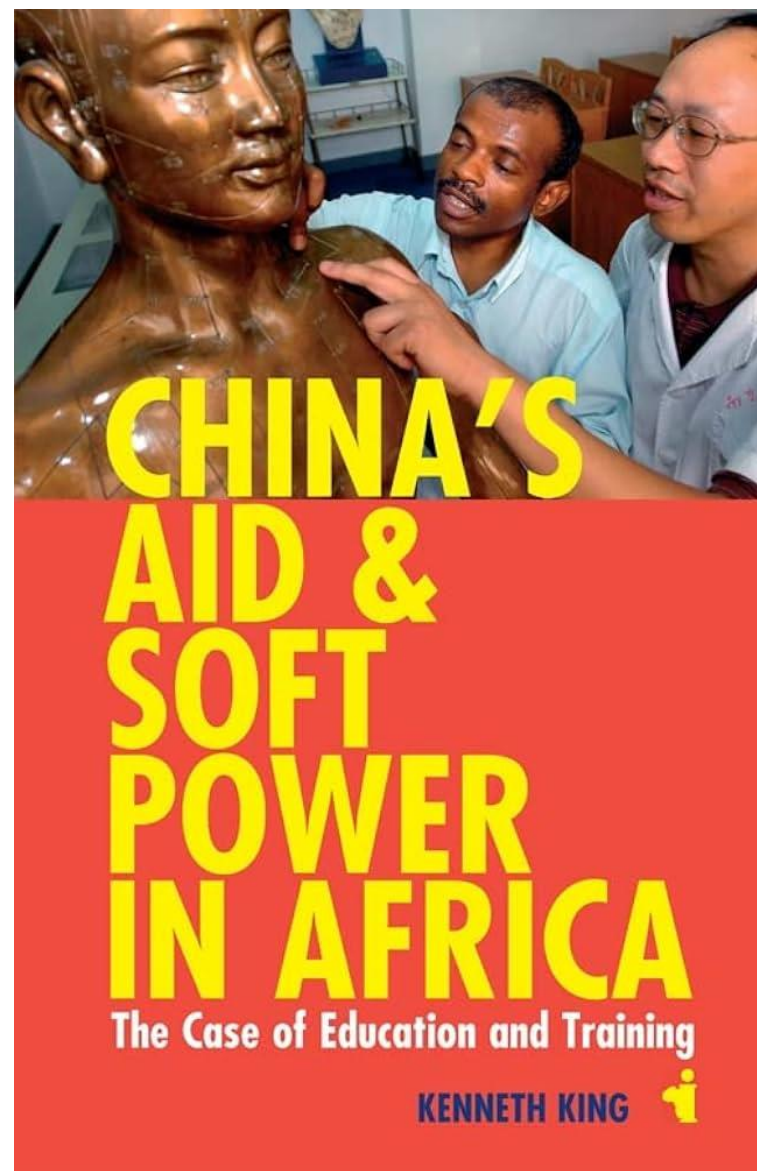
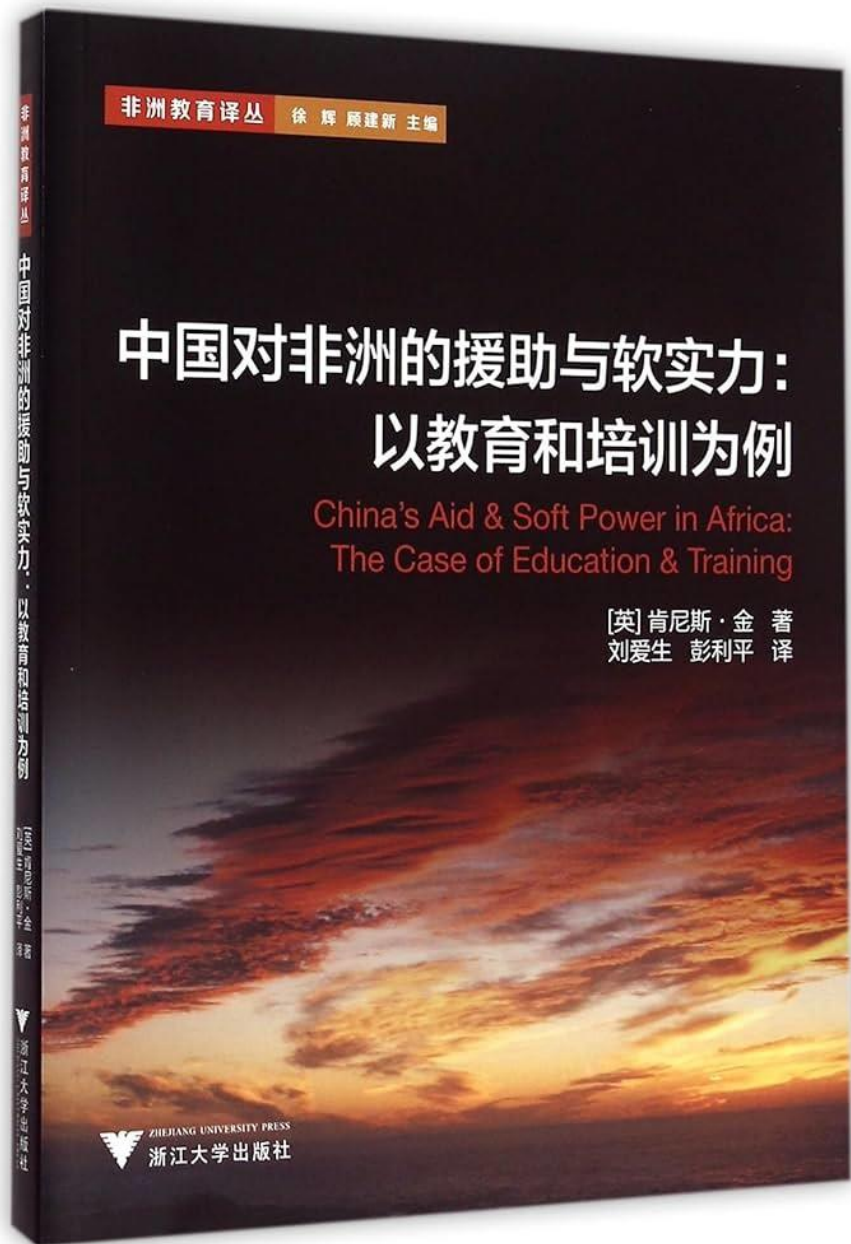
Kenneth.King@ed.ac.uk

