What Teachers Say About Working in Confucius Institutes and Their Soft-Power Effectiveness

Linsheng HONG

Key Takeaways

1. The number of Confucius Institutes (CIs) worldwide has remained largely stable since 2020, while affiliated Confucius Classrooms (CCs) have declined sharply.

2. Regional trends show a steady presence in Asia and Africa but a contraction in Europe and the Americas, reflecting divergent levels of local receptivity.

3. Interviews with CI teachers point to uneven working conditions, insufficient stipends, and limited career support.

4. Student motivation proved highly context dependent, remaining weak in Europe but stronger in Asia, where learning Chinese offered tangible benefits.

5. Teachers viewed cultural activities as valuable but increasingly repetitive, calling for more contemporary and locally relevant programming.

6. Overall, the CI network remains an important but imperfect tool of Chinese soft power. It is most effective where demand and cooperation are strong but it continues to face bureaucratic and political constraints.

Introduction

China has sought to promote a distinct form of soft power, presented less as an ideological project and more as a blend of cultural outreach and pragmatic considerations. Alongside trade and investment initiatives, Beijing has invested heavily in educational and cultural programs abroad. The most visible of these are the CIs, launched in 2004 by Hanban (now the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, CLEC). CIs were designed as key instruments for promoting Chinese language and culture abroad. Modelled by the British Council, Alliance Française, and Goethe-Institut, the CIs were framed as neutral spaces for language learning and cultural exchanges. Yet in practice, they have often been perceived, particularly in Western countries, as politicised and inefficient mechanisms of cultural diplomacy.

At their peak, more than 500 CIs operated worldwide, supported by a network of thousands of affiliated CCs in secondary schools. Many students enrolled with enthusiasm for Chinese culture and confidence in China's growing economic importance. However, the network has faced mounting political scrutiny, particularly in North America and Europe, where concerns over academic freedom, ideological influence, and institutional autonomy have led to widespread closures. Even in places where CIs once drew large numbers, former students now struggle to maintain their language skills or sustain a lasting connection to Chinese culture. This uneven reception highlights a core tension: China has invested heavily in language promotion, but the sustainability and impact of its efforts have varied sharply across regions.

These broad debates intersect with the lived experiences of those working inside the system. A 2025 memoir of a CI director at Lancaster University described challenges ranging from administrative disruption caused by organizational reforms, to the pressures of the COVID-19 crisis, and even suspicion of espionage and threats to personal safety. Despite the personal effort invested, questions remain: from the perspective of those who taught and managed these programs, did the CIs succeed in their cultural mission, or did they function more as bureaucratic symbols than as genuine platforms for exchange?

Understanding how those inside the CI system experienced its operation has practical and societal relevance. At the policy level, such insights can inform the improvement of teacher management, training, and institutional coordination in future international Chinese education programs. At the societal level, these experiences offer a grounded perspective

on how cultural and language exchanges are perceived and practised in different contexts, revealing both the opportunities and limitations of people-to-people engagement.

This report investigates the on-the-ground effectiveness of CIs by examining both global trends and personal experiences of CI teachers. It addresses the following questions:

1. How do CI teachers describe their working conditions and the challenges they face in different contexts?
2. How do teachers perceive differences in student demand and institutional support across regions?
3. What do teachers' experiences suggest about the strengths and limitations of CIs as a soft power building platform?

This report first outlines the services and governance of the CI system, then examines global and regional trends in institute numbers, and finally draws on teachers' experiences to assess how these patterns play out in practice.

CI Services and Governance

The CIs and CCs are not the only fruits under the CI network. The system is far more complex, combining education, cultural programming and institutional support. As shown in Figure 1, its core services can be grouped into five major areas. First, teacher training and recruitment as a foundation, with Chinese universities preparing and dispatching teachers and volunteers abroad. Second, teaching and certification are delivered through language courses and standardized exams such as the Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (HSK), Youth Chinese Test (YCT) and Business Chinese Test (BCT). Third, cultural and academic exchanges expand the scope through festivals, immersion programs, and joint research with host institutions. Fourth, institutional development sustains growth by establishing new CIs and CCs, offering scholarships, and building partnerships with local schools and organizations. Finally, digital innovation and outreach extend these activities into online platforms, virtual events, and digital exam preparation.
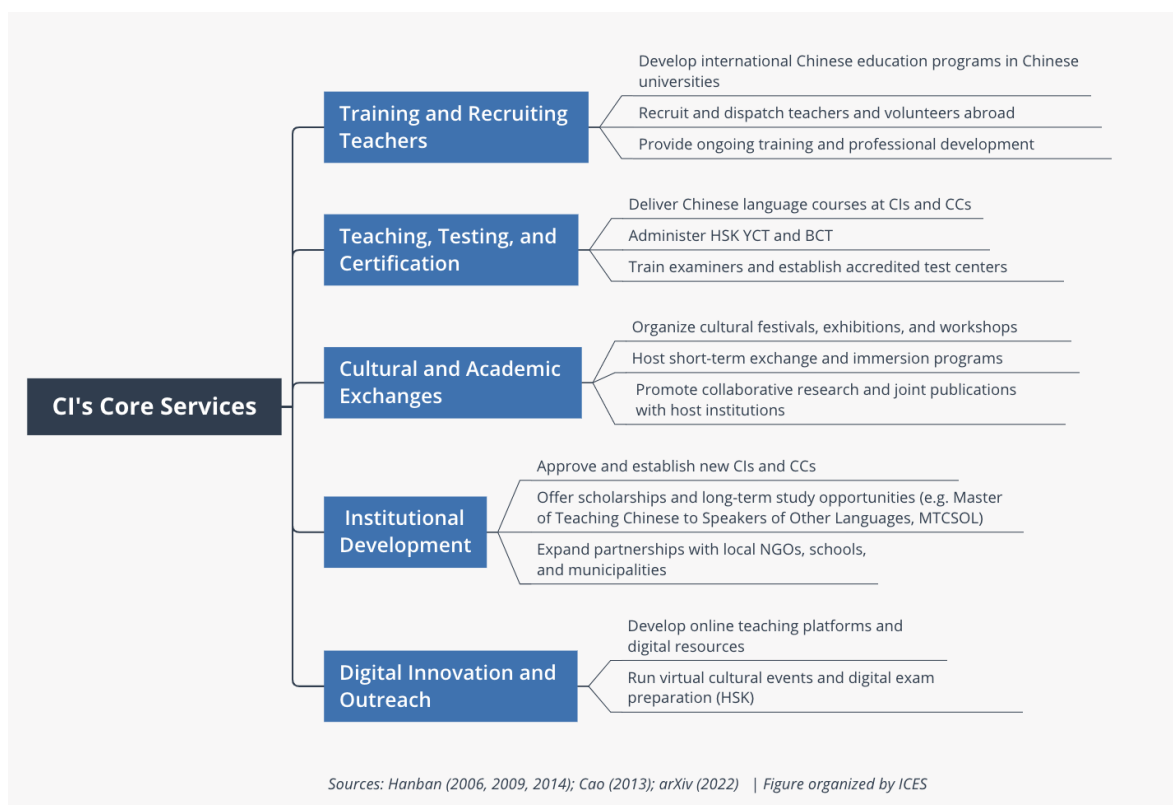
Figure 1. CI's Core Services

