

# The Development of Confucius Institute and its Identity Transformation—From the Perspective of Social Identity Theory

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## Abstract

Considerable growth in its economy leads to the rise of China in the international community, on account of which it perceives the necessity to promote its international reputation and soft power to match its economic achievements. Against this background, Confucius Institute (CI) was established, attracting attention from both the political realm and the academia. This paper analyzes CI's identity formation and transformation process by combing the reality of CI and identity theory, which includes: *i)* CI's identity forms in an initiative and positive way, as opposed to base on confrontation with others; and *ii)* CI's identity changes through positive interactions with others instead of setting negative stereotypy against others. CI's initial identity was not born amid the hostility against outgroups, but through internal self-design, which can be demonstrated through analyzing its establishment background, strategies and targets as well as its operation and organizing patterns. After its launch, CI triggered fierce reactions from the international society, receiving considerable criticism and suspicion. In response, CI made several adjustments and started its self-revolution while having identity transformation. CI did not arm against external pressure but

rose to the challenges in a positive way—accommodating international concerns while maintaining the stance. In this line, identity transformation happens within CI through positive interactions rather than hostility towards others.

**Keywords:** *Confucius Institute, identity theory, identity transformation soft power*

## 1. Introduction

After the launching of reform and opening-up policy in 1987, China's economy has moved into the fast line. Through a two-phase policy of “bringing in” and “going out”, China managed to become “the world factory” by opening its market to the whole world. With economic achievements, China has attained a new status in the international society as a powerful country. However, China's soft power development failed to match its hard power development, and its international leverage fell short of supporting its international reputation. To reverse this unfavorable situation, China has devoted itself to cultural construction, which largely resembles the development pattern of its economy. China first experienced “bringing in” foreign cultures and then letting its own culture “go out”, the latter of which is critical to building China's national image (Liu, 2015) and enhancing China's soft power (Xiao, 2019). It is in the “going out” process that the Confucius Institute (hereinafter referred to as CI) is introduced as a crucial part.

In 2004, China took a significant step in enhancing its cultural influence—establishing CI, which is an educational institution set up by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2004 with the target of promoting cultural exchange by setting up institutions in overseas universities or other educational sites. After more than a decade of development, CI has gained great coverage all around the world. CI is believed to be a great success according to the mainstream Chinese media and scholars. Some scholars even

stated that CI is “the most successful and distinctive combination of Chinese public diplomacy and traditional culture” (Ji, 2012).

However, CI initiative is not all plain sailing. With its prevalence, it sparked great controversies concerning academic freedom and even potential espionage tendency (Rogin, 2018). A report by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which views CI as a threat, appeals to reconsideration of the relationship between related universities and CI and even to terminate the collaboration (AAUP, 2014). It is followed by the voice from Professor Marshall Sahlins who published a book named *Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware* questioning the suspicious actions of CI. In response, some universities, including the University of Chicago and Pennsylvania State University, opted to cut off from CI (Becca, 2015).

Ever since, CI has been facing great adversaries and it still has not got rid of suspicion and controversies. With critical voices from abroad and the de facto huge investments by China’s government, CI also met domestic frustration—Chinese people began to question whether such a program is effective and economical. On famous social media like Sina Weibo and Zhihu, China citizens expressed their concerns for CI. Despite negative remarks, CI still holds up to its position and continuously sends more teachers and volunteers abroad. But at the same time, CI is also trying to dissolve the criticism and fit in with the international society by consistently adjusting its position and identity. Through shifting its business to “China International Education Foundation”, Hanban’s transformation has reached a new height (Hanban, 2020).

Against this background, the research question of this article is proposed as: what is the recent interaction between CI and the international society and how has it adjusted its strategy and identity to cope with the external suspicion and pressure?

## **2. Literature Review**

Since CI’s establishment in 2004, heated discussions regarding budgeting, cultural diplomacy, “true purposes” and so on have been generated both domestically

and internationally.

Soft power is one term closely associated with CI projects (Wu and Lv, 2007; Paradise, 2009; Yang, 2010; China News, 2013; Procopio, 2015; Mattingly and Sundquist, 2020). Although the term “soft power” has been widely used by political scientists as well as mass media, it was originally created by Joseph Nye (1990) in his book *Bound to Lead*. While traditional international relation theories, realism for example, consider power as the ability of one actor to direct the decisions and actions of others, soft power is exercised indirectly, and associated with “intangible power resources”, e.g. culture and ideology (Winkler and Nye, 2005; Nye, 2006).

Paradise (2009) considers the Confucius Institute as one of the efforts the Chinese government makes to improve the national image and strengthen its soft power, but he acknowledges that it is difficult to actually measure the success of CI. Hatig (2016) considers CI as the “star of China’s public diplomacy” and investigates its roles in China’s public diplomacy. In recent years, more statistical methodologies have been introduced to this field, providing interesting findings and systematic evidence (Kim et al., 2015; Huang and Xiang, 2019).

Unlike western scholars who have paid more attention to CI’s function in public diplomacy and soft power, Chinese scholars have devoted much energy into studying the role and identity development as well as the future scenario of CI (Zhang and Zhen, 2021). Some scholars discuss future potentials of CI, including not only cultural promotion (Wang, 2020), but also economic function (Ning, 2017). For example, some scholars explored the relationship between the establishment of CI and outward foreign direct investment (Xie, Jiang and Cui, 2017), believing that CI as a way of cultural exportation has significantly promoted Chinese outward foreign direct investment.