Outline of presentation

- Background on Kenneth King's engagement with Africa, China and the Confucius Institutes
- The role of chance or serendipity in professional and academic development –see KK's PhD on Pan-Africanism
- A review of the variety of Confucius Institutes (CIs)
- Research possibilities around CIs in different countries
- A critical look at the politics of the CI situation in the US and UK

Kenneth King reached China in March 2006

- Two months earlier, China had published *China's African Policy 2006*
- Not an **aid** document, but about '**Learning from each other**' and 'common development'. Key words in *China's African policy* are **mutual & win-win-**not 'aid'
- A central theme: 'Cooperation in human resources and education'
- No mention of Confucius Institutes, though they started in 2004
- But the *African policy* promised to 'continue to send teachers to Africa to help with Chinese language teaching'
- King's first HKU seminar was therefore on *China and Africa*: in March 2006
- It led to King's: *China's aid and soft power in Africa* (2013) - also in Chinese



Role of *Chance* in King's academic safari

- The **chance** of a particularly good teacher influences what you study.
- In my case I studied Ancient Greek & Latin in Cambridge –but wish I'd studied Chinese! I'd be speaking to you in Chinese! And might have published on China-Africa earlier, like Snow in 1989, with *Star Raft*.
- I found my PhD topic completely **by chance** in two library books.
- This led directly to my first job in the University of Nairobi in Kenya
- While researching vocational training in Kenya, I **accidentally** encountered **the informal sector** – young people working without regular jobs or pay. I did 20 years of research and two books on this. The origins were **serendipitous**.
- **By chance** I came to Hong Kong University, as my first PhD student worked there.
- **What role has chance played in your academic or research journey thru school to university to work? We might ask you about this at the end of the seminar**

Kenneth King's early reflections on the Confucius Institutes (CIs) in 2013

- In King's book on *China's aid & soft power in Africa*, it is clear that CIs are very different from the European parallel bodies like the British Council, Goethe Institute, and Alliance Française
- They are mostly **responses to requests** by universities outside China
- They are located right inside universities not on the high street
- They are joint ventures between two partner universities – in our case, the University of Edinburgh and Fudan University in Shanghai. See PolyU, only CI in HK, but with no partner abroad or mainland
- As we shall see, there is **no single model** of a CI.
- 'Let a thousand flowers bloom' has been the preferred approach to CIs

