

Research on the Cultural Diplomacy Function of Confucius Institutes from a Cross-cultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT: *In the context of global cultural exchanges, Confucius Institutes have evolved from language educators into a unique form of cultural diplomacy that operates between official and civilian spheres. Grounded in cross-cultural communication theory, this study analyzes their dynamic operational mechanisms, which include classroom negotiation, festival experiences and community co-construction. It reveals how these institutes accumulate diplomatic influence through daily, humanistic interactions. However, this process faces contemporary challenges such as external misinterpretation, institutional differences and the need for regional adaptation, all of which reflect the complexity of cultural dissemination globally. In response, this paper proposes a strategic pivot from “interpreting China” to “building relationships,” achieved through localized curricula, collaborative teaching, co-created topics and transparent governance. The research concludes that the cultural outreach of Confucius Institutes represents not merely an instrument of China’s soft power, but a form of civilizational dialogue rooted in the principle of “harmony without uniformity.”*

KEYWORDS - *Confucius Institutes, Cross-cultural Communication, Cultural Diplomacy, Localization, Relationship Building, Soft Power*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2004, the world’s first Confucius Institute was established in Seoul, South Korea. China began a new chapter in vigorously promoting language and cultural dissemination overseas. Over the past 20 years, it has taken root and developed in more than 130 countries, with a total of more than 500, which has become a window for the world to understand Chinese language and culture. Compared with the cultural institutions of other countries, the Confucius Institute has the function of teaching and the identity of national culture. It does not directly represent the position of the country like the diplomatic department, but it is constantly labeled as “soft power” and shoulders the task of spreading culture. This role positioning between the official and the private, communication and diplomacy makes the Confucius Institute a case of observing the diplomatic mode of Chinese culture.

In recent years, there has been more and more research on Confucius Institutes, but many discussions are still at the level of language teaching achievements, management system or ideological disputes. They rarely start from the communication behavior itself to analyze how it expands into diplomatic effects in actual cultural interaction. In fact, the curriculum, festivals, local cooperation and other specific scenes of the Confucius Institute are all cross-cultural exchange sites, not only conveying language knowledge, but also conveying the implicit narrative of “what is China”. It is precisely because of such a research gap that this article takes the Confucius Institute as the practical subject of cross-cultural communication. Starting from cultural interaction, context adaptation, identity negotiation and other communication details, it explores how it slowly undertakes the task of national cultural diplomacy.

At the theoretical level, this article refers to the classic cross-cultural communication perspectives such as Hofstede's cultural dimension model[1], Hall's coding and decoding theory[2], and Berry's cultural adaptation theory [3], and explores the cognitive bias and interactive negotiation arising in the process of cultural exchange, and also combines soft power and public diplomacy research on culture. Attention to attraction, understand how culture plays a role in international relations. In terms of research methods, based on the analysis of practical problems and the discussion of improvement strategies, and through combing the communication process in the operation of Confucius Institute, to understand the challenges and development opportunities encountered in cultural diplomacy from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, and put forward relevant suggestions according to such realities.

It is in the process of this kind of cross-cultural communication that we can understand how the national image is formed unconsciously, and we can understand how cultural exchanges are accepted, negotiated and even redefined. I hope that through this study, we can have a clearer understanding of the real situation and strategies facing China's current foreign cultural communication, and provide a view that is closer to the practical logic of "communication with literature" in Chinese cultural diplomacy, which is closer to the real communication process.

II. The operation mode of cross-cultural communication of Confucius Institute

As China's core platform for global language and cultural promotion, the operation mechanism of cross-cultural communication of Confucius Institute is mainly reflected in the three aspects of language teaching, public cultural activities and cooperation with local institutions, and gradually builds a dynamic consultation mechanism. Under this model, cultural significance is constantly reinterpreted, adjusted and co-shaped in real and specific cross-cultural scenarios.