Case studies are also important for empirically understanding how a Confucius Institute is established and operated. Some of the case studies are regional studies based on regional division to discuss CI’s running within the geographical border, while others encompass field study like interview or questionnaire to understand CI in the real world.

Scholars have endeavored to review CI’s development in different regions in the world. Wang (2015) conducted a case study on the teacher of CIs in the

United States (US). By limiting the research scope to a single country, i.e. the US, she probes into the teaching practice of CI—sending teachers from China. This research casts some light upon the advantages and disadvantages of hiring local Chinese without American pedagogy as CI teacher. Apart from the research targeting the US which accommodates most CIs, regional study of CI has covered many major regions in CI's strategic layout, including Europe Africa and South East Asia (Wheeler, 2014; Theo and Leung, 2018).

Besides regional study, there are other types of empirical research on CI like field study. For example, Procopio, focusing on interviews with the local people affiliated to CIs, analyzes the effectiveness of CIs as a tool of China's soft power promotion in South Africa (Procopio, 2015). These field study data all together form a living image of CI.

Empirical studies have contributed practical meaning to the research of CI, and truthfully reflected its localization process and running effects. It is built on the foundation of pioneer general research, and in return serves as a foundation to move the research to be more specific and down-to-earth.

Some other research findings are also useful for understanding CI from diversified perspectives. For example, Lien and his colleagues conducted research on how CI impact international travel to China (Lien, Oh and Selmier, 2012; Lien, Ghosh and Yamarik, 2014; Lien, Yao and Zhang, 2017). Some other scholars pay attention to Chinese Dream as a cultural and ideological symbol (Zhou, 2016; Rowen, 2019), and according to their research, CI's values are good demonstration of Chinese traditional culture and ideology. From the perspective of higher education policy, Yang highlights how Chinese universities interact with their international peers with the continuous spread of CIs (Yang, 2010).

In conclusion, while existing research on the CIs is extensive and diverse, it often centers on the role of CIs in China's soft power initiatives, their function as tools of public diplomacy, and their regional impacts across various geopolitical contexts. Scholars have provided valuable insights into CIs' influence on cultural diplomacy, language dissemination, and even economic outcomes, such as foreign direct investment. However, a key research gap remains in understanding how CI's evolving identity aligns with shifts in China's broader diplomatic strategy.

Recent changes—most notably, the establishment of the Center for

Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) and the restructuring of CI management—signal a significant pivot in CI's branding and organizational framework. Yet, limited research has explored the implications of these developments, particularly regarding how CI's identity might be transitioning from a soft power tool to a more educationally and diplomatically nuanced institution. This shift raises questions about whether CLEC's structure allows CI to maintain cultural influence while addressing international criticisms, or if it symbolizes a broader rebranding strategy aimed at minimizing political perceptions.

Addressing this gap, this paper examines how these institutional changes reflect a recalibration of CI's identity within China's public diplomacy apparatus. By focusing on identity formation and transformation through the lens of identity theory, this study offers a fresh perspective on CIs as entities actively negotiating their identity amid global scrutiny. This approach not only fills a gap in the literature by highlighting CI's self-perception versus external expectations but also situates CI's evolution within China's broader, adaptive approach to international engagement.

### **3. Identity Theory**

Identity is so important that people could not be held accountable for their prior actions without a sense of identity, and the threads from which social life is woven, e.g. promises, contracts and moral responsibilities, would become meaningless if people did not own their past (Chandler et al., 2003). However, researchers haven't reached a consensus until today regarding the exact definition of identity.

For Erikson (1964, 1968), personal identity is what separates one person from the next, while social identity refers to the collection of social roles that a person might play. Weinreich (1986) defines a person's identity as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future. A constructivist perspective assumes that people play a role in constructing both a sense of who they think they are and the "reality" within which they live. As Kelly (2020) suggests,

to understand experiences, people manufacture personal constructs that govern the selection, integration, and understanding of environmental stimuli.

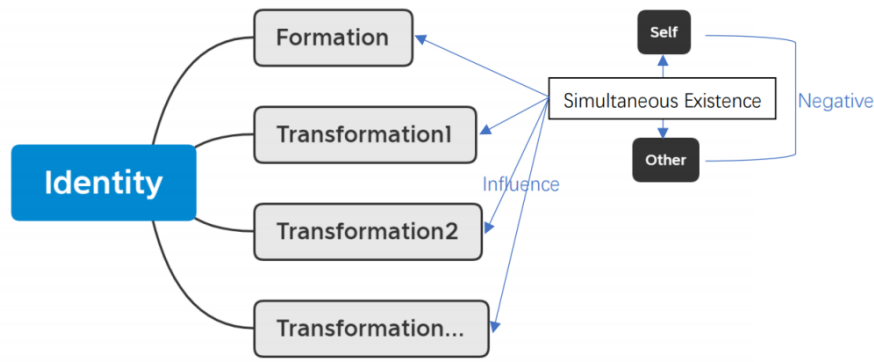
The concept of identity is closely connected to the relationship between “self” and “others”. Hogg and Abrams (2006), for example, define identity as people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others. In the book *War of Visions*, Deng (1995) used the term identity to describe the way “individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture”.

In the late twentieth century, many works refocused attention from the individual to the collective (Cerulo, 1997). Jenkins (1996) defines identity as “the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities”.

