

ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА КИТАЯ В УСЛОВИЯХ ГЛОБАЛЬНОЙ ТУРБУЛЕНТНОСТИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ РЕФОРМЫ ИНСТИТУТОВ КОНФУЦИЯ

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Аннотация. На примере реформы сети институтов Конфуция исследуются особенности изменения международной политики Китая. Отмечается, что за последние 15 лет институты Конфуция стали играть ключевую роль в расширении международного сотрудничества государства. Однако с недавних пор время данный проект столкнулся с массовой критикой на фоне растущей глобальной турбулентности и напряженности в отношениях между Китаем, Соединенными Штатами Америки и другими странами. Ответом Китая на критику стало последовательное реформирование сети институтов Конфуция, демонстрирующее приверженность государства к двустороннему взаимодействию и отказ от приоритета глобализации. Подчеркивается, что Китай стремится налаживать контакты с развивающимися странами и испытывает сомнения по поводу преодоления напряженности в отношениях с некоторыми развитыми государствами.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика Китая; институты Конфуция; глобализация; глобальная турбулентность.

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CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL TURBULENCE: EXAMINING THE REFORM OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

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Abstract. Using the example of the reform of the network of Confucius Institutes, the features of changes in China's international policy are explored. It is noted that over the past 15 years, Confucius Institutes have begun to play a key role in expanding the state's international cooperation. However, the project has recently faced massive criticism amid growing global

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turbulence and tensions between China, the United States of America, and other countries. China's response to criticism was the consistent reform of the network of Confucius Institutes, demonstrating the state's commitment to bilateral interaction and rejection of the priority of globalisation. It is emphasised that China seeks to establish contacts with developing countries and has doubts about overcoming tensions in relations with some developed countries.

Keywords: China's foreign policy; Confucius institutes; globalisation; global turbulence.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, China has taken significant strides in enhancing global connectivity. Through the initiation and promotion of international projects, China has contributed to both economic and political globalisation, while simultaneously bolstering its influence on a global scale, particularly in developing nations. In addition to employing economic, financial, and infrastructural tools, the realm of higher education has played a pivotal role in solidifying China's connections with its global partners over the last two decades and could be considered as one of behavioural evidences for the clarification of China's foreign policy.

The Belt and Road Initiative, established in the mid-2010s, in conjunction with plans to expand student exchanges with key regions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Shanghai cooperation organisation, the United States of America, the European Union, and Russia, has been a deliberate effort to fortify

China's global connectivity and reinforce its position as a driving force behind globalisation. In the framework of globalisation over the 15 past years, the network of Confucius Institutes (CI) has been playing a crucial role in advancing China's global connectivity and has therefore undergone rapid expansion, sparking both high expectations and concerns. However, recent diplomatic tensions have profoundly affected CI worldwide, extending their influence even further than the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, this article aims to delve into the primary challenges confronting CI on a global scale and examine the key strategies China is employing to bolster this instrument in national diplomacy. By scrutinising the evolving international landscape of CI, this research endeavors to shed light on the transformation of China's foreign policy and its global strategy towards cooperation and integration in the realm of increasing turbulence.

Theoretical framework

Sources on CI present a multi-faceted perspective on their role and impact, exploring the intricate connection between various aspects of China's foreign policy, diplomatic relations, and «soft power». D. Lien, C. H. Oh, and W. Selmier highlight the positive impact of CI on trade and outward foreign direct investment [1]. Meantime the increase in the number of CI branches correlates positively with exports from the United States to China [2]. The majority of sources suggest that CI play a significant role in facilitating economic exchange, particularly in developing countries. That insight was provided by K. Zhu, R. Yang, 2022 [3], and M. Akhtaruzzaman, N. Berg, and D. Lien [4].

Furthermore, F. Hartig [5] and J. F. Paradise [6] suggest that CI are seen as essential in bridging China and host-country organisations in collaborative projects and business ventures and in enhancing China's national language. H. Schmidt [7] also admits the CIs' influence on the global image of China. Nevertheless, J. F. Paradise [6], R. Yang [8], and Z. Ren [9] have been dissenting voices expressing traditional apprehension

about connection between CI and China's «soft power». These concerns revolve around the potential erosion of academic independence within host institutions, as noted by C. Jocelyn [10].

Conversely, some sources view CI as a positive «soft power» instrument, projecting a peaceful image of economic emergence and cultural capital. This insight was suggested by A. M. Brady [11], L. Zhao, S. Tan [12]. R. Kluver [13]. It is emphasised by D. Wang, B. Adamson [14] that a pivotal moment of criticism towards CI emerged in the United States by 2013, associating CI with China's global dominance aspirations through their influence on host institutions worldwide [5; 15]. Although Chinese and Russian authors have frequently outlined CIs' role in China's diplomatic relations and foreign policy, as suggested by J. Wang and E.V. Kuchumova [16], A. M. Kussainova and T. Yuan [17], N. V. Khisamutdinova and Y. Yang [18], however, several sources have highlighted that this perspective may not represent all aspects of CIs' global value [14; 19; 20].