2.1 Language teaching practice

Language is a symbol and a culture. The teaching site of the Confucius Institute conveys the phonetic grammar of Chinese, and conveys the understanding of China's social structure, values and historical memory behind the words. The festival explanations, idiom backgrounds, folk stories, etiquette rules, etc. embedded in the classroom not only expand students' vocabulary, but also quietly affect their perception of Chinese culture. Take the Confucius Institute in Ireland as an example, when teaching keywords such as "year" and "home", teachers will introduce cultural meanings such as Spring Festival reunion and ancestor worship, so that learners can gradually understand the social meaning behind these words while learning the language[4]. This kind of cultural explanation is not an additional content, but classroom teaching itself. The choice of teaching language, the contextual framing, and the use of examples function as ways to shape and convey cultural meanings during instruction.

However, these cultural meanings are not always received in the way teachers anticipate. Students bring their own cultural experience into the classroom, and then question and even develop a biased understanding of certain cultural concepts. For example, some students think the concept of "filial piety" is very important, but they are also disgusted with the implicit hierarchy behind this concept. In this process, teachers should not only rely on textbooks or presets to explain, but should consult with students in classroom interaction. The teacher's response is no longer just preaching and teaching to solve the confusion, but also evolves into the process of understanding and correction, and strives to maximize the resonance of cultural meaning in the process of interlingual conversion.

In terms of communication effect, this kind of classroom consultation ability is particularly crucial. As Hall's coding and decoding theory points out, the meaning of propagation is not whether it is accurately repeated, but whether it is created in propagation. Teachers' tolerance of cultural differences and guiding strategies for cultural differences determine the accessibility and durability of cultural communication. And now some teachers are not only limited to the content of standard textbooks, but also use local customs as references. For example, at the Confucius Institute in Dublin, teachers compare Chinese family concepts with Irish family ethics,

which maintains the integrity of Chinese culture itself, and promotes mutual understanding between different cultures.

At the same time, the localization of textbooks is also a way to improve the suitability of teaching. As noted in a study on the Confucius Institute in Belarus, if the content of the textbook is not close to the local reality, it will fall into the dilemma of mechanical input[5]. On the contrary, creating a teaching situation in combination with local current affairs, social context or students' daily life not only stimulates students' interest in learning, but also allows language to return to the essence of its communication, becoming a bridge for real communication between people. This effort of "localization" also shows that Confucius Institutes are not an indoctrination institution that adheres to the right of speech, but is trying to build a cross-contained where culture can be shared and meaning can be negotiated.

2.2 Communication mechanism of public cultural activities

The visibility of Confucius Institute in overseas society often comes not from the classroom, but from the cultural activities it carries out in public spaces. The Spring Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and other festivals have left a preliminary impression of Chinese culture on the foreign public. It is these ritual and symbolic activities that make the cultural dissemination of the Confucius Institute jump out of the campus and enter a broader social context.

For example, at the Spring Festival celebration of the Confucius Institute in Minsk, Belarus, there are activities such as lion dances, lantern riddles and dumplings in the temple fair, which many people are attracted to participate. This immersive cultural communication enhances the sense of experience with the help of visual, tactile and taste-faceted stimulation. However, the excitement of the ceremony does not automatically bring an understanding of culture. In the process of participation, many audiences only stay at the level of appearances that feel fresh, and may not have further thoughts on the deep connotation and social ethics behind the ceremony. This will also trigger deeper communication reflection. When cultural communication relies too much on visual symbols, will it only become the appearance of "cultural wonders"? Research on the Confucius Institute in Ireland suggests that what truly promotes cultural understanding are communication designs that prompt audiences to reflect on the links between their own cultural experiences and those of others[4]. such as letting participants understand the connotation of the word "reunion" in the concept of Chinese and Western families in the Spring Festival activities, and explore the similarities and differences. Some Confucius Institutes have begun to try similar cross-cultural "juxtaposition" strategies, while showing Chinese culture, they embedding the local cultural context to form content connections. For example, in the tea art activity of the Confucius Institute in Dublin, Irish tea customs were also introduced, and the event designers also encouraged participants to have on-site discussions on the embodiment of the sense of ritual in the tea culture of East and West. This kind of communication is no longer just a one-way output, but a culture is reflected and reconstructed through interaction, and then the relationship embedding of the surface logic of "exotic style".