When it comes to national identity, the concept was introduced in the course of the “behavioral revolution” in political science (Dittmer and Samuel S Kim, 1993). The forces of change brought about by the processes of globalization have also brought issues of national identity to the forefront of academic discourses (McLean, 1998). Breuning (1997) links culture with national role conception theoretically, suggesting that the role conception or identity of the nation contributes to the construction of “axiomatic beliefs”. These theories provide a new approach to understanding how the status and identity of a subject influences its actions. Therefore, many scholars in the field of International Relations considered national identity as a possible motive of a state to act, sometimes irrationally, in the global affairs (Wish, 1980; Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, 1993; Harnisch, Frank and Maull, 2011; Wehner, 2018).

The conceptualization of national identity in this study draws on the theories of psychology and sociology, of self-concept and collective identity—in particular Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (2001). According to the social identity theory, group identity can be framed by comparison with other groups, and individuals might behave very differently when they are acting as a group member (Tajfel, 1978; Glassner and Tajfel, 1985). To summarize, these scholars suggest that identity is constructed through distinguishing self from others.

**Figure 1.** Model Based on Mainstream Understanding of Identity



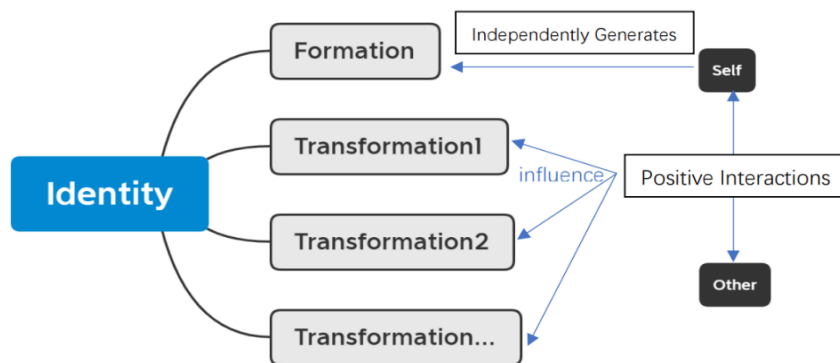
While the identity theory is apparently well-developed, it is also inconsonant because scholars from different disciplines elaborate on it differently. However divergent their understanding might be, there is a consensus among scholars that identity is constructed through distinguishing self from others.

Differences appear when it comes to how others facilitate the formation process of self. For most IR scholars, self and others are binary, and thus the construction and maintenance of identity is based on distancing oneself from outgroups and setting up negative stereotypes of others. Nevertheless, this claim runs counter to the empirical results delivered by psychologists, which indicates a much more sophisticated connection between self and others (Lebow, 2008). In Ned Lebow's research, he manages to reinterpret the identity theory by finding a middle ground, which has injected new energy into identity theory studies.

His views can be summarized into 3 parts: *(i)* identity generally forms prior to construction of others; *(ii)* identity can form without antagonism in the self-other binary; *(iii)* identity can be constructed by positive interactions between self and others.



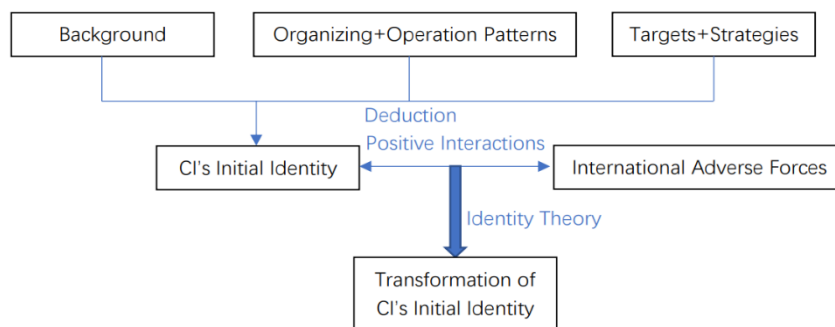
Figure 2. Lebow's View on Identity



#### 4. CI's Development and its Identity Transformation

The section presents the chronological order of CI's development, from the formation of its initial identity to its identity transformation caused by interaction with international pressures. CI's initial identity is just the case narrated by Lebow—it forms in the absence of “others”. It designed by the Chinese government according to its pursuits and future scenario of the day, so the author tries to depict the initial identity by digging into CI's background, initial strategies, targets as well as organizing and operation patterns. The following development of CI's identity is constructed by the positive interactions with “others”, which can be explained by Lebow's understanding of identity theory properly.

Figure 3. The analytical logic of the case description



#### **4.1 CI's initial identity analysis**

CI's foundational identity was envisioned as non-confrontational, aligned with soft power strategies modelled on cultural organizations like the Alliance Française or Goethe-Institut. This identity emerged not from rivalry but through intentional design, rooted in China's strategic goals of cultural integration and language dissemination. Therefore, the initial identity of CI cannot be obtained by defining "others" but by deduction from its background, original strategies, targets as well as its organizing and operation patterns. Even at this stage, CI's identity is not static and fixed, and not determined by a single decision of the government. Instead, it is a self-evolutional process in which modifications and adjustments keep taking place within the system.

At the turn of the century, with economic achievements, China started to pursue its international status by strengthening cultural construction. In this process, CI is proposed as a star project of China's public diplomacy. However, the establishment of CI should not be considered as a single event, but one of a series of actions aiming at the International Promotion of Chinese Language (IPCL), and eventually the construction of the national identity of China in this century.