Results and discussion

Currently, the CI play a central role in facilitating China's global academic connectivity, emerging as the most effective and influential means to achieve this objec-

tive. With a vast workforce comprising 105 000 administrative and teaching staff members worldwide, including 60000 teaching volunteers [21], these institutions

have demonstrated their commitment to promoting Chinese language and culture on an international scale.

Notably, CI have become the preferred institutional choice for international students seeking enrollment in Chinese universities. To foster internationalisation, CI offer an array of educational opportunities, ranging from short-term and long-term courses to summer schools, cultural visits, and scholarships. These initiatives significantly contribute to the globalisation of China's higher education system, positioning CI as the primary gateway for the admission of the most talented international students to Chinese universities. Additionally, CI play a pivotal role in fostering collaborative partnerships between Chinese institutions and their counterparts worldwide, particularly in the fields of science and double diploma projects, with a particular focus on collaborating with partners from developing nations. In this context, the CI proved to be a valuable asset for Chinese academic staff, providing them with the means to advance their careers and enhance their professional skills. Beyond the opportunity to work in foreign academic environments, these institutes also facilitate academic pursuits at partner universities or institutions in the host cities, thus offering a comprehensive platform for personal and professional growth [22].

However, right from the inception of the project, it was perceived through a traditional colonial lens, which subsequently became the prevailing approach in global academic narratives. Over the years, CI have been recognised under various labels, encompassing them as a tool of cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics [5], geopolitical power, the rise of China, Chinese propaganda [23], Chinese public diplomacy and China's strategic narratives [24], or even as Trojan horses with Chinese characteristics [25]. Numerous research articles, both in English and Russian, examining the philosophical or geopolitical aspects, have interpreted CI within the framework of «soft power», often drawing comparisons to the British Council or Alliance Française. Regardless of their degree of alignment or disassociation with China, the overarching theme of the metapolitical or geopolitical assessment of this project has been based on the notion of influence.

Despite the speculative and unsubstantiated nature of such sources, they have contributed to the establishment of a persistent perception of CI as a crucial element of China's diplomacy, serving as a means of projecting its influence on the global community. Under these circumstances, the Chinese side seemed to tacitly endorse such an interpretation, perhaps viewing it as flattering. However, by 2020, this portrayal began to have adverse effects on the project's development. Certain countries started to perceive CI not merely as individual projects of bilateral cooperation between Chinese and foreign universities but rather as a singular tool of China's diplomacy that could and should be affected within the framework of a political agenda, rather than an academic one.

The escalating confrontation between the United States of America and China, coupled with various diplomatic and political controversies, ushered in a new era for China's interactions with the United States of America, New Zealand, Australia, and several European countries. This period saw the unfolding of an escalating cycle of economic sanctions, technology disputes, and trade controversies. The challenge was to identify pressure points that could have a significant political impact while causing minimal disruption to economic cooperation. In this context, the CI emerged as a convenient target. This was particularly true since they had already solidified their image as an instrument of China's «soft power» and a key element of its global influence on the world stage.

The accusations regarding the negative influence of CI primarily revolved around the following key arguments: firstly, the direct association of the Hanban, which oversaw CI with governmental bodies, led to its perceived role as a vehicle for promoting a particular agenda in shaping the conditions and execution of academic initiatives. In essence, critics contended that Hanban not only orchestrated funding and monitored the progress of projects but also served as a tool for exerting global Chinese influence.

Secondly, unlike the Goethe Institutes or Institut Français, CI are integrated into the structure of their host academic organisations; however, Chinese staff members remained under the authority of their Chinese counterparts and the Hanban. Critics argued that this arrangement opens doors for China's influence within the hosting institutions and deeply affects the host's policy and decision-making process.

The third critical issue is the concern that CI are suggesting inadequate development of academic freedom. Within this line of criticism, CI are viewed as an infrastructure through which the Chinese administration and academic staff experience persistent oversight and control from China. This arrangement is perceived to hinder the academic staff from fully adhering to the principles of openness and democracy upheld by the host university, potentially leading to an indirect negative impact on the mindset of the younger generation.

This criticism is further compounded by a longstanding view that CI should serve a more comprehensive role. Many Chinese experts have consistently emphasised that using CI solely as a programme for teaching Chinese for free would be a missed opportunity. Instead, they see CI as an infrastructure for conducting Chinese diplomacy and enhancing China's global influence [26].

Even China's formal allies share certain concerns in this regard. For instance, Russian authors, while acknowledging CI as a resource for China's «soft power» of culture to bolster the appeal of its culture in education, science, and culture, also highlight a mismatch with the Russian higher education system. This mismatch stems from the fact that CI are not completely integrated into the host country's national higher education system.