Combined with Hofstede's cultural dimension model, Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism and high-power distance, while many Western cultures attach more importance to individual expression and low power structure. Therefore, if cultural activities only present display links, they will be regarded as a lack of real interaction; and those links that allow the audience to express themselves and even ask questions are more likely to resonate. So Confucius Institutes in some countries try to do similar innovative forms of activities, allowing students to invite local cultural organizations to cooperate in planning festivals and celebrations, etc., which lends the activities a sense of warmth and creates space for Chinese culture to grow through exchange.

In a word, the cultural activities of Confucius Institute should not only show the content but also activate the relationship. The effective cross-cultural communication is not whether the audience can remember the name of a festival, but whether they feel "this is related to me" in their participation.

2.3 Communication cooperation with local universities and communities

The cultural dissemination of Confucius Institute is a product of the "co-construction and co-management" model. It is usually jointly built by Chinese universities and foreign universities, and the cooperation content includes

personnel dispatch, curriculum design and activity planning. This mechanism determines that Confucius Institute must always maintain collaboration and interaction with local universities, communities and local cultural institutions in communication.

When cooperating with universities, Confucius Institutes are usually deeply combined with the original curriculum system and undertake tasks such as language course teaching, cultural elective courses and cooperative research projects. For example, Confucius Institute cooperates with the Department of Linguistics of Irish universities to open the course of “Chinese Culture and Communication”, giving students the opportunity to go to China for further study in the summer. Such an embedded cooperation, on the one hand, provides the possibility for the enrichment of the original teaching resources of colleges and universities, and on the other hand, it also allows Chinese culture to be more naturally integrated into the local academic ecology, and slowly opens a space for cross-cultural dialogue.

In the interaction with the community, its cultural communication form has become more humane. In Minsk, Belarus, the Confucius Institute’s staff also regularly goes to libraries, cultural centers, community activity centers, and organizes Chinese corners, cultural lectures, thematic exhibitions and other activities. Especially under the background of the “Belt and Road” strategy, this kind of cultural exchange rooted in the community makes Chinese culture more and more friendly and participatory at the folk level. Cultural emotions take root and germinate in real interaction, slowly becoming a subtle bond of cross-cultural understanding.

Such a cooperation mechanism is essentially the process of establishing cross-cultural relations. From the perspective of communication, this process is not smooth sailing, but full of consultation, grinding and restructuring. In terms of cultural understanding, identity and cooperative role positioning, both China and foreign countries need to constantly adjust each other’s expectations in practice. This also means that communication should be regarded as a multi-way process of participation and relationship building. As the theory of cultural adaptation points out, truly effective cross-cultural communication requires building relationships grounded in mutual understanding and trust. Whether the overseas cultural dissemination of Confucius Institutes can take root primarily depends on its ability to become a widely accepted presence supported by sustained cooperation and accumulated mutual trust.

Looking back at the communication practice of Confucius Institute in the three aspects of language teaching, cultural activities and local collaboration, it is not difficult to find that what it has built is not a cultural export mechanism in the traditional sense, but a communication process that is closer to interpersonal interaction. The meaning of culture is constructed through repeated classroom interactions, reinforced through festival experiences, and reshaped through ongoing cooperation. This process is related to both the choice of communication mode and the construction of cultural relations. It allows the audience to view each other's cultural experiences with a more equal attitude, and shows that cultural communication is the coexistence with each other.