To prepare for this aspiration, the Chinese government tried to utilize the wisdoms of its traditional culture. In 2004, the Chinese government issued the Five-Year Plan of Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language (TCFL), also known as the Chinese Bridge Engineering (han yu qiao gong cheng), aiming to "promote cultural diversification of the world and make China be better integrated into the international community" (Ministry of Education, no date). In the same year, Li Yuming, the director-level official of the Ministry of Education proposed the idea named "language of a powerful nation and a nation with a powerful language", appealing to a higher attention to the language of China. The idea links the prosperity of a country to the strength of its language, which indicates that promoting the language will contribute to the promotion of the national power. In his article, Li pointed out that "Language is the basic of culture, the emblem of a nation, the core of 'soft power'" (Yuming, 2004).

Also, in 2004, Chinese Culture Promotion Society, a national-level society with high influence published the Jia-shen Cultural Declaration, with signature of

tens of famous writers and public figures. This cultural activity cast some light on the traditional Chinese culture along with traditional values, hoping to revitalize traditional Chinese culture and promote the learning and understanding of it. These proposals, activities and plans have a common core—to promote the Chinese culture, especially the traditional ones, based on the cognition that China has become a successful country who should retake its historical grandeur as the center of the world. In addition, 70 scholars from over 30 academic institutions organized a conference named “Construct Chinese Theory; Establish Chinese School”, in 2004, calling on the attention to Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism and the establishment of the Chinese School of IR theory (Guo, 2005).

Against this background, Confucius Institute came into being in line with the trend of the time, accommodating China’s aspiration to promote the leverage of its culture. Its identity is not formed by the confrontation to others, but by the reflection of Chinese national identity at that time.

**Figure 4.** The Reorganization of the NLG of IPCL

	1987	1993	1998	2006
<b>Name of NLG</b>	TCFL	TCFL	TCFL	TCFL
<b>Chief Leader and Ranking</b>	He Dongchang Vice Minister	Zhu Kaixuan Minister	Chen Zhili Minister	Chen Zhili State Councilor
<b>Responsible Authorities</b> (in original order)	MoE	MoE	MoE	MoE
			<b>MoF</b>	OCAO
	OCAO	OCAO	OCAO	OCAO
				NDRC
			MoFTEC	MOFCOM
	MoC	MoC	MoC	MoC
			SCIO	
	MoRFT	MoRFT	MoRFT	MoRFT
	NPPA	NPPA	NPPA	NPPA
	BLCU	BLCU		SCIO

The trend was also reflected in the academic community in China. Most of the journal articles published in the 1980s, related to Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language (TCFL), focused on teaching methods, textbook compilation and the development of Chinese language courses overseas. Few of the scholars were interested in TCFL in the context of cultural exchange, international relations, international role, or economics before the 20th century, even though most of the international communication activities, including TEFL, were connected to the “international peace” since the 1940s.

However, more academic articles, studying the cultural, political or economic impacts of TCFL, have been published, especially since 2004 when CI was established. 750 recently published academic articles (2019-2020) collected in the CNKI, the largest academic database in China, are investigated. Among all these articles, 86 articles' titles include the word “Belt and Road Initiative”, other keywords are indicated in the following table. This is to say, even though teaching methods are always a core research area in terms of CI, more scholars are paying attention to the connection between CI and other national strategies.

**Figure 5.** Keywords and Article Numbers of CI Research

Number of articles	Keyword in the title	Meaning
168	Jiao Xue	teaching
108	Chuan Bo	disseminate/ propagate
86	Yi Dai Yi Lu	BRI
50	Jiao Shi	teacher
14	Zhan Lue	strategy
11	Ruan Shi Li	soft power

Hanban is known as Confucius Institute Headquarters today, according to its official website or any other source. However, Hanban, as a Chinese abbreviation, initially refers to the Office of the NLG of TCFL/IPCL. Even though the NLG of IPCL was dismissed by the Chinese government in 2008, while all functions and duties left to the Ministry of Education, the abbreviation was used continuously (State Council, 2008). Therefore, any study on CI or Hanban should not ignore the reorganization history of these NLGs, reflecting the change of the policy at the national level.

As an institute run by the Chinese government, its identity is closely connected to Chinese national identity. This Chinese national identity reflects the overview of mainland China's characteristics. Chinese national identity served as takeoff point for actions in initiating CI, and thus has great influence on the formation of CI's strategies and targets.

The study on the running patterns and the operation situations are essential for understanding the identity of CI. As for its running pattern, references can be found in CI's official documents which represent the official stance, and a report "Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education" of CI published by the National Association of Scholars which view from a foreign perspective. If contradictions were met, other empirical case studies conducted by some scholars would be taken into consideration.

By its nature, CI has the headquarters at its core as a non-profit organization with the independent status of a corporate body (Hanban, n.d.). Through an application-approval process, Confucius institutes or Confucius Classrooms as joint ventures between Chinese and overseas partners can be established. According to the Chinese official settings, the establishment of any CI should be initially requested by the local university. But in effect, Chinese embassies, especially the educational branches seem to play a more proactive role than stated—they are taking actions to facilitate more CI projects. In addition, the potential financial support from China might also motivate the local universities to move into the application process (Procopio, 2015).

