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Transnational Higher Education in the Shifting International Context: A Scoping Review of Confucius Institutes Worldwide

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