III. Development and limitations of cultural diplomacy functions

The true meaning of cross-cultural communication is often hidden in daily life. It grows slowly in continuous dialogue and coexistence, rather than relying on grand narratives to show it. With the extension of cultural tentacles from the classroom to social life, the role positioning of Confucius Institute is also quietly changing. Under the banner of education, it expands the space for mutual understanding between countries in real interpersonal exchanges, accumulates the temperature of diplomacy from the bottom of social relations, and slowly promotes the gentle reshaping of relations between countries.

3.1 Expansion of the cultural diplomacy practice of Confucius Institute

The cultural diplomacy function of Confucius Institute is the result of continuous cross-cultural interaction. Language classes, cultural activities and community collaboration constitute a long-term social network, so that culture can be emotionally understood and experienced in interpersonal relationships. While learning languages, students are also re-understanding the values and lifestyle of a country; while participating in activities, the community also learns to associate the concept of “China” with specific faces, stories and scenes. The accumulation of these experiences makes abstract cultural narratives perceptible and credible, besides that,

gradually transforms into a stable impression of China. Cultural diplomacy grows out of such accumulated experiences. Rather than relying on direct persuasion, it is grounded in the trust that develops through long-term contact[6].

This expansion is first reflected in the public level. The cultural space built by the Confucius Institute gives the foreign public a practical scene of contact with China. Through continuous language learning and cultural participation, the audience slowly broke away from the stereotype of China and began to develop an experience-based understanding, it constitutes the most sticky public opinion foundation in international public opinion. Secondly, at the institutional level, the cooperation between Confucius Institutes and universities, cultural museums and local governments. The continuity of such cooperation has promoted cultural relations into trust relations, thus affecting higher-level diplomatic dialogue. Finally, from the level of policy perception, when Confucius Institutes show a reliable and open posture in the local society, the dissemination of Chinese culture is no longer regarded as an external intervention, but becomes knowledge and experience that can be shared. This positive feedback at the micro level provides social support for diplomatic communication at the macro level.

The functional expansion of Confucius Institutes is also reflected in the adjustment of organizational form and the innovation of communication strategies. In recent years, the Confucius Institute has continuously strengthened digital communication and regional collaboration, and used online courses, cultural forums and bilateral projects to expand the scope of contact. This extension reflects the deep connection between cultural communication and the logic of social development. If language learning is intertwined with the local education system, employment needs or social problems, the meaning of cultural communication will permeate into the construction of common interests. Therefore, the cultural diplomacy represented by the Confucius Institute is no longer just a simple cultural display, but a mode of operation with relations as the core and cooperation as the carrier. It is in this sense that the Confucius Institute has become a form of international diplomacy. Its effectiveness depends on the depth of time and the stability of relations, injecting new vitality into China's diplomacy on a larger scale of society.

3.2 Diplomatic dilemma in cross-cultural communication

The openness of cultural communication inevitably causes friction with the political context. First of all, from the imbalance of the external discourse environment. Some Western countries regard Confucius Institutes as a tool for extending national influence to the outside, and confuse the cultural activities of Confucius Institutes with political intentions. This preconceived labeling has brought relatively unfavorable conditions to cultural communication. In 2019, relevant foreign media involved some conventional cultural activities with geopolitical issues, so some colleges and universities in the United States suspended relevant projects due to external pressure. And the amplification effect of media public opinion has also further deepened this misreading. Some people who have not really come into contact with Confucius Institutes have become alienated because of some media reports. The original intention of communication was therefore distorted, and cultural diplomacy was given an implicit purpose before it began.

The deeper challenge comes from the institutional differences between different countries. The different systems of educational management, curriculum evaluation, teacher appointment and academic autonomy in various countries often put Confucius Institutes in a complex game state in their actual operation. Conceptual systems in Chinese culture, such as “family” and “harmony”, are reinterpreted in different contexts, and even included in the category of ideology for consideration.

which is the norm in the practice of cultural diplomacy of Confucius Institutes. It presents the most difficult aspect of cross-cultural communication, that is, when culture and politics are mapped to each other on the international stage, the ownership of meaning becomes the object of competition.