From a governance perspective, CIs are typically organised as joint partnerships among the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), a Chinese partner university, and a local host institution. Governance is exercised through a board with representatives from both sides, while daily operations are managed by co-directors, one appointed by the Chinese partner and the other by the host. In practice, the Institutes combine language teaching with cultural programming and are staffed by dispatched teachers and volunteers from China alongside locally recruited staff. Some also support CCs in secondary schools under separate agreements, extending their reach beyond the university setting. Administrative and cultural responsibilities are handled in different ways across countries, but overall CIs function as hybrid institutions: guided from China yet reliant on host universities and local cooperation. This framework is broadly shared, although the precise balance of authority differs from place to place depending on local arrangements. The overall structure is illustrated in Figure 2.
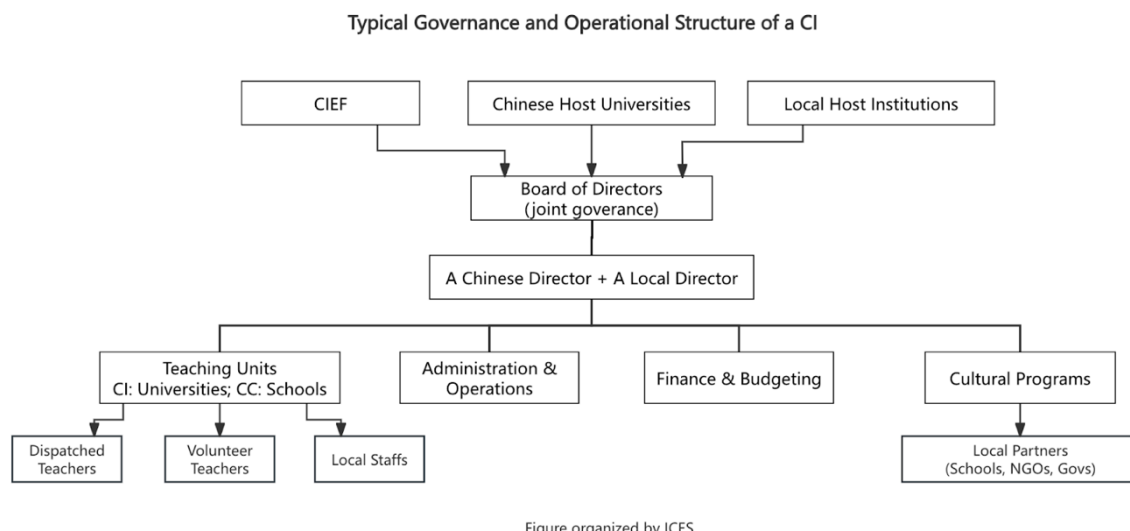
Figure 2. Typical Governance and Operational Structure of a CI

With this framework in view, the scale and direction of the network can be better understood. The following section tracks how the number of CIs and CCs has evolved in recent years, revealing where growth has stalled and where it has held firm.

Global and Regional Trends in CI and CCs (2020-2024)

Overall, the global network of CIs has remained largely steady in recent years, while CCs have declined more sharply. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of CIs fell only slightly from 506 to 500, whereas CCs dropped from 1,030 to around 760 worldwide, a 26% decrease (Figure 3).