As for its funding, the start-up capital is provided by the Chinese parties while the running fees come from both individual Confucius Institutes and the Chinese parties. According to Hanban's official reports, the ratio of the Chinese

funding to the foreign funding is about 1:1, which is based on the “equally shared funding” principle (Hanban, 2011). The annual funding for the operation of CI was approximately 44 million US dollars or 350 million CNY in 2006 (Hanban, 2006), and increased to 314 million US dollars in 2016 (Hanban, 2016). However, the funding sources and the budget of Hanban are blurry, and the annual reports of CI have not included the funding details since 2017. In an online interview of Qiao Jianzhen, the Chinese Director of the Confucius Institute at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, when asked by some netizens that where the funding of CIs comes from and the financial situation of CI, she stated that these were “sharp questions”, and unfriendly asked the netizens to enquire the Ministry of Finance or the president (of China) (Qiao, 2016). These conversations indicate that the concerns for CI’s running problems are not exclusive to foreigners but also shared by Chinese themselves.

When it comes to the educational resources, textbooks and other forms of teaching materials are all provided by China’s side and teachers are all Chinese sent from China (the National Association of Scholars, 2017). Even though the teaching materials seems to be hold in the hand of China, individual CIs possess the right to work out its own annual projects and decide what specific events they are going to hold. That is to say, theoretically, Hanban, or the headquarters of CI cannot directly control the presentation of teaching contents, but as some scholars pointed out, “generally, there is a tendency to stay on the safe side of the fence by not engaging with sensitive topics” (Hartig, 2016, p. 180).

Without any doubt, the main identity of CI is a Chinese language school with the core target of promoting Chinese language education all around the world at the early stage. It is consistent in its Constitution and its strategies. The initial identity of the Confucius Institute can be summarized as below:

- i. An official Chinese language teaching institute to improve the international promotion of Chinese language by teaching Chinese as a foreign language overseas;
- ii. A national-image-improving mechanism demonstrating Chinese culture through face-to face communication; and

- iii. A tool for China's soft power by making foreign people understand and accept the Chinese culture and philosophy.

#### **4.2 Criticism and controversy: External pressures as driver for CI's change of identity**

- **Tension between self-identity and the identity perceived by others**

As CI expanded globally, its intended identity as a neutral cultural and educational institution promoting Chinese language and culture began to clash with external perceptions. Many international observers, especially in Western nations, increasingly viewed CI as a vehicle for political influence aligned with China's state interests, associating its activities with potential interference in academic freedom and promotion of state-controlled narratives. This divergence from CI's self-image as a benign cultural institution created a tension between how CI intended to present itself and how it was perceived by host countries, academics, and policymakers.

The growing skepticism and criticism from external audiences prompted CI to reassess its identity and adjust its strategies. This process of identity transformation reflects an adaptive response by CI, aiming to bridge the gap between its self-perception and international concerns. Central to this transformation was the 2020 rebranding and restructuring, with the Confucius Institute Headquarters, commonly known as Hanban, replaced by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC). By transitioning oversight from a government-affiliated entity to a public welfare organization, CI aimed to mitigate perceptions of state control and signal a shift toward a more autonomous, education-focused role.

Following these changes, CI's transformed self-identity emphasizes a less politicized, more academically cooperative stance. This section explores how this transformation unfolded, analyzing the specific strategies CI adopted to reshape its image, including adjustments in governance structure, curriculum focus, and public messaging. It also examines how CI currently identifies itself post-transformation.

Reviewing CI through the lens of identity allows for a nuanced

understanding of its operations, revealing the ways it navigates and negotiates its purpose and image in response to diverse global perspectives. This approach provides a richer picture of CI as a cultural institution shaped not just by its stated goals but also by the dynamic and evolving identities it cultivates within the international community.

- ***Controversies and the reconstruction of self-identity***

Both CI's targets and the operation mode have set forth some controversies bogging CI down for a long time. Firstly, CI is suspected as a political strategy taken by the Chinese government in a strong "invasive" posture. Its government-controlled operation encountered harsh criticism, especially regarding its funding directly from the Chinese government and the teachers chose and trained by the government (Fraser, 2019). As discussed, CI or Hanban is indeed never an institution independent from the Ministry of Education. In this narration, CI operates under the shadow of China's government and shows too strong a signal of cultural invasion (The BL, 2018). Although Chinese officials reassured repeatedly that CI is a peaceful step only to satisfy the global needs of learning Chinese and promote cultural exchanges, CI fails to get rid of the skepticism that it carries certain political intentions and it is even stigmatized as "espionage agency" (Ekblom, 2019).

Secondly, CI is questioned as a propaganda machine under strong censorship or strong self-censorship. In some scholars' view, CI is tries to "whitewash" the Chinese government (the National Association of Scholars, 2017), or the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP), to "nurture pro-China view and shape public opinion following wills of the CCP" (The BL, 2018). And thus, its "culture" exchange is the dissemination of a one-side view, serving to promote the prevalence of CCP's values, and the China depicted by CCP is only a blinded version of China which hides deficits while amplifies merits. Specifically, the teaching of CI never touches the realm of Chinese history, politics, or economics; sensitive topics are even strictly avoided (the National Association of Scholars, 2017).

Thirdly, CI is criticized for undermining academic integrity and freedom



(Becca, 2015). The most discussed issue about CI's practice is the establishment of concrete institutes inside targeted universities, which is never done by institutes alike. Along with the accused "censorship" of topics, textbooks and even teachers mentioned above, CI is considered as a decay of the academic integrity of the university's education.

Some points from the criticism might be true. For example, it is undeniable that CI tries to build a better national image about China or the Chinese government. In fact, the Chinese government never deny the willingness to promote the friendship between countries. However, on one hand, the international counterparts of CI, e.g. the British Council or Germany's Goethe Institute, are also working for their governments and the foreign policy thereof, although acting independently (Hartig, 2016). On the other hand, the functions and operation methods of CI make it difficult to become an "espionage agency". Most of the teachers and volunteers are majoring in Chinese-teaching or foreign languages, with no training from any spying agency of China. Notwithstanding, the criticism, which is likely to be a weapon of the "public opinion warfare" with China on the perspective of the Chinese government, is indeed harmful for the reputation of China.