At the same time, regional differences have also made this dilemma appear in different forms. Africa generally has an open attitude towards Chinese cultural cooperation, and local residents also maintain a high enthusiasm for learning and experiencing traditional Chinese culture. However, due to lack of resources and insufficient teachers, the depth of communication is limited[7]. In Europe and North America, the system of academic independence and public opinion freedom Tradition has made colleges and universities more cautious

in cooperation. In the past few years, Stockholm University in Sweden, McMaster University in Canada and other institutions have successively made decisions to terminate cooperation[8]. The emergence of this phenomenon is not the rejection of Chinese culture, but more from institutional differences and the pressure of the public opinion environment. Confucius Institutes in these areas often need to face both external distrust and internal structural pressure. It needs to respond to external doubts while maintaining the continuity of the project, it must also uphold an open image while preventing excessive politicization. Under this double pressure, the space for cultural diplomacy has been compressed, but it has also shown new flexibility due to continuous debugging. In the process, the Confucius Institute has to rethink the meaning of communication and re-find the position of culture in international relations.

From the perspective of communication, this kind of dilemma is essentially a struggle for the right to interpret. Whoever has the right to define the meaning of culture can influence the direction of the right to speak in international relations. In a non-neutral international public opinion environment, any attempt to unilaterally control the right of interpretation will not only fail, but also intensify suspicion, creating a self-defeating cycle in which the more one explains, the more one is doubted. Because the premise of the struggle for interpretation is the singularity and exclusivity of cultural significance, which is contrary to the interactivity of cross-cultural communication. If you want to break this situation, you have to break out of the shackles of fighting for the right to interpret from the source and turn to the cultivation of “co-construction of meaning”. That is to say, the focus of cultural diplomacy should shift from “explaining China” to “co-construction of relations”, so that culture can be jointly interpreted in real interaction, rather than suspended in abstract political imagination.

3.3 Optimization strategy for relational cultural diplomacy

Throughout the global operation of Confucius Institutes, the real strength of cultural diplomacy has never been the scale and speed of communication, but in the depth and quality of relationship construction. Whether the challenges stem from public misinterpretation, institutional friction, or regional differences, they ultimately converge on the same core issue: when cultural communication is separated from real interpersonal interaction and common experience, it is easy to lose vitality in political imagination and fall into the struggle for the right to interpret. If we want to get out of this dilemma, we must redetermine the positioning of cultural diplomacy. As Fierke argues, diplomacy is not only the art of negotiation between states, but also the continuation, restoration, and maintenance of social relations[9]. This conceptual perspective of relational diplomacy makes its cultural communication change from pursuing the effect of persuasion to paying attention to the “co-construction of relationships” of common understanding.

Historical experience has also shown that the strategic logic of “co-building relationships” is wise. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the reason why Rima Dou succeeded in spreading Western studies in China was that he set aside his missionary identity and engaged with the spiritual and intellectual world of Chinese scholars through a scholarly role. He used Confucian words to explain the meaning of Christianity, so that can connect two completely different beliefs and spiritual cores. This kind of communication based on relationships makes dialogue an opportunity for understanding, not a prelude to conflict. Similarly, as Buddhism spread eastward, it did not present itself as a foreign doctrine, instead, it actively entered into dialogue with Confucianism and Daoism, gradually adapting to the local context and evolving into a distinct form of Chinese Zen Buddhism. These historical experiences have revealed a permanent law, that is the decisive factor of whether a culture can cross borders is whether it can be reinterpreted in relationships.