Total Confucius Institutes and Classrooms (2020–2024)
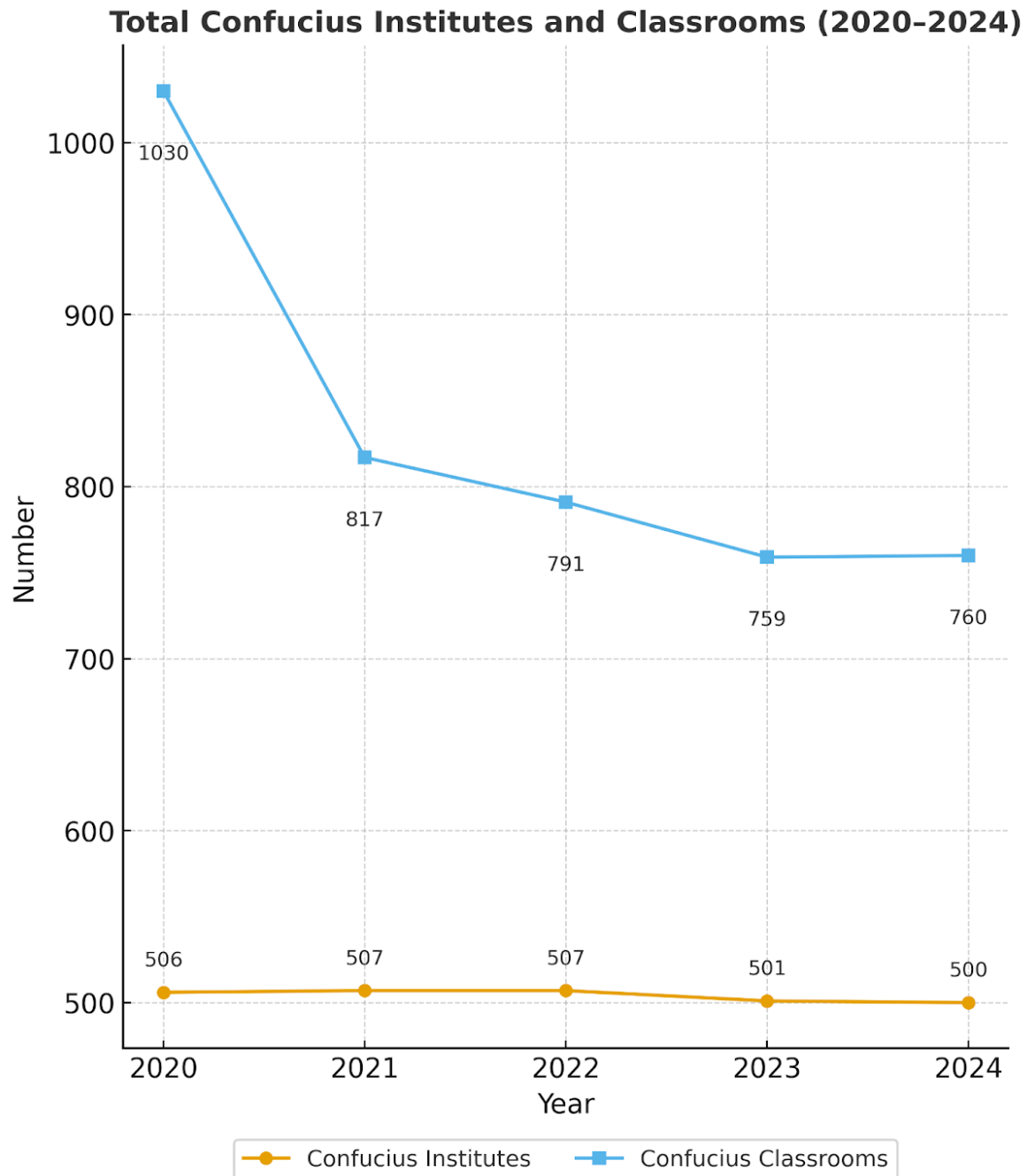
Data from: Chinese International Education Foundation | Chart organized by ICES

Figure 3. Global totals of CIs and CC, 2020–2024

This downward trend did not begin with the pandemic. In the West, many local Chinese classes and programs had already been shutting down. Since 2013, over 100 CIs have shut

down. To be more specific, 11 countries in Europe, North America, and Australia have terminated partnerships. By contrast, no Asian country had closed a CI by the early 2020s. Although data on the specific locations of new institutes are not available, the establishment of additional CIs helped maintain overall stability in their numbers from 2021 to 2024, according to data from the Chinese International Education Foundation (Figure 4).

Regional patterns highlight the unevenness of this situation. From 2021 to 2024, CIs in Asia, Africa, and Europe remained steady, while the Americas declined and Oceania stayed small and flat. The trend for CCs was more mixed. Numbers in Asia, Africa, and Europe held steady, but the Americas saw consistent decreases, particularly in 2023, from 249 to 193, a 22% decrease (Figure 5). Overall, the data suggest the CI network is no longer expanding, with Europe remaining the strongest base and the Americas experiencing the sharpest contraction.

But numbers alone cannot explain why this is happening, nor can they capture what takes place inside classrooms, how students respond, or what challenges teachers face. To understand these dynamics, the following sections draw on interviews with CI teachers in Europe and Asia.
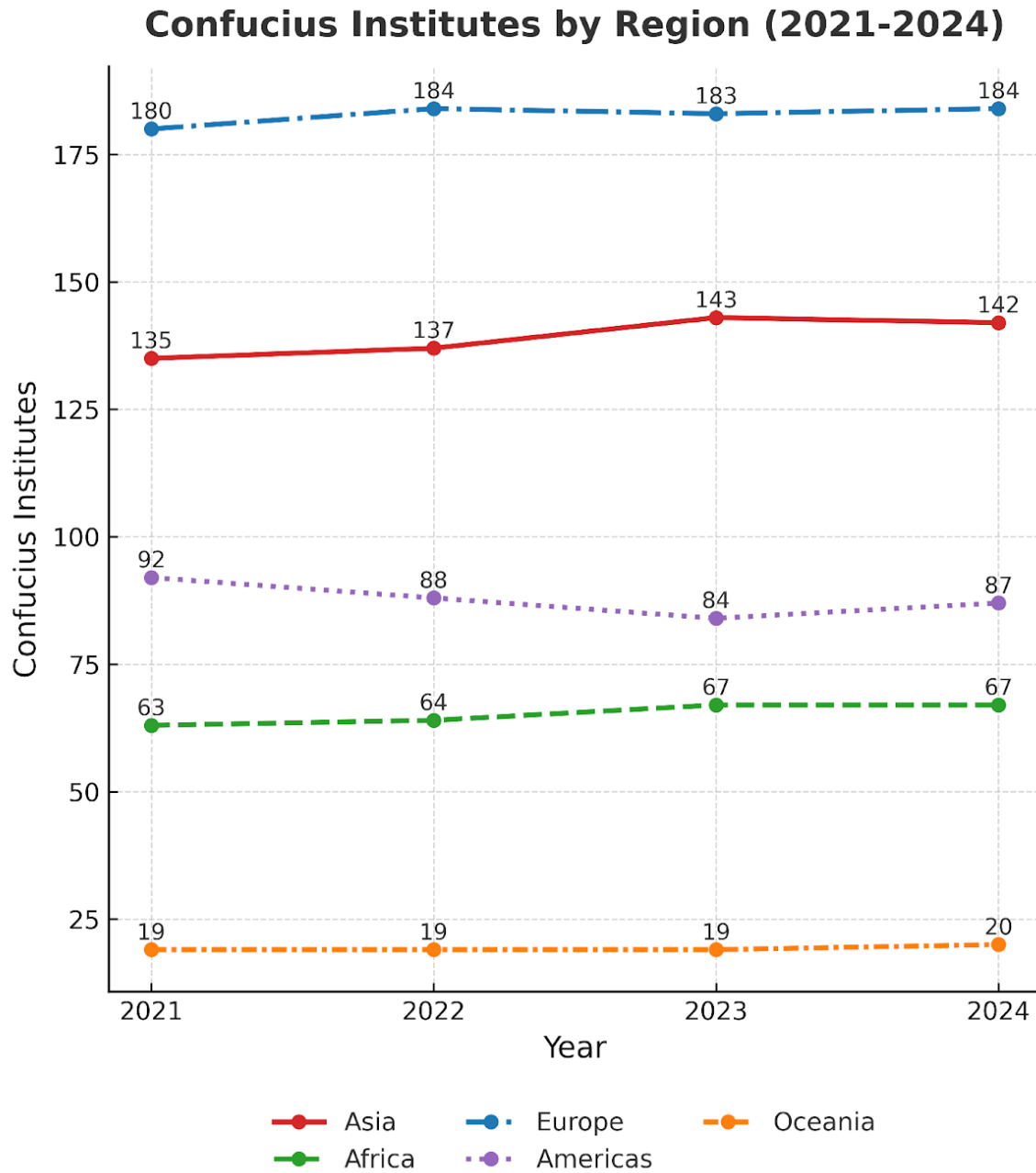
Figure 4. Number of CIs by region, 2021–2024

