

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Teaching Chinese to the
World: The Political
Economy of the
Confucius Institutes*

REPORT

Speaker :
Kenneth King

13 March 2024

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Speaker: Prof. Kenneth King, Emeritus Professor, School of Education & School of Social and Political Studies, Former Director, Centre of African Studies & Professor, International and Comparative Education, University of Edinburgh.

Chair: Amb. Kishan S. Rana, former Ambassador/High Commissioner; Professor Emeritus, DiploFoundation, Malta & Geneva; and, Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The seminar began with the Chair's observations on the challenges encountered by Confucius Institutes (CI), initially perceived as highly innovative, later faced closures in North America and Western Europe. The practice of the PRC's monitoring and oversight of these institutes, exercising stringent control over their administration, compromised the CI's autonomy. He raised questions about the broader implications of the CIs on China's educational and cultural diplomacy, as well as their indirect connection to China's diaspora diplomacy, particularly concerning Chinese students studying abroad.

Professor Kenneth King, in his introduction to CIs, emphasised their distinctiveness compared to European counterparts such as the British Council and Goethe Institute. He noted that CIs are typically established through collaboration between two partner universities, often with two directors, and are predominantly requested by universities rather than imposed. Additionally, he highlighted the individuality and specificity of CIs across different locations, embracing diverse models rather than a singular approach, akin to the "Let a thousand flowers bloom" ideology.

In his presentation, the speaker directed attention to a statement made by Former CI Director, Xu Lin, in 2010, who claimed that "There is no ideological element in the CI; it is completely cultural; it has nothing to do with politics". Prof. King challenged this assertion stating that CIs are inherently political precisely because politicians designate them as such. The speaker noted the significant role of CIs as a soft power tool for China. Before the launch of CIs in Africa in 2005, Chinese influence primarily relied on hard power, be it the roads, rails or harbours; but lacked soft power presence in education and society. CIs, described by the speaker as the world's largest language project, have effectively enabled China to be

embedded within universities across the globe. Highlighting the unique characteristics of CIs in Africa, the speaker asserted that the 63 CIs spread across 46 African countries differ significantly from their European counterparts. Presently, Africa hosts more CIs than any other language and cultural institutes, surpassing even those of the British Council. Unlike Europe and other regions like India, where Mandarin was already prevalent in numerous universities by 2005, CIs in Africa introduced Chinese language studies and Chinese degrees to many African universities for the first time. Furthermore, the manner in which CIs engage with businesses varies notably in Africa. While in Europe, CIs primarily promote business ties with China, in Africa, they also facilitate access to the multitude of Chinese businesses operating on the continent.

Continuing the focus on specificity, the speaker highlighted the emergence of specialised CIs in various contexts. These specialised CIs encompass diverse fields including agriculture, literature, publishing, arts, dance & music, technology, business, and notably, Chinese traditional medicine.

Prof. King presented a series of thought-provoking inquiries stemming from the discourse on the 'geopolitics' of the CI's. He questioned the scarcity of CIs in a prominent higher education hub like India and raised the question as to why all CIs in Japan are associated with private rather than the public universities. Additionally, he raised concerns about the minimal discourse surrounding CIs in the Middle East compared to European nations. The speaker posed an intriguing inquiry about the potential role of CIs as a Chinese Peace Corps, facilitating connections between young Chinese volunteers and teachers with schools and universities, both in developed and developing nations. Additionally, he highlighted the lack of research concerning the relationship between thousands of Chinese international students, predominantly in developed economies, and the CIs within the same universities.

Prof. King also discussed the prevalence of bias, disinformation, and fake news surrounding CIs in the USA during the previous Trump administration, escalating anti-China sentiments leading to a sharp cessation of federal funding, resulting in sharp decline in the number of CIs from 110 in 2017-18 to only 10 in 2024.. In his concluding remarks, the speaker accentuated the necessity for researchers to adopt a more critical approach to comprehend the geopolitics and political economy surrounding CIs.

The chair acknowledged the thought-provoking and enlightening discussion by the speaker, and raised questions regarding the autonomy and academic freedom of the CIs. He also

expressed his view on the potential hidden political agendas associated with them. Additionally, he mentioned the closures of CIs prior to the Trump administration, a point to which the speaker concurred. The presentation was followed by a lively question and answer segment.

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