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## Whither the "Year of China"?

Denise Ho  
*University of Kentucky*

Jared Flanery  
*University of Kentucky*

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# Whither the “Year of China”?

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## The Confucius Institute, China Studies, and the University of Kentucky



Opening Ceremony of the Confucius Institute at the University of Kentucky, 2010

By Denise Ho

To conclude my Chinese history lecture course at the University of Kentucky, I introduce my undergraduates to the concept of “soft power” and suggest that Confucius Institutes are emblematic of China’s cultural diplomacy, which aims to project a peaceful image abroad. Confucius Institutes are centers for teaching Chinese language and culture overseas; they are organized by an office known as Hanban in the Ministry of Education, though their funding comes directly from the Chinese government’s treasury. There are

now over 350 Confucius Institutes in the world, and two of these are in the state of Kentucky.

When my students and I first proposed capping off our “Year of China” guest column with a story on UK’s Confucius Institute, I thought the article would be an incisive look at American perceptions of China and the politics of teaching and learning about China here in the South. As readers of this blog may be well aware, Mandarin lessons funded by the Chinese state have created controversy. Some communities have protested the presence of Confucian Classrooms in American schools; the story of Alhambra, California’s experience was spoofed in the *Daily Show*’s feature, [“Socialism Studies.”](#) In March, the [New York Times](#) covered the controversy over Confucius Institutes, showing that the world of higher education—in both the United States and Europe—is split on whether to accept Hanban funding to establish centers, pay teachers and staff, and even to endow university professorships. Even academics are beginning to study the phenomenon of Confucius Institutes. As the anthropologist Jennifer Hubbert explained at the 2011 meeting of the American Anthropological Association, the reality of the Confucius Classroom is far more complex than the media would have it. Hubbert’s ethnographic study of a Confucius Classroom in Oregon suggests that though the Chinese teachers often contest their role as agents of the state, many students continued to essentialize “both teachers and nation as synonymous with the Chinese socialist state.”

My observation of UK’s Confucius Institute in the past month—interviews with Director Huajing Maske, observations of the Chinese 1 and Chinese 2 courses for adults, and attendance at their faculty meeting and campus events—revealed a situation at once more nuanced than the media representation and less political than Hubbert’s study of the Oregon high school. To provide a brief sketch of UK’s Confucius Institute: it was established in November 2010 with Shanghai University as its partner institution and with a particular focus on fine arts. UK’s Confucius Institute supports 10 teachers and staff, which includes four instructors for the community-oriented night courses and the rest devoted to teaching in K-12 programs in neighboring Woodford County. When asked about community impact, Maske estimated that UK’s Confucius Institute serves about 2,500 students (2,000+ from Woodford County public schools), and many more through public programming: over 2,000 in two separate Chinese New Year celebrations, several thousand students in the Children’s Museum and in other community centers, and others on campus through co-sponsorship of UK events such as the Year of China. Though my observations with the UK students have yielded enough for several articles, I’d like to make three observations here:

**1. The Confucius Institute has to create its own market.** Media coverage of learning Chinese in general and Confucius Institutes in particular has suggested a rush of American interest in studying Chinese. When I sat in on the Confucius Institute's faculty meeting of April 18, I was struck by how hard the staff is working to generate interest. Much of the faculty meeting focused on publicity, on how to actually get students to come to summer camp or to night classes, on how to get university staff to come out for *taiji* or what sorts of games would engage small children at public events. I found myself empathizing with the staff as they strategized, realizing that it is not unlike my struggle to make China interesting to the UK community at large. The reality of interest in learning Chinese is reflected in the numbers of students in adult classes; Chinese 2 is significantly smaller than Chinese 1, and of the students we interviewed the most compelling reasons for studying Chinese were personal. Rather than be concerned about or interested in China as a rising power, they were there because they had Chinese students, Chinese friends, or Chinese spouses. The dignitaries at the ribbon-cutting in 2010 spoke as though establishing a Confucius Institute would result in an instant flowering of US-China relations; my primary takeaway from observing UK's Confucius Institute is that interest is not given, and sustaining interest is hard work.