Confucius Classrooms by Region (2021-2024)
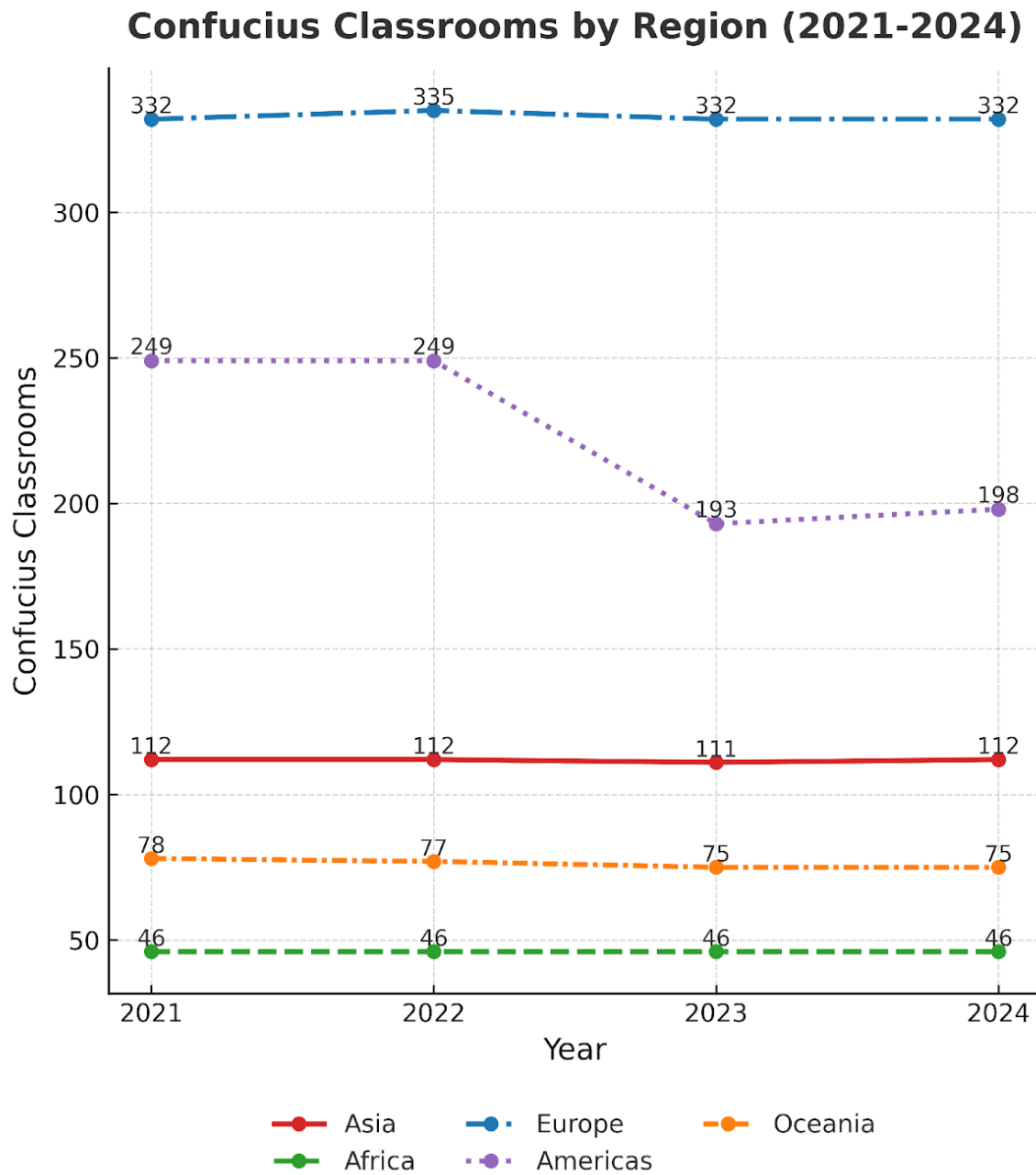
Data from: Chinese International Education Foundation | Chart organized by ICES

Figure 5. Number of CCs by region, 2021-2024

Methodology

This analysis is based on semi-structured and multi-phased interviews with 5 Chinese teachers who have worked, or are currently working, at CIs across Europe, Asia and Africa. Each interview lasted around one hour and was conducted in Chinese, then translated into English for analysis. Follow-up messages were exchanged with participants to verify details and clarify specific points. The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and regional variations.