CI's individuality & specificity in each context

- According to state councillor, Liu Yandong, in 2010: *Confucius Institutes are expected to adapt to the local situations, mingle with the local particularities, and strive for their own unique styles. They need to respect and embody cultural diversity.*
- In other words, there are 'model CIs' but **no single model** for CIs.
- Former CI director, Xu Lin, said: 'There is no ideological element in the CI; it is completely cultural. Therefore, the CI can't be called a kind of Mao Zedong Institute; it has nothing to do with politics' (2010)
- '70 Confucius Institutes cannot beat the influence of one mega Hollywood movie screened in China' according to Xu Lin (2010)

The Soft Power of Confucius Institutes (CIs) worldwide, and the example of Edinburgh

- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences scholar, He Wenping, had commented on the success of China's hard power in Africa in roads, rail, harbours and stadiums, but the relative absence of its soft power in education and society.
- But the Confucius Institute has suddenly put China into the heart of universities across the world – in the largest language project the world has ever seen. Chinese professors and teachers all over the world
- Edinburgh University CI has a fine historic building, supporting Chinese language, sponsoring exhibitions, offering scholarships & summer camps = major cultural diplomacy. Its title is *CI for Scotland*, 1 of 31 CIs in the UK
- Is the CI perhaps more influential than the 8000 Chinese students in Edinburgh University currently in 2023? Surely not!

The particularity of the CIs in Africa

- Reinforcing the theme of a thousand flowers, **the 63 CIs in 46 African countries** are very different from those in Europe
- It is 18 years since the first CI opened in my old University of Nairobi, but CI numbers in Africa compare with 20 cultural centres from Germany, 32 from France and 25 from the UK (British Council). So there are more CIs in Africa than any other language and cultural institute
- Unlike Europe where Mandarin was already present in many universities, CIs have brought Chinese studies & Chinese degrees to Africa
- In Europe, the CIs promote business links with China; whereas in Africa the CIs promote access to the many Chinese businesses in Africa.

Specialist CIs across the world

- Given the aim to encourage particularity, it should not be surprising that what we call **specialist CIs** should have emerged in many different settings
- Currently there have been almost a dozen different specialisms, picking up the location of the host university, or a shared professional or cultural focus of the two partner universities.
- A good illustration of this can be found in **the three agricultural CIs**, in Kenya, Thailand and Pakistan. Such specialisms are hugely supported by the tradition of agricultural universities of China.
- In the case of the Kenya Agricultural CI, there is an agro-science park, a crop research lab, and active two-way technology transfer with Nanjing Agriculture University, the CI partner of the Kenyan host CI.

Textiles and Publishing CIs

- A specialized **Textile CI** in Kenya is in Kenya's Moi University which unusually is affiliated to a neighbouring textile factory. Moi is partnered with Donghua in Shanghai with its very strong textile engineering focus.
- Beyond the regular CI language courses, there are textile engineering and fashion design courses, as well as textile and clothing training.
- Workers in the textile factory enrol in the job-linked language training
- In the **Publishing CI** in Oxford Brookes University in the UK, there is another link with a firm, this time a publishing company in China. This is affiliated to the CI partner, Beijing Foreign Studies University
- Courses on digital publishing are available beyond Chinese language. Not yet an AI-CI!

Chinese traditional medicine CIs & alliance

- One of the most popular specialisms for CIs worldwide is a focus on **Chinese traditional medicine**, with the first being in London South Bank University.
- There are no less than 14 CIs with links to Chinese universities with the same traditional medicine focus.
- Together they have formed a **Global Alliance of CIs for Chinese Medicine** – from Brazil to Australia and from Cuba to Japan
- In the special case of Western Cape University in South Africa, the Medical CI has collaborated with the Traditional Healers' Organisation of South Africa.