From the perspective of identity theory, identity is constructed through interacting with others and based on others' perception of self (Iyengar, 2020). In the case of CI, those holding negative views against CI can be classified into others. Since CI's identity is established by the initiated design according to China's strategic concerns, "others" should not be defined as those distinguished from self at the forming stage of identity, like similar institutes including Alliance Française and Goethe-Institut. However, it does not necessarily equate to the absence of others, which runs counter to reality as well as the identity theory. In fact, as the identity forming process is constructive, "others" are also constructed during CI's interactions with the international society, which encompasses those holding negative views against CI.

Their negative comments precisely reflect others' perception of CI's identity, which is not consistent with CI's self-perception. While CI is designed to be a friendship builder with good will, it is interpreted as propaganda machine, espionage agency and academic freedom destroyer. The perception gap

between self and others needs to be bridged, which drives CI into response, resulting in its identity transformation.

### **4.3 CI's Response to the external pressures**

The 21st century has witnessed the rapid development, or in other words, rise of China. As the second biggest economy, many scholars, inside or outside China, argue that China has accumulated the material and ideational capacity to challenge US hegemony. The participants of the ongoing debate regarding the role China should play have tried to explain international affairs from a Chinese perspective. The name of Confucius Institute reflects the willingness to export the Confucian culture as the representation of the “world view” of China and Chinese people. As Xu Lin, a vice-minister-level official and the Director of Hanban stated, “Confucius is the ancestor (lao zu zong) of Chinese culture...(Confucianism) consists of the universal value emphasizing the principle of ‘harmony but not sameness’... This is the reason why all the national leaders and the scholars agree on the name of Confucius Institute” (H. Liu & Weng, 2011).

Although the Chinese government evades to mention the improvement of the soft power of China recently, just as it has used “peaceful development” to replace “peaceful rise” for constructing a national image as a modest developing country, the improvement of the soft power has been emphasized by different high-level officials regarding the development of CI. In addition, “building good national image” and “improving influence of Chinese culture” are also frequently mentioned (China News, 2013; H. Liu & Weng, 2011; State Council, 2006). However, on the other hand, Xu Lin once stated that “I am against the term soft power. CI has nothing to do with soft power” (Procopio, 2015), while she also stated that “CI becomes the most shining brand of Chinese soft power” (Wu & Lv, 2007). Xu's paradoxical statements might reflect the inconsistency even inside the leadership of CI.

Judging from expression change, it is evident that CI has noticed the gap between the perception of its identity by self and others. It tried to mitigate the antagonism by carefully replacing some of its expressions that might trigger concerns. However, though adopting more cautious expressions indeed

indicates that CI intends to take a low-profile posture, which represents part of its identity, deeper changes in CI's identity can only be unveiled by analyzing CI's strategic alteration.

2020 is a critical year in CI's development process, because major reforms happened within its headquarters according to the decision made by the Ministry of Education. Before July 2020, the brand of CI is managed by Hanban, and Hanban serves as the headquarters of CI. On July 5, 2020, the news center for Hanban's official website published an Announcement on the establishment of the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, which covers main duties of Hanban in CI's projects (Hanban, 2020b). Besides, in this announcement, it is mentioned that the running of CI will be transferred to Chinese International Education Foundation, which is a non-governmental public welfare organization.

There is no official statement proving that the Center for Language Education and Cooperation is the substitute for Hanban, or it is renamed from Hanban, but evidence shows that the two bears so much in common that it is reasonable to regard them as the same one. First, there is much overlap in their duties towards CI. Second, the updating of their website is chronologically cohesive. After publishing the Announcement on the establishment of the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, the official website of Hanban (<http://www.hanban.org/>) had stopped updating, which seems to be continued on the Center's new website (<http://www.chinese.cn/page/#/pcpage/mainpage>). Third, according to the message open to the public, these two organizations share the same contact information and location.

This reform within the headquarters of CI shows the identity transformation of CI in a smart way. On the one hand, it reformed the headquarters instead of CI itself to accommodate international concerns and mitigate international adversaries. Thus, the name of "Confucius" remains eminent in this project, showing its cultural emphasis and unwavering stand. What's more, it is not simple renaming, but a wise duty transfer, which avoids direct concession to international pressure through indirect methods. In this way, it managed to butter two sides of the bread—refusing to define its path as "wrong" while absorbing external advice. On the other hand, this action is the signal of China's good will in promoting international cooperation, by listening to international voice and

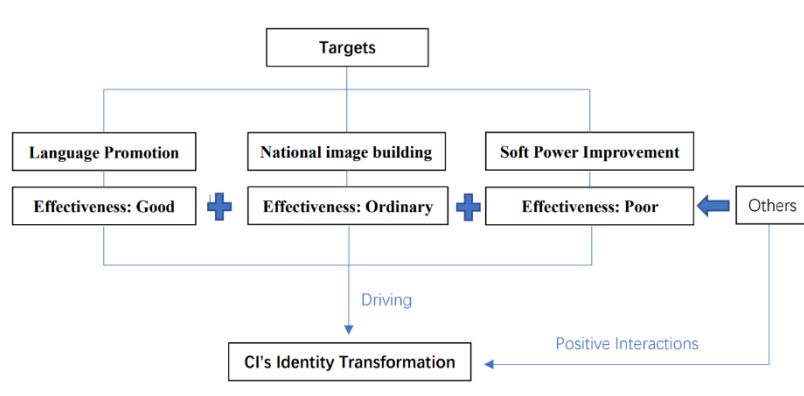
making appropriate compromise.