The interviews focused on four themes: (a) recruitment and working conditions, b) student demand, (c) teaching and cultural activities, and (d) teachers' perceptions of CI effectiveness. Respondents included both dispatched teachers and volunteers, offering perspectives from different recruitment channels and contract conditions.

As CI teachers are generally not encouraged to participate in interviews, all participants were anonymised to ensure confidentiality and allow them to speak openly. Identifiers such as Teacher A-E are used throughout the report. Given the small sample size and the sensitivity of the topic, the findings are intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. Nonetheless, they provide insight into the working experiences of CI teachers and the institutional realities shaping China's overseas language-teaching initiatives.

Interview Findings

The findings are organized into four main themes, reflecting common experiences and perceptions shared by the teachers.

Theme 1: Recruitment, Training, and Working Conditions

Selected to be a CI Teacher

CIs rely on two main types of instructors: dispatched teachers (公派教师) and volunteer teachers (志愿者). Both groups are responsible for teaching language courses and organizing cultural activities, but they differ in background, status, and length of service. Volunteer teachers are usually graduate students who serve abroad for one year, with the option of extending their term to a maximum of three years. Dispatched teachers are typically more senior instructors from Chinese universities, and their postings normally last up to two years at the same CI.

The pathway into teaching with the CI is both structured and restrictive. Candidates are typically drawn from Chinese universities and must be recommended by an affiliated institution. As one interviewee explained, "you must have a recommending institution" (推荐单位). This means that, most of the time, only graduate students or teachers affiliated with Chinese universities can apply, leaving out qualified independent candidates who lack such backing. Although occasional public recruitment takes place when positions are left unfilled, and these opportunities are usually limited to less-developed regions or a newly founded CI that demands many new teachers in a relatively short period, according to one of the interviewees.

Once selected, candidates undergo pre-departure training organised by CI headquarters (formerly Hanban, now CLEC). However, interviewees' experiences with the training varied. Some praised the in-person sessions for offering basic teaching methods, cultural orientation, and the opportunity to learn from experts and experienced instructors. Others described the content as overly theoretical and "not very helpful" when it came to daily classroom realities such as managing young learners or addressing politically sensitive questions.

Teachers who only received online training during the pandemic felt particularly unprepared, in contrast to those who attended in-person sessions in Beijing with access to better facilities and expert trainers. In addition, the duration of pre-departure training was shortened after the pandemic from one and a half months to half a month. When asked why, one interviewee explained: "Because there is a shortage of funding. During training, all the hotels, train tickets, and meals are covered."

Working in CI

Overall, working conditions were described as moderate, but financial insecurity was the most consistent challenge. Stipends were low and subject to exchange-rate losses. Volunteers typically earn around $800-1,000 per month based on an exchange rate of 1 USD to 8 RMB), depending on the host country's development level. Even dispatched teachers, who often earned double, acknowledged that their income remained low compared to the local standard. However, to encourage postings in less developed regions, the CIEF offered five types of subsidies, scaled to the host country's economic conditions. The less developed the host country, the higher the subsidy. Several interviewees mentioned problems with payment. One teacher described additional losses when converting stipends from RMB into foreign currency. Another noted that the monthly stipend had not changed for over a decade and was now perceived as insufficient given rising living costs.

The degree of host support varied widely, largely depending on the local host institution. Teacher A found her foreign director quite helpful, particularly with housing, paperwork, and settling in. She also recalled another teacher, who works in a different CI in the same country, received little help from the local host institution, leaving her facing many challenges upon arrival. Besides, one teacher explained that when accommodation is arranged by the host institution, teachers are expected to accept it, even if conditions are poor or the room is shared. Choosing to move out meant covering the costs personally. Teacher B felt well supported. "There's one secretary who is responsible for assisting CI teachers with administrative matters." Teacher C described strong institutional support with paperwork and housing: "I have nothing to worry about; housing was arranged for me."

Some interviewees pointed to the absence of clear grievance channels within the CI structure. Volunteers in particular felt they had limited channels to raise concerns or provide feedback when disagreements arose. For younger teachers working far from home, this sense of vulnerability could be heightened. Some also reflected on the governance dynamics between the Chinese and local directors. In many cases, the Chinese director was perceived as more decisive on academic arrangements and cultural events, while the local director's role was described as more consultative, particularly regarding cultural appropriateness. As one interviewee remarked, the effectiveness of a CI often depended more on the leadership and management style of its Chinese director.

Relations with host institutions were also complex. In some universities, local faculty regarded CI teachers as outsiders, which created tension. One volunteer in Poland recalled that "local faculty did not respect volunteers because [they knew] our salaries were lower than theirs." Schools also tended to prefer hiring local teachers directly rather than maintaining cooperative agreements with CIs. In her case, the university later that year ended its CI partnership in favor of greater autonomy. By contrast, in some Asian countries, partnerships thrived when local and Chinese staff worked closely together, sharing teaching responsibilities and co-organising events.

The political environment also cast a shadow, particularly in Europe. Negative media coverage and suspicion of espionage damaged CI reputation, even when teachers themselves avoided talking about politics in classrooms. In Belgium, one teacher cited the scandal of a former CI director accused of spying, which damaged the institute's reputation: "after that case, enrollment dropped." Yet most teachers emphasized that in the classroom, politics rarely intruded. Students came to learn a language, not debate geopolitics. As one put it, "people who think like that won't come."