Returning to the present, this historical wisdom offers clear guidance for the future trajectory of Confucius Institute. If we aim to shift from “interpreting China” to “co-constructing relationships,” we must rely on strategies that are grounded in everyday interactions. First, in terms of curriculum and teaching content, we should accurately change from “general teaching” to “demand customization”. This means jumping out of unified textbooks and outlines, actively discovering and responding to specific development problems, career paths and personal interests in cooperating areas, so that language and cultural learning can be closely combined with the real pulse of local society. For example, countries with a large demand for industrial cooperation such as Belarus can rely on the Sino-Belarus Industrial Park, as well as enterprises and vocational colleges and universities in the

park to develop customized courses such as “Industrial Chinese” and “Business Exchange” to give local employees language tools suitable for professional scenarios. Meanwhile, Ireland’s strong atmosphere of scientific and technological innovation enables Confucius Institutes to work with local tech enterprises to conduct workshops on “Technology, Innovation and Culture,” which help students understand China’s innovation landscape while linking Chinese learning with creative thinking. This kind of curriculum design, which is oriented towards solving real problems, is the essence of the wisdom embodied in the above historical experience, which transforms cultural exchange from an external cultural experience to the improvement of internal ability and the creation of opportunities, so that culture is sublimated into a resource that can be used together.

Secondly, in terms of teacher development and teaching resources, we should build a joint construction and sharing mechanism of “Sino-foreign cooperation”. Confucius Institutes should establish a “joint teacher training project” with local educational institutions. Chinese teachers will teach language teaching knowledge, foreign experts will teach local educational concepts and teaching methods, and jointly form teachers who are both fluent in Chinese and familiar with the local educational context. In terms of teaching materials, a joint “Textbook Localization Committee” involving both Chinese and local teachers should be established to ensure that instructional content is accurate while aligned with local realities and cultural contexts[5]. Let learners stimulate new knowledge from their own cultural cognition, not the input of unilateral information.

Thirdly, in terms of activity planning and community connection, from “talent display” to “topic co-creation”, cultural activities should strive to create a public space that can trigger two-way thinking and promote joint action. For example, Confucius Institutes can jointly organize innovation forums with local partners working in areas such as smart-city development or digital heritage, turning the institutes into a space where Chinese insights and local innovation meet. At the community level, they may hold “community cultural co-creation camps,” inviting local residents and Chinese volunteers to explore themes such as family memories or urban transformation. Through this process, cultural understanding shifts from passive observation to relationships built through shared experience.

Finally, in terms of cooperative governance and project evaluation, we should practice the principles of “transparent co-governance” and “long-term trust investment”. The stability of the relationship depends on the guarantee of the system, so the Confucius Institute should give foreign cooperation institutions practical co-creation space and decision-making weight in the project, such as the authority to jointly formulate plans, jointly carry out evaluation and open information sharing. Regarding performance evaluation, long-term indicators should be adopted, emphasizing the continuity of partnerships and the outcomes of jointly incubated projects. Ultimately, these metrics reflect the essential trust capital that underpins cultural diplomacy.

Looking back on the twenty years of development of the Confucius Institutes, the most valuable insight is that the essence of cultural diplomacy lies in the art of relationship-building and grows out of deep mutual understanding. The purpose of the above optimization strategies is to ensure that, amid coexistence and difference, the concrete forms of cooperation can gradually weave a shared vision for the future. Placing “relationship” at the center means viewing diplomacy as a long-term investment in trust. Such trust cannot be rushed; it can only take shape gradually through long-term interaction. When culture can bring together communities with entirely different backgrounds, it acquires a form of influence that transcends short-term political tensions and becomes one of the most enduring bonds between civilizations. This may be the diplomatic wisdom most worth preserving in our present era.

IV. Implications for China’s Cross-cultural Communication Strategy

The rich experience of the Confucius Institute since its establishment has made its significance extend beyond the initial boundaries of language teaching and has gradually crystallized into a diplomatic practice with deep cultural consciousness. It is not only an important window through which Chinese culture enters the world, but also, in a broader global context, outlines an emerging mode of cross-cultural communication rooted in oriental wisdom. This development represents a resilient cultural response to the paradoxes China faces in globalization and offers a contemporary expression of the historical ideal of “harmony without uniformity” in today’s dialogue among civilizations.