CIs & the arts of Dance, Performance & Music

- In Goldsmiths, University of London, the CI focuses on **dance and music**, covering many different dance traditions, as well as focusing on training in several different Chinese musical instruments.
- Its natural partner is Beijing Dance Academy
- Intriguing about the **Music CI** in Denmark is that it too is not linked to a university but rather to the Royal Danish Academy of Music.
- Its Chinese partner is also not a university but is the Central Conservatory of Music in China.
- Their websites reflect the rich music and dance traditions of China

Business CIs as one of the key specialisms

- Beyond the CIs such as those in Athens, Leeds and London which are specifically named as **Business CIs**, there are others such as Heriot Watt in Edinburgh which is called a **CI for Business & Communication**
- The **CI for Business London** brings together two pre-eminent universities, in the London School of Economics and Tsinghua University.
- This partnership also brings into play no less than five sponsor companies, in HSBC, BP, Deloitte, Swire and Standard Chartered.
- Beyond these named business CIs, there are others like Edinburgh which offers a whole range of business language courses. Pass round the Edinburgh CI brochure!

Innovation in Science & Technology & the Online CI at the Open University (OU)

- Two further CIs are associated with universities in the UK
- The CI for **Innovation in Science & Technology** is based in Huddersfield University with a link to the Shanghai University of Science and Technology
- The most recent CI in the UK – since 2022—is the **Online CI at the Open University (OU)**.
- Like the specialist CI in publishing, mentioned above, this too is linked to Beijing Foreign Studies University
- The latter has huge experience of CI partnerships worldwide, having CI links to no less than 23 overseas universities in 18 countries

Specialist, Model and Regular CIs

- Beyond the specialist CIs just mentioned, there were others on **Opera, Martial Arts** and **International Finance** which are now closed.
- In addition to what we are calling specialist CIs, there are almost 50 CIs which have achieved the formal status of being termed **model CIs**.
- Then there are the bulk of CIs which might be called 'regular' CIs but a closer inspection of these would reveal that many of them do have a special character and a way of partnering.
- It would be fascinating to know more about the policy relationship of HK universities to CIs. Why only one CI in HK? **An interesting research topic for a masters??**

Developing a research agenda of questions about the geopolitics of CIs

- Here are some other research questions which arise by looking at the CIs in their different environments
- **CIs and India.** The obvious research question for Indian CIs is surely: *How do we explain that there is only one CI in the whole of India with its 1.3 billion people & a very large number of universities? No visa for Chinese director. Contrast of Indian students in China*
- **CIs in Japan.** Here a key question for the dozen CIs in Japan would be: *How do we explain the fact that all the CIs in Japan are in **private universities** including the top university, Waseda? None is in a public university. Do private universities in China partner with CIs worldwide? Yes.*
- **CIs in the Middle East.** Here the question would be: *Why do we hear so much about the CIs in Europe and North America, but so very little about the CIs in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and UAE?*

CIs and Internationalisation

- There are several questions to be raised on what be called the **international relations' side** of the CIs:
- One of these could be: Does the huge network of 1000 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) in schools and some 400+ CIs in universities operate **as a kind of Chinese Peace Corps**, exposing thousands of younger Chinese volunteers and teachers to different schools and universities? Of course, these volunteers & teachers, unlike the Peace Corps, or the JOCV, or VSO go both to 'developing' and 'developed' countries.
- Another question is: What if anything is or could be the relationship between the hundreds of thousands of **Chinese international students** – mostly in 'developed economies' - and **the CIs in these same universities?** At the moment there seems to be very little relationship and no research on this. Can a HK student apply to be a volunteer in a CI? Let's find out!

The CI vision and the political realities

- In these first 19 slides we have dealt with the vision and ambition of the CIs, their variety, their creativity and their confidence.
- In the next slides we shall deal with just a few aspects of the **bias, disinformation, and fake news** that surround some dimensions of the CI presence, and especially in parts of Europe and in **the USA during former President Trump's time**.
- It is more much difficult to find any controversies about the CIs in Africa and the Middle East, or in East Asia or Latin America.
- If you have access to Wikipedia, look at the very long article on **'Criticisms of Confucius Institutes'** & ask yourselves –how do we explain this? No critical Wiki. articles on other soft power institutions

The double role of social media in policy and practice

- In 2022 when I was in a Washington DC webinar about the African CIs and China's engagements with Africa, one of the papers was heavily based on the impact of different social media programmes operating in Kenya.
- It was argued that social media could be a powerful force for good, but it was also a huge source of **disinformation**.
- The firm, **Cambridge Analytica**, had really used fake news and disinformation in the latest Kenya election. It had also intervened massively in the Brexit Referendum by targeting millions of UK citizens with fake news about the threat of migration, health costs etc. Is fake news free speech? Or should it be censored? A role for censorship of anonymous. soc. media?
- **UK would still be in the EU today if all that fake news had not happened.**

Looking critically at the politics of closing CIs in the US & the threat to CIs in the UK

- I want to use some examples of information about the CIs in the US and UK which you can examine critically to see the geopolitics of soft power.
- As background you should know that in 2017/8 there were about 110 CIs in the US; **they had declined to just 10 in 2023**. How could this have happened? The National Defense Authorisation Act (NDA) in USA said this:

‘None of the funds authorized to be appropriated by this Act or otherwise made available for the Department of Defense may be obligated or expended to support a Chinese language program at an institution of higher education that hosts Confucius Institute.’