Career trajectories were another concern; both volunteers and dispatched teachers often struggled after service. One admitted it was "very hard to find Chinese teaching jobs" back home, unless one continued abroad or taught Chinese online to international students. Moreover, salaries for Chinese teachers outside the CI framework are generally "too low to make it a sustainable long-term career" (工资太低，没法以此谋生), especially in Europe.

Despite these challenges, teachers still found the experience transformative. The CI system attracted motivated instructors who saw overseas teaching as a rare opportunity, though at the cost of precarious finances and uneven support. For some, especially younger volunteers, the posting felt like an internship or gap year; for others it was a chance to broaden exposure and pursue cultural exchange. As one interviewee put it, despite the modest stipend, "the opportunity to teach abroad was rare and worth seizing."

Theme 2: Student Demand Across Regions

Student demand for Chinese varied sharply by region: relatively weak and inconsistent in Europe, but more structured and incentive-driven in Asia and parts of Africa.

In parts of the EU, CI teachers encountered fragile or inconsistent interest. Many courses were open to the public, attracting small groups of students ranging from university youth to retirees. One teacher in Belgium described how classes included "students from middle school age to eighty-year-olds." Opening a class only requires 3 students' registration. These learners joined out of curiosity, sometimes after travelling to China, but attendance was voluntary and retention fragile. As the teacher explained, if students felt "the teaching style didn't suit them, they simply stopped going to the Chinese class."

Where learning was compulsory, teachers also struggled with student motivation. In Poland, Teacher B remembered teaching middle-schoolers who were placed in Chinese classes because it was one of the available foreign language options. Despite explaining patiently and repeating simple vocabulary such as "red" and "white" ten times over a semester, students showed little progress. She reflected that she "didn't understand why free Chinese classes were offered." She referred to such phenomena as a "cultural criticism" (文化批判), explaining, "perhaps they don't like Chinese and Chinese culture at all, but it's offered free, so they reluctantly learn it." Teachers in such contexts reported frustration and a sense that their efforts were undervalued.

Another factor shaping demand was cultural competition. In Europe, Japanese and Korean often outshone Chinese in popularity due to pop culture. One teacher described that "Japanese and Korean are more fashionable" among young Europeans, while Chinese was

seen as difficult and old-fashioned. In multilingual countries like Belgium, where three national languages already dominate, few saw a practical need for Chinese.. Limited exposure to contemporary Chinese culture also weakened curiosity. Students often associated China more with media-covered politics or tradition than with relatable modern culture. As she put it, "if people can't even imagine travelling to China, why would they learn Chinese?" However, she also observed that this situation has begun to change since 2024 because of China's visa-free policy, noting also an increase in students registering at local, non-CI-affiliated Chinese schools.

Serbia and Morocco receive a relatively larger number of students, but Chinese is still not a popular language. According to Teacher E, in Morocco more than 1,700 students applied to study at the CI, while the capacity was only about 600, so students had to take an entrance exam to be admitted. He also recalled that "as the semester goes by, there are fewer students attending class and more excuses." In Serbia, by contrast, students were attentive in class and seldom used their phones. The passing rate for the HSK exam was high, with the lowest rate at the class level still around 91-92%. However, even with higher enrollment and strong HSK results, Chinese remains far from a popular language in Serbia: "There are actually many schools in Serbia, but only a few have partnerships with us."

In Asia, especially South Korea and Indonesia, Chinese language learning carried more practical weight, but that practical weight did not always guarantee appreciation. In Korea, Teacher A recalled that at Samsung, employees who wanted to be promoted or assigned to work in China had to study Chinese. The company offered its own classes and exams, and the exams were more difficult than the HSK. In public schools, however, the picture was different. Chinese was offered alongside Japanese, with half the students assigned to the Chinese track regardless of personal choice. Teacher C reflected that in middle school, he noticed social discomfort around Chinese heritage: "99% of Chinese–Korean mixed-heritage children try to hide their Chinese roots, feeling a sense of shame" (羞耻感). In addition, political tensions also influenced perceptions. During the Winter Olympics controversy between China and Korea in 2022, he sensed clear unease among students. They remained polite toward him, but that politeness reflected social norms in Asia rather than a disappearance of unease.

In Indonesia, Chinese was embedded in school curricula, sometimes with as many as five hours per week in primary grades. Parents also invested in after-school tutoring, especially within the ethnic Chinese community, where proficiency was seen as an asset for both business and heritage. When students had clear goals such as preparing for HSK exams or studying abroad, engagement was high and results were visible. One teacher reported that 76% of her sixth-grade students passed HSK 3 after a year, proof that structured curricula

and motivated learners could produce strong outcomes. Adult learners, too, often showed dedication: some prepared for exams, while others simply sought conversational skills for travel or business.

Overall, demand was relatively weak in Europe but more robust in Asia where structural incentives existed. Where Chinese was elective, sustaining motivation was a constant challenge. Where it was embedded in curricula or tied to tangible benefits, students engaged more seriously. This suggests that the Chinese language promotion is less about the inherent appeal but more on whether local contexts provide meaningful and positively received incentives to learn it.

Theme 3: Teaching Methods and Cultural Activities

Chinese courses are not always free. According to interviewees, CI classes were generally affordable and priced to match the lower end of local language-course markets. Otherwise, complaints may arise. As one interviewee explained, "If you make the courses free, you'll receive complaints from other institutions because they would say you are disturbing the market." By contrast, courses offered in middle schools that have signed cooperative agreements with CIs are usually free.

Except countries like South Korea where the textbook must be written by the local education authorities, teachers employed standard materials provided by the CI system, most commonly the HSK Standard Course textbooks. These offered structure and alignment with proficiency testing, but some felt they were rigid. Therefore, teachers often had to adapt their methods creatively to suit diverse learners. In adult classes, they emphasized conversation and cultural notes. In school contexts, they used games and songs to maintain attention. Yet difficulties persisted when students were unmotivated or discipline was weak.