It is also exacerbated by the absence of well-defined criteria for assessing teaching quality and a lack of host-institutions' comprehensive control and management [27]. Furthermore, there is a notable asymmetry in the interaction with China, as CI often wield more power and influence compared to any other symmetric partner initiatives or projects on Chinese territory. Issues of control and symmetry serve as the primary elements driving political criticism of CI, especially amidst the backdrop of escalating global tensions.

As a response to the decreasing number of CI, its system since 2020 has passed the stage of reform in depoliticisation and decentralisation.

Primarily, there has been a shift in the perception of CI, leading to a restructuring of the symbolic aspect of their activities. This shift is manifested as a gradual transition from cultural diplomacy to strategies of knowledge diplomacy, and in some cases, even to the internationalisation of higher education. Within this context, CI have bolstered their role as gateways to enhance and broaden collaboration between the host organisation and a Chinese partner in domains beyond Chinese language education. Consequently, the cultural influence component has gradually evolved into a tool for extending cooperation into other realms of academic knowledge, including the natural sciences.

At the infrastructural level, the headquarters of the CI are being abolished, and a non-profit public organisation «China International Educational Foundation», is being created, among the founders of which are 27 universities, enterprises, and public organisations. The goals of the organisation are to strengthen international understanding and promote mutual learning by supporting Chinese educational projects around the globe. A non-profit professional training Centre for the exchange and cooperation of Chinese and foreign languages is also being created, affiliated with China's Ministry of Education, which has assumed the functions of quality control in the educational work of CI.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated China's adoption of innovative approaches, particularly in the realm of online education and remote collaboration. These innovations have facilitated ongoing development, especially as host-institutions have demanded more control over the activities and teaching processes of CI. Expanding the online component of the educational process is poised to alleviate the burden on host-institutions in terms of control and management of CI activities. By shifting a substantial portion of the educational process online and centralising training materials within a single platform that is independent of any particular host-institution, opportunities emerge for deeper integration of CI into the structures of host institutions. Simultaneously, this underscores the growing significance of online education as a pivotal component of the global activities of CI.

China had to modify its strategy for CI global development, in response to the challenges mentioned,

however, there were certain areas where the implemented steps were not considered sufficient. Notably, in the United States of America, the reforms of CI were viewed as an effort to maintain the project's essence by altering its image. At the same time, conditions suitable for the relaunch of CI have not yet been established in many countries, such as Sweden or Norway.

As CI have evolved into gateways for expanding collaboration with Chinese partner universities, China has shifted its focus toward developing projects that have demonstrated effectiveness and the potential for scaling academic and cultural interactions. This change in priorities has also led to a transformation in the global symbolic interpretation of cooperation. In this evolution, globalisation is gradually giving way to internationalisation or even localisation.

Previously, China's approach to engaging with its international partners was primarily oriented towards globalisation, with the goal of establishing a universal educational framework. However, a noticeable shift has occurred towards a focus on localisation. This approach prioritises the incorporation of national elements into educational and cultural exchange programmes. It is reflected in an extensive range of academic courses spanning martial arts, traditional medicine, and traditional cultural practices, which are rapidly integrated into the curriculum.

In recent years, China's local agenda has been guided by two core interconnected themes: modernisation and localisation. These themes are paramount for China as tools for national sustainability and have garnered widespread support among scholars in the Chinese academic community. Over time, Chinese modernisation has progressed from its initial stages of imitation of Western models to independent exploration, from a state of one-sided imbalance to overall coordination, from a rudimentary stage to a perfected pattern, and from a single focus on development to multiple areas of advancement. At its core, Chinese modernisation is driven by a people-centered approach, which serves as the fundamental standpoint and motivation for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The localisation of higher education in China represents a second crucial concept, extending beyond the mere preservation of traditional culture. It entails the adaptation and integration of traditional culture within the framework of modern education. This approach places cultural integration as the central pillar of localisation.

Localisation comprises two primary aspects. The first emphasises the incorporation of traditional culture into contemporary social development, ensuring the preservation of a unique cultural identity. The second aspect operates on an international scale, where localisation involves the development of both local and foreign educational cultures while fostering equitable and harmonious international exchange. This multifaceted approach positions China to be globally relevant and competitive.

Conclusions

The evidence presented regarding the reform of CI supports a shift in China's global policy towards international cooperation. The shift away from globalisation goals towards promoting China's modernisation and localisation policy might stem from China's disillusionment with some key partners' cooperation prospects, as indicated by growing doubts about the possibility of overcoming difficulties between China and the United States of America or the Nordic countries. The shift may entail China's ultimate commitment to advancing ties with nations that have established and upheld a strong connection with China, even if those partners are riskier in means of security or economic reasons.

In general, the study presented validates earlier research on China's evolving foreign policy in the global sphere. The nation's emphasis on the developing regions of Africa and Asia, as it already happens in CI policy, moving forward, the forthcoming alterations could result in an augmented redistribution of China's worldwide involvement in endeavors in political, trade, and scientific, and technical collaboration. This could potentially boost trade and political collaboration with former less significant trading associates in Asia and Africa, while reducing it with prior more significant trading associates like Europe and the United States of America.

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