According to Lebow's understanding of identity, CI's identity transformation happens by way of positive interactions with "others". Instead of adopting confrontational gestures, CI accepts international advice and initiatively bridge the gap between self-perception of identity and others' perception.

This measure is a turning point in the development path of CI, in which positive reactions were made in response to the external voices; at the same time, it is the signal heralding the upcoming transformation of CI's system. Before discussing the identity change, the effectiveness of CI's strategies should be analyzed to find out the clues for the contributors to the change, based on which CI's transformed identity can be unveiled.

The change of CI's Identity is based on the evaluation of cost and gain after implementing its initial strategies and plans. In effect, both the cost of international negative comments and dissatisfactory gains of its cultural promotion plans lead to the transformation of its identity. As the cost of controversies have been analyzed in previous sections, the following part will focus on the effectiveness of CI's strategies so that the identity transformation of CI can be better explained.

According to Lebow's understanding of identity, identity can be formed by positive interactions with others. Considering effectiveness, it works as an indicator of the result of such positive interactions, based on which CI will evaluate and change its identity to the best status. The specific process is demonstrated in the figure below, and the effectiveness of three main targets are analyzed respectively in the following part.

**Figure 6.** Effectiveness of CI's Different Targets and CI's Identity Transformation

- **Effectiveness: International promotion of Chinese language**

It is doubtless that CI, benefiting nearly two million students, is the largest government-sponsored institution with a language teaching purpose. However, many projects aiming to teach foreigners Chinese started long before the establishment of CI, most of which are initiated and operated by universities.

As early as 1957, there were 79 universities in Japan which had Chinese language courses. The number increased to over 200 in the 1970s. In addition, millions of people are learning Chinese through the radio course provided by NHK (Z. Wang, 1987). The situation is similar in Germany, the United Kingdom, the US, Russia and many other countries. In this regard, CI is not the only choice for learning Chinese at least in many developed countries.

In recent years, with the rapid development of China, the Chinese economic development and international relationship almost involve partners from all over the world. Therefore, the need for grasping Chinese language increased accordingly. Even without CI programs proposed by China, many countries have voluntarily devoted to enhancing Chinese teaching practices to meet the needs of their people. For example, almost all British universities offer some kind of Chinese courses, and more secondary schools have started to provide Chinese courses (G. X. Zhang & Li, 2010). However, while many countries have already established satisfactory learning access, others do not. In these

cases, CI can be an ideal facilitator to fill in the gap. Because CI offers a convenient way to learn Chinese, it is still the first choice in many developing countries.

- ***Effectiveness: National image building***

The Chinese government and the Chinese scholars have already realized that the Chinese national image cannot fit the rapid development of modern China. Many of Chinese, officials, scholars and the public, believe that the China imaged by the international community is often wrong, or a combination of stereotype, prejudice and irrational fear, leading to the Chinese Threat Theory. (Su, 2008) It is therefore believed that CI, by spreading the “correct conception” about China, could build a better national image of China.

Indeed, the face-to-face communication between the Chinese teachers and foreign students might improve the national image of China among the students and even scholars who benefit from the program. In addition, the engagement of more international stakeholders is a smart way to win more supporters overseas, including both academic institutions and local organizations.

However, the criticism towards CI might decrease the positive impacts for the public because the audience of the mass media is obviously larger than the students of CI. Therefore, the effectiveness of CI as a tool to improve the national image of China is questionable.

- ***Effectiveness: Soft power improvement via understanding Chinese culture and philosophy***

The Chinese government and leadership thereof are used to raise the slogans regarding their domestic and foreign policies, including but not limited to the Chinese Dream, Peaceful Development, Harmony World, and the Community of Shared Future for Mankind. Even though the Chinese policymakers and their think tanks make great efforts to develop these ideas, little attention is paid to the diplomatic parlance by the Western media and scholars, partly because these ideas are believed to be “patently untrue or a clever prevarication about Beijing’s

real intentions" (Medeiros, 2009), or fail to explain the national interests and behavior of China.

More importantly, the ideas, though translated by the top experts in China, might be too difficult to understand for foreigners or even native Chinese speakers without the political content, e.g. Chinese speakers in Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore. As Nye emphasized, "success depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins." Obviously, China's story has long way to go.

The problems have obstructed the improvement of Chinese soft power and created distrust between China and other countries. When Qin (2018) and other Chinese scholars try to develop the Chinese International Relations Theory, namely the Chinese School, as indicated, more Chinese traditional philosophies are included, e.g. zhongyong (Golden Mean), yin-yang, tianxia (all-under-heaven), and guanxi (relation). It is believed that the development of CI can promote the understanding of Chinese culture, philosophy and wisdoms, which can finally increase the foreign understanding on China's diplomacy.

However, the effectiveness of CI on removing the obstruction of understanding is questionable. Most of the courses provided by CIs focused on lower level of the Chinese language learning so that the students can rarely get in touch of the real "Confucianism", even though they are studying in the Confucius Institute. In addition, the events organized by CIs are somehow homogenous, such as making dumplings, paper cuts or other simple traditional arts. From another perspective, as Tang pointed out, it is dangerous for China and Chinese to be addicted to the glory history and political model of ancient China, and China is never a unique country to the world. CI is telling the Chinese story in a Chinese way, not a way that the audience familiar with, which might result in complacency. In general, the practices of CI are on suspicion of ineffectiveness for trying to correct a distorted picture with another blurry one.