Building on this foundation, the accumulated experience of Confucius Institutes invites further reflection on China's wider cross-cultural communication strategy. When viewed in relation to debates on China's soft power and its role in the international system, these long-term practices show how cultural influence grows through steady relational engagement. As Su notes, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends on how well a country aligns its cultural appeal with the expectations and interpretive frameworks of international audiences[10]. The daily interactions fostered through Confucius Institutes illustrate this point clearly. Their influence develops from the credibility that forms when cultural meanings are discussed, adapted and jointly produced within local communities.

At the same time, the challenges encountered by Confucius Institutes reveal structural tensions that China must continue to address in future communication efforts. Value differences, asymmetrical discourse environments and questions of institutional trust all shape how cultural messages are received. Differences between traditional Chinese ideas of relational harmony and Western traditions of individual autonomy often condition the interpretive process, at times producing simplified or one-sided readings. The global information landscape further complicates this dynamic, as cultural initiatives are frequently understood through geopolitical lenses before their educational intentions can be fully recognized. These difficulties suggest that the success of China's cross-cultural communication strategy hinges on building credibility, fostering interpretive openness and sustaining long-term relationships across diverse cultural contexts.

From these insights, several implications emerge for China's future cross-cultural communication strategy. First, cultural engagement should move beyond presenting symbolic forms and instead foster shared reflection on issues that resonate across societies. Linking traditional practices with contemporary questions, such as the meaning of community or family in an era of digital transformation, can expand interpretive space and enhance relevance. Second, effective communication requires moving from a predominantly China-led model toward collaborative governance. When international partners participate meaningfully in curriculum design, project evaluation and cultural interpretation, the credibility of cultural initiatives increases, and communication becomes more responsive to local expectations. Third, greater attention should be given to the temporal nature of influence. Cultural understanding develops within long-term interaction rather than short-term visibility, which means evaluation should prioritize trust, continuity and embeddedness.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the value of China's cross-cultural communication lies not in the expansion of its reach but in the depth of relationships it is able to cultivate. The experience of Confucius Institutes shows that cultural exchange becomes most meaningful when it grows through dialogue, shared interpretation and the slow formation of trust. In a global environment where cultural messages are often filtered through political expectations, the influence of culture rests on sincerity, openness and the willingness to stay engaged over time. Viewed in this way, relational engagement also offers a gentler understanding of soft power, one shaped by trust that accumulates in interaction. Such an approach provides a thoughtful direction for China's future communication efforts: to make culture a meeting place where understanding can take root.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined the cultural diplomacy function of Confucius Institutes through a cross-cultural communication lens, emphasizing how their influence emerges not from institutional design alone but from the texture of everyday interaction. By tracing the dynamics of classroom negotiation, festival participation and community collaboration, the analysis shows that cultural meaning is not transmitted intact but continually shaped through dialogue, contextual adaptation and shared experience. These micro-level practices illuminate how diplomatic effects take root in ways that are often subtle yet enduring.

At the same time, the study has highlighted the challenges that complicate this process, including external misinterpretation, institutional asymmetries and variation across regional contexts. These tensions do not diminish the significance of Confucius Institutes; rather, they underscore the importance of relational approaches that treat communication as an ongoing practice of meaning-making. The proposed strategies of localization, collaborative governance and transparent evaluation reflect this orientation. They also suggest that the strength of

cultural diplomacy lies less in asserting persuasive narratives than in cultivating trust that develops gradually through participation.

Viewed in this light, the experience of Confucius Institutes offers a valuable reference point for China's broader international communication efforts. It demonstrates that soft power is not simply accumulated through visibility or symbolic display, but through the credibility formed when people engage one another with openness and patience. Ultimately, the long-term significance of Confucius Institutes may lie in their capacity to create spaces where cultural difference becomes a source of dialogue rather than division. Such spaces allow mutual understanding to emerge in ways that are both modest and durable, providing a foundation for a more reflective model of global cultural exchange.

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