It proved to be impossible to draw a sharp line between the Federal and the Chinese funding; so most major universities wanted to be sure they held on to Federal funds and so they dropped the CI funding and also CIs.

Choose between US Federal funds & Chinese funding?

- Three years after the NDA ruling which was already complicated there was a Senate ruling which sounded quite straightforward: **'The bill would cut federal funds to universities and colleges that have Confucius Institutes that don't comply with new oversight rules and regulations'**
- That sounds simple; but in fact everything depends on how complex the oversight rules and regulations are.
- So CI closure was easier and safer than lengthy rule-checking.
- And federal funds are absolutely crucial to all top universities

What is the risk of overseas funding of higher education in the UK?

- Parallel to the US, there was an amendment to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) bill of June 2022 in the UK that has to assess the risk attached to overseas funding in respect of a whole series of areas.
- No decision has not yet been taken to close UK's 31 Confucius Institutes, though the Prime Minister, and Minister of Security have both recently spoken strongly in favour of doing so. And there are already discussions about using Taiwanese language teachers in UK instead of CI and CC teachers.
- Like the USA, the money from China for the CI is a tiny fraction (0.04%) of total university income. Tiny compared to the income from the international student fees of 8,000 Chinese students in Edinburgh University right now.
- As you can see, the real contribution from China is student fees. Which are not a risk!! Yet the political focus is on the very small Confucius Institute funding.
- The message is that you need to look very critically at apparently simple text.
- **But also ask yourself what lies behind this attack in US and UK on the CIs?**

Get used to looking critically at key text.

- Here is another example of the need for you to use a critical lens:
- However, unlike the Alliance Française or Goethe Institutes, many Confucius Institutes operate directly on university campuses, thus giving rise to unique concerns related to academic freedom and political influence. However, **after a year-long investigation into the Confucius Institutes in the United States**, the Government Accountability Office released a report in February 2019 that was **unable to find any evidence of any widespread attempts to restrict academic freedom** with people directly involved in the CI programmes stating there had been no attempts to interfere with their curriculum. ***Yet the concern still remains and the closures have continued.***
- ***Is the real issue not the CI but the anti-China feelings stirred up by Trump?***

One of the commonest criticisms of the CI is that the CI comes from a country with very different politics from UK & USA

- China **allegedly** lacks the centuries-old democratic traditions of USA and UK.....But how were the last 3 UK premiers 'elected'??
- Leaving aside the attack on the US Capitol of February 2020 and Trump's 'Stop the Steal', we should consider whether Trump's 'China War' and his talk about the 'China Virus' in 2020 have not directly contributed to the criticisms and closures of the CIs in the US.
- Is it not quite extraordinary that someone as stupid and bombastic as Trump should actually have been able to create an anti-China feeling in the US? Which has continued to some extent with Joe Biden and with the extreme rightwing of the ruling party in the UK.
- **What can we as critical students and teachers do about this?**

Further Reading

- Li, Siyuan. 2017. *China's Confucius Institute in the Discourse of Power in International Relations: A Case Study of the Confucius Institute in Africa* (unpublished PhD, University of Leeds).
- Li, Siyuan. 2023. China's Confucius Institute and its European counterparts in Africa: A six-dimensional comparative study. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 18(3), 419-440.
- King, K. 2017 'Confucius Institutes in Africa: Culture and Language without Controversy?' In Batchelor, K. and Zhang X. (eds.) *China-Africa relations*. Taylor and Francis, London
- Ask Siyuan lisiyuan43@gmail.com for his pieces or me Kenneth.King@ed.ac.uk for mine
- Check out Wikipedia article:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Confucius_Institutes#:~:text=Espionage,-Further%20information%3A%20Chinese&text=Critics%20of%20Confucius%20Institutes%20have,of%20Chinese%20students%20studying%20abroad