Cultural activities formed a central part of CI teachers' duties. Nearly all interviewees described a packed calendar of traditional events, including Spring Festival celebrations, Lantern Festival dumpling-making, Mid-Autumn mooncakes, Dragon Boat crafts, and workshops in calligraphy, tea ceremony, or folk dance. These activities were familiar, inexpensive to organize, and aligned with headquarters' expectations. As one teacher noted, "holding traditional festival activities was a KPI (Key Performance Indicator)." Yet over time, many teachers found them repetitive and old-fashioned, with audiences gradually losing interest. One said that "activities were always the same (千篇一律). For instance, you can see a kung fu team appearing at many different events and performing the same thing each time, every year," while another observed that younger participants were "more drawn to pop culture, films, and technology than to brush calligraphy or tea rituals."

When handled creatively, however, such events could still generate genuine enthusiasm. A Belgian teacher recalled a Valentine's Day calligraphy booth where visitors wrote the character for "love" (爱) and made bookmarks to take home, saying that "everyone really enjoyed it." Food-related events were especially effective in drawing participants, and one teacher joked that "if there was food, people always came." The challenge, several explained, was sustainability. Limited staff and budgets made frequent events exhausting, and at times "we held activities just for the sake of holding them" (为了办活动而办活动).

Teachers suggested that fewer but higher-quality activities would be more impactful, and that integrating contemporary culture would help attract youth. As one argued, "contemporary activities should be closer to how China is today." Ideas included film festivals, Chinese pop music concerts, or workshops linking calligraphy with modern design.

In short, cultural practices under the CI framework created visibility and heritage awareness, but risked becoming repetitive and boring without innovation. Teachers' experiences suggest that innovation and audience sensitivity are critical if cultural programming is to avoid becoming ritualistic and irrelevant.

Theme 4: Perceptions of the CI Mission and Effectiveness

Teachers gave balanced but cautious assessments of how well CIs fulfil their mission of promoting Chinese language and culture abroad, with perceptions differing sharply by region

In Asia, teachers generally rated the CI model highly. One instructor in South Korea gave it "8 out of 10," noting that "the CI provided an official platform able to organize large exhibitions or invite cultural troupes in partnership with embassies." He explained that such large-scale activities, with many Chinese teachers involved, were beyond the capacity of small private schools. Another teacher offered a similar score for South Korea but acknowledged that "political differences between the two countries still created some concerns," and that cultural overlap sometimes led to competition. Koreans, she said, would "listen but resist Chinese narratives" by emphasizing their own versions of shared traditions, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival. She described Thailand as even more positive, rating it "8 or 9 out of ten," as classes were consistently full and community enthusiasm created robust ground for cultural exchange.

In Indonesia, one teacher now working at a private school gave the CI model "6 out of 10." Speaking from outside the CI system, he felt that institutes were present but not especially active. In Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, there is only one CI, while most activity takes

place in schools through cooperation projects with Chinese universities that bring in volunteers, not necessarily linked to the local CI. He observed that many Indonesians prefer private tutoring centers, often focused on HSK preparation, and predicted that Chinese language teaching abroad will become more privatized, similar to the Alliance Française model. Despite these limits, he believed the demand for Chinese in Indonesia is rising, noting that "Chinese is becoming more and more important."

In Europe, perceptions were more restrained. One teacher estimated the effectiveness of the CI in Poland at "about 6 out of 10." She explained that while significant money and resources were invested, the actual outcomes were modest and much of the effort felt wasted. Classes often struggled to attract genuine interest from students or the wider community, remaining concentrated within formal university settings. Compared to organizations like the Alliance Française or Goethe-Institut, which rely on revenue yet still manage to run profitably, CI often operated at a loss. In her view, cultural promotion through the CI did not necessarily generate the same impact as popular culture products like video games or films, which reached people more naturally and memorably. As she put it, culture cannot simply be imposed from the top down, if branded too strongly as "official," it risks feeling like "cultural imposition" (文化入侵) rather than friendly exchange. By contrast, when people encounter Chinese culture through a game like Wukong or a film like The Wandering Earth, they engage directly with creative content and values in a way that feels more authentic and appealing.

Another teacher suggests that the cultural impact of CI depends heavily on local context. The teacher stressed that effectiveness cannot be measured in absolute terms but varies by country and by how receptive the host society is. In Belgium, she rated the influence around "5 out of 10," noting that interested students did gain exposure to Chinese culture, but those with no interest remained unmoved, even if they repeatedly attended events. Besides, students did not always treat it as a neutral space for language learning. Some assumed from the name "Confucius Institute" that it represented Chinese cultural promotion, while others associated it with political agendas, especially after the CI incident in Brussels.

In central and Eastern Europe, outcomes were mixed. In Slovakia, effectiveness was rated around 6 out of 10 and seen as moderate, largely dependent on the host institution. Events and programs thrived when local partners supported them, but when they hesitated, activities slowed or stopped. In Serbia, the teacher gave it a 6. Classes continued steadily but cultural programming was limited, which reduced visibility in the wider community.

In Africa, the Moroccan case stood out more positively with a rating of 7 out of 10. Teachers remembered a steady flow of cultural events and strong community participation. Local institutions welcomed cooperation, which made the institute more visible and active than in many European contexts.

Taken together, the interviews show that the effectiveness of CIs is complex and cannot be captured by one simple rating. Teachers gave scores ranging from 5 to 9 out of 10 depending on the country, but all stressed that outcomes were shaped less by resources than by whether local audiences and institutions were receptive. Where demand was high and cooperation strong, as in Thailand or Morocco, institutes were able to thrive. Where suspicion, low motivation, or political sensitivities prevailed, as in Belgium or Poland, their impact remained limited. Overall, teachers saw the CI mission as valuable but only partially realized: useful as entry points for language and culture, yet often superficial and constrained by geopolitics and structural inefficiencies.

Emerging Lessons from CI Teachers

The following insights are drawn from 5 CI teachers. They are not comprehensive recommendations but reflective lessons based on teachers' on-the-ground experiences, indicating areas where the CI network could further adapt and improve.

I. System-Level Support (CIEF and Chinese Partner Universities)
1. Ensure Timely and Fair Pay
Teachers reported insufficient stipends. Reliable monthly payments, adjusted for living costs and delivered in local currency, would reduce stress and improve retention.

2. Make Training Practical
Pre-departure training was often too general, offering little guidance on classroom management or sensitive issues. More practical modules, including case studies from experienced teachers, would make preparation more effective.

3. Support Career Continuity
After service, many teachers struggled to find stable career pathways. Alumni networks, career guidance, and clearer progression from volunteer to dispatched posts would help retain trained talent.

II. Institute-Level Management (CI Directors and Local Partners)

4. Protect Teachers and Create Feedback Channels

Teachers described weak status and limited recourse when treated unfairly. Establishing confidential grievance mechanisms and mentoring systems would strengthen accountability and support.

5. Modernize Cultural Programming

Cultural activities tended to repeat traditional formats such as calligraphy and dumpling-making. While popular, their impact was limited. Integrating contemporary culture and shifting evaluation from event quantity to quality would improve engagement.

6. Prioritise Motivated Learners

Compulsory Chinese classes often produced indifference and weak discipline, while elective courses and family-driven demand generated stronger outcomes. Targeting genuinely motivated learners would yield more sustainable results.

III. Cross-Cutting Engagement and Communication (Shared Responsibilities)

7. Improve Public Communication and Branding

Teachers observed that some audiences viewed CIs as official or politicized. Transparent communication and showcasing everyday cultural life could make programs feel more approachable.

Overall, these insights suggest that while CIs have made tangible contributions to expanding access to Chinese language and culture, persistent gaps remain between policy design and teachers' on-the-ground experiences. Addressing these issues by improving teacher support, modernizing cultural content, and fostering more flexible and locally responsive partnerships would not only enhance the Institutes' effectiveness but also strengthen their long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Although the interviews were designed to be illustrative rather than comprehensive, their findings align with broader assessments of the CI system. Independent reviews, including those by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2019, 2023) and the Stanford University Freeman Spogli Institute (2021), identify similar patterns of centralised management and uneven local adaptation. The European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) likewise notes that China's soft power in Europe "has fallen on hard times,"

reflecting persistent gaps between official narratives of cultural exchange and European perceptions of influence (2021). Echoing these assessments, Sun (2023) argues that while CIs have served as China's principal vehicles for projecting cultural soft power, their credibility in Western contexts has been constrained by political sensitivities and perceptions of state control. In contrast to these external critiques, the CIEF's Annual Reports (2020–2024) focus mainly on institutional expansion and international partnerships, with comparatively less attention to teacher welfare or classroom practice. Meanwhile, recent Chinese-language analyses, such as Xu's *High-Quality Development of Confucius Institutes: Key Features and Practical Approaches* (2024), call for greater innovation and localisation. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the challenges raised by interviewees also mirror structural characteristics of the CI model.

The trajectory of CIs illustrates both the breadth of China's cultural outreach and the limits of its soft-power endeavors. At their best, CIs created accessible platforms for Chinese language and culture, especially in Asia, where student demand was steady and linked to economic or educational opportunity. In these environments, teachers reported lively classrooms, motivated learners, and cultural activities that connected well with local interests. In contrast, in Europe, the model encountered obstacles. Political suspicion, limited grassroots demand, and less innovative or engaging cultural activities left many institutes struggling to remain relevant. Teachers noted that top-down rules and repetitive cultural programming often hampered flexibility and failed to spark deeper engagement.

These findings highlight a broader reflection: cultural diplomacy cannot be imposed uniformly from the top down. Teachers' accounts point to gaps in support, training, and program design that mirror broader structural limits of the CI model. For Chinese managing authorities, future initiatives will need to delegate greater autonomy, adapt to local contexts, and invest more in teacher support and innovative programming. For host institutions, the CI experience suggests that effective cooperation depends on aligning programs with local demand and preserving academic integrity. Partnerships tended to work best where language learning served clear educational or professional purposes and where both sides maintained transparent, balanced arrangements.

Now, as reflected in many European policy and think-tank discussions, Europe increasingly recognizes its lack of China-related expertise, particularly among those involved in policymaking. In this context, CIs could serve as one of several entry points for addressing Europe's broader China knowledge gap, offering limited but useful exposure that may contribute to a more balanced understanding and dialogue between China and Europe.

References

Cao, D. (2013). *Introduction to the development plan of Confucius Institute*. https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=ci_pubs

Chinese International Education Foundation. (2021). *Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2021*. https://ci.cn/en/gywm/nb/db8e7611-8c24-46c7-bc0a-830fa10d5b1c

Chinese International Education Foundation. (2022). *Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2022*. https://ci.cn/en/gywm/nb/b3267e90-4b4e-4dc0-8de8-04128c6164e1

Chinese International Education Foundation. (2023). *Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2023*. https://ci.cn/en/gywm/nb/15ac77fe-0c40-4c32-8f5a-4b3a3f0f149c

Hanban. (2006). *Annual Report*. Hanban.

Hanban. (2009). *Annual Report*. Hanban.

Hanban. (2014). *Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2014*. Hanban.

Maksimova, A. (2022). *A systematic review of research on the use and impact of technology for learning Chinese. arXiv preprint arXiv:2208.13630*.

Sun, Shao-Cheng. (2023). Confucius Institutes: China's Cultural Soft Power Strategy. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education. 6*. 52-68. https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2023.4

Author

Linsheng HONG is a research and Management Associate at Institute for China-Europe Studies. Before joining ICES, he worked at the China Chamber of Commerce to the EU for research and communications.

Rond-point Robert Schuman 6, 1040 Brussels
+32 (0) 2 234 6397
info@ices-eu.org
https://ices-eu.org/

Referencing Policy