According to the above-mentioned effectiveness of CI's strategies, it can be concluded that language teaching is the safest and the most fruitful one, while the others face adversaries and negative side effects, which justifies CI's action of cutting the side branches and maintaining the trunk. As a result, CI's identity altered from a comprehensive cultural promotion program to a streamlined

Chinese language promotion institute.

- ***CI's transformed identity***

Through a thorough review of the effectiveness of CI's 3 branches of target, it is safe to depict the reality of CI as: language promotion is a core function and it has produced satisfactory results, while the additional pursuits of national image building and soft power improvement face adversaries. In this sense, it is wise for China's government to highlight language teaching and restrain overt claims for the latter targets.

The trade-off between the desirable goals and the realistic controversies can justify the government's choice of reforming the headquarters. To step further, it can be deduced from this official action that CI is trying to accommodate itself to the international environment by making compromise without distorting its initial projection. This is also a reflection of Chinese current national identity which dismisses aggressiveness and advocate harmonious development.

Considering Lebow's view of identity, CI has experienced its identity transformation by positively interacting with others. To be specific, "positive" means the transformation process happens in a benign way. Although the stimulus pushing this transformation—external criticism and suspicion—might be negative, it causes CI's positive reactions. From the angle of CI, it is trying to improve itself and mitigate the tensions, which represents a friendly gesture and results in healthy interactions. If CI fires back, its relations with the external forces would be confrontational, and thus hostility and negative stereotypes would come into being subsequently. In this vein, CI's identity would be constructed in another way in line with traditional identity theory—self-other binary works and "self" is strengthened by hostility towards others. Nevertheless, the reality does not repeat the conventional path for CI to choose harmony and win-win solutions. Instead of adopting hostile countermeasures, CI managed to accommodate reasonable international concerns and reform its own structure to fit in with the international society, for which its identity changed accordingly. Through positive interactions with the international society, CI adjusted its policy and posture to be



a more acceptable member of the whole, which aims not only at raving out complaints but also fulfilling its ultimate mission of “going out”.

CI's new identity, embodied in the establishment of the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, reflects a profound strategic shift that goes beyond mere rebranding; it represents a transformation in self-identity where language education has become the primary focus. This transition illustrates CI's intention to prioritize its role in promoting the Chinese language while simultaneously de-emphasizing higher-level cultural and political objectives that previously defined its mission. By adopting a more practical, business-oriented approach, CI aims to position itself competitively within the global cultural-promotion-through-language-promotion landscape. CI remains committed to cultural promotion, albeit in a more understated and cautious manner, allowing it to navigate potential controversies while still facilitating cultural exchange through its language programs. In essence, CI now embraces a new depoliticized identity, relegating cultural communication to a more subdued, less explicit role.

## **5. Conclusion**

Since the turn of century, China had shaken off the shackles of economic backwardness, and it perceived an urgent need to build up its international leverage and status. To this end, soft power construction was imperative, and cultural promotion is the key to it, which justifies the establishment of CI in 2004. Based on the national condition at that time, CI was designed to be a synthesis of practical language institution as well as a soft power carrier, on which foundation its identity formed.

Since it came into being, the dynamic interactions between CI and the international society have never stopped. In this process, CI managed to adjust itself to fit in the practical circumstances and to live with international pressures, which happens along with its identity change. At the initial stage, its identity is formed by the design of the government to serve national targets at that time. When carrying out the policies, CI was challenged by international and domestic negative comments, which represents others' perception of CI's identity and serves as a force driving CI's transformation. In response, CI took a more prudent

gesture based on evaluation of the effectiveness of its targets at different levels by avoiding adversary-provoking expressions and taking practical steps to reform its headquarters.

CI has long been of considerable significance to China's national strategy and public diplomacy, and it is internationally famous as a representative project of China's official efforts to build up its soft power. There are abundant research centering around various aspects of CI, which provides adequate resources and inspiration. As CI is closely connected to China's national policy and it has much international relevance, there is much to be explored pertaining to CI's role and deeper indications behind. This paper mainly focuses on CI's identity, which is also very distinctive for divergence from traditional identity theory. Following Lebow's understanding of identity theory, two main arguments are employed to illustrate the case of CI—identity is not always formed by self-other binary, and the identity can be constructed by positive interactions between Self and Others instead of negative stereotypy. Along with reviewing CI's development and evaluating causes and effects of its actions, CI's identity formation and transformation is analyzed. In CI's case, the self and others in identity is not binary and confrontational. CI's identity formation happens in the absence of others, and CI's identity transformation is prompted by positive interactions with others. Behind the identity change, it is a smart strategic arrangement by China's government and the guidance of harmonious pursuits and the ideology of win-win solutions.

CI is inseparable to the policies of China's government, and it is a good demonstration of China's policy logic and pursuits. Research about China's policy and diplomacy from the angle of CI is a good direction to follow, and there is much research vacuum of understanding the relation between CI and the general picture.

CI's transformation is driven by the government, and behind CI's identity is China's national identity. There is a two-way connection between the identity of CI and China as a nation—CI's identity reflects China's national identity, and that its action is the demonstration of China's public diplomacy choice. This connection still needs further research.

## Notes

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