**2. University faculty here and elsewhere must find ways to make the Confucius Institute our ally.** One of my central concerns as the Year of China draws to a close is: what happens *after* the Year of China? For places like the University of Michigan, which had a Year of China in 2007-2008, or Brown University, which had one this academic year, their theme years drew attention to programs of study that were well-established and at least relatively well-funded. At the University of Kentucky there are *four* tenure-track faculty members in China studies: three in Chinese language and literature, and myself. The Year of China will be over and gone, but the Confucius Institute—with a half-million dollar operating budget—is here to stay. Though I share the concern about academic freedom, after this year we may have no other funds to bring speakers to campus; if the Confucius Institute can sponsor a speaker series (albeit one that avoids Tibet, Taiwan, and human rights), then this is better than none at all. Ideally a visionary university leadership might take this as an opportunity to provide content in exactly these taboo issues, but after my colleagues in Chinese language have been denied funding (\$3600) to open a second section of Chinese 201 for two years running, I am not optimistic. For want of a nail...the kingdom was lost.

**3. The importance of the individual, one-on-one contact of cultural diplomacy.** In preparing to write this article I watched the videotape of the University of Kentucky Confucius Institute Inaugural Ceremony from November 6, 2010, an event I attended in my second year on the faculty. As I revisited the remarks made by representatives of UK, Shanghai University, the Chinese Embassy, Hanban, and former labor secretary Elaine

Chao, I reflected on how far removed they were from the classes and meetings I had attended. There are two gaps: the first is between stereotype and reality, and the second between the bureaucrat and the teacher. For the two keynote addresses were chockablock with the very stereotypes that “cultural understanding” purports to confront; Hu Zhiping of Hanban gave a speech on the deliciousness of Kentucky Fried Chicken and how he hoped that Confucius Institutes would be just like KFC in providing a “cultural feast,” and Elaine Chao—despite saying that her talk was based on anecdotes and concluding that “China is not a monolithic country”—spoke entirely in clichés: “The family is the foundation,” “the Chinese respect education,” and “the Chinese value harmony and order.” If these are the caricatures expressed by our own cultural and political leaders, then it is all the more important that members of the community meet Confucius Institute teachers and see them as individuals. As for the second gap, that between politician/bureaucrat and teacher, it seems to me that the former makes the news while the latter—as Hubbert’s research and our observation suggest—is actually where cultural diplomacy happens.



A Chinese class at the UK Confucius Institute

By Jared Flanery

Throughout the course of the University of Kentucky's "Year of China," both Western scholars of China and Chinese nationals alike contended with the seemingly interminable question of China's rise in specially designed courses, seminars, and lectures. Yet the themed year has now come to an end, and the recent conclusion of the spring semester immediately provokes another question: what is next for China Studies at the university? One method of contextualizing UK's efforts is through comparison with a more permanent organization, the Confucius Institute.

As Denise Ho's blog mentions above, the Confucius Institute at UK was inaugurated in November 2010. Since then, Director Huajing Maske identified a shift in focus from Hanban from Chinese traditions and cultural studies to K-12 classes. The next strategic phase for UK's Confucius Institute is "internationalization." This consists of partnering with Chinese universities like Shanghai and Jilin Universities and participating in academic exchanges (sending academics and students across borders). Yet this does not indicate a reluctance to engage in political controversy on campus. On the contrary, this reconsideration of priorities may reflect another persistent theme – the dearth of demand. While [a 2008 article from Xinhua](#) cited the "booming" Confucius Institutes as a result of increasing American demand for language studies, in Lexington reciprocal interest appears difficult to inspire. K-12 classes offer a captive market and audience and comprise the majority of students receiving soft power services. Moreover, most of the scholars and students selected or self-selected to travel to China likely already display interest in the region.

Much of the media discourse on Confucius Institutes surrounds the theme of soft power and the potential threat of an encroaching China. Politically divergent observers, including concerned parent Teresa Macias, who was interviewed by the *Daily Show*, and historian Bruce Cumings, allude to the purported increase in influence the Institute will afford the interests of the Chinese government. The site of soft power varies according to the critic. For Cumings, the danger lies in self-censorship as a result of a collision of funding interests. For Macias, the good will of the Confucius Institute could not conceal an insidious curriculum bent on indoctrination.

Although in the actual classes the question of nationality arose, it was purely in a linguistic context, while both students and teachers we interviewed said their relationship to Chinese was mainly didactic and apolitical. Furthermore, the majority of students in Chinese-language classes at UK were not even aware that the program was funded by Hanban. Matt Treblehorn, an attorney in Lexington, said he saw the teachers as representatives of the Chinese government, but other students tended to view their language instructor as just that: a teacher. As part of our ethnographic research, a few



teachers responded to a questionnaire that asked how they viewed themselves in the classroom context. Bi Yifei, a ceramicist who teaches Chinese 1 at UK, avoided the issue of political representation, and responded that she was "just a teacher." Simmons Elementary teacher Carol Chen, by way of contrast, claimed her role "as a gateway to Chinese language and culture." Politics was notably absent from that formulation. K-5 teacher Zhang Huihui admitted that sometimes she is viewed as a stand-in for *China*, but not the Chinese *state*. Still, she sought to stake out a sense of personal identity as well: "sometimes, I am just myself."

Zhang Huihui also informed us about the training process she underwent before arriving in the United States as a member of the Institute's faculty. There is a two month "intensive training" at Beijing Language and Culture University, in which a variety of mostly linguistic subjects are covered. For Zhang, though, this training is "far from enough." Though the teachers viewed themselves as apolitical classroom figures, students occasionally ask political questions that must be addressed. Instructors from K-5 and the instructor at UK described their students' views of China in a similar fashion. Bi Yifei downplayed the potential for classroom discord arising from difficult political conversations, saying she would simply use "her way" to defuse them. Students in the university-level classes noted that while there was no concerted effort to avoid touchy subjects, the instructors exhibited national and cultural pride.

Carol Chen identified the primary political stereotype in the minds of Confucius Institute students as there being an excess of crime and war in China. Most of her students, however, were too young to pose such questions and instead were familiar only with "yummy Chinese food." The comments of Zhang Huihui essentially accord with Chen's. Some young students' comments apparently viewed Chinese people as eating dogs and the Chinese government as killing children. Clearly these topics are sensitive and pose a real challenge to teachers, even those with more than two months of training. Zhang responded by inviting students to maintain an open mind and seek out facts rather than stereotypes. Zhang also emphasized that the vast majority of students here in the American South are focused on other received representations of Chinese culture: "*Kung Fu Panda*, *Karate Kid*, and Chinese food." The faculty of the Confucius Institute, it should be noted, is not engaged in imposing standardized views of China on small children. Rather, the teachers are tasked with addressing the pre-conceptions of the students themselves. At the K-12 level, at least, image supersedes reality.

Perhaps the more practical question is whether pedagogical methods will ever overshadow political controversy in scholarly approaches to the Confucius Institutes. The general sense among students was that their respective instructor was comfortable with questions, as well as "animated" and "encouraging." The classes also acted as a cost-

effective alternative to accredited courses, and attracted students of China from both the university and the wider Lexington community. Yet according to the students, class attendance in Chinese 1 diminished substantially as the semester wore on, and Chinese 2 was even smaller in size. Despite the success of the “Year of China,” it is unlikely that through public outreach alone the Confucius Institute will attract significantly more people. As the cultural, political, and economic motivations to study China proliferate, interested community members are just as diffuse. A long-term strategy would acknowledge that, on the University of Kentucky’s campus, there are multiple actors working toward somewhat similar ends: the Asia Center, the Confucius Institute, and UK’s relatively new China Studies program. Hanban’s resources could be better used in conjunction with these institutions, while simultaneously moving beyond the depoliticized realms of K-12 education and international exchange. A joint center focused on contemporary Chinese history and issues could serve as a diplomatic combination of efforts, without eliding the perpetual need to engage in difficult political discourse.

*Denise Ho is assistant professor of history at the University of Kentucky. Jared Flanery is a rising senior from Louisville, KY. This article is the last of a four-part series on teaching and learning about China at the University of Kentucky, a public land-grant institution founded in 1865. For more information about the Year of China, please click [here](#). To learn more about the University of Kentucky’s Confucius Institute, please visit [their website](#). The authors of this blog would like to thank the Confucius Institute, in particular Huajing Maske, Bi Yifei, and Zhang Dandan, for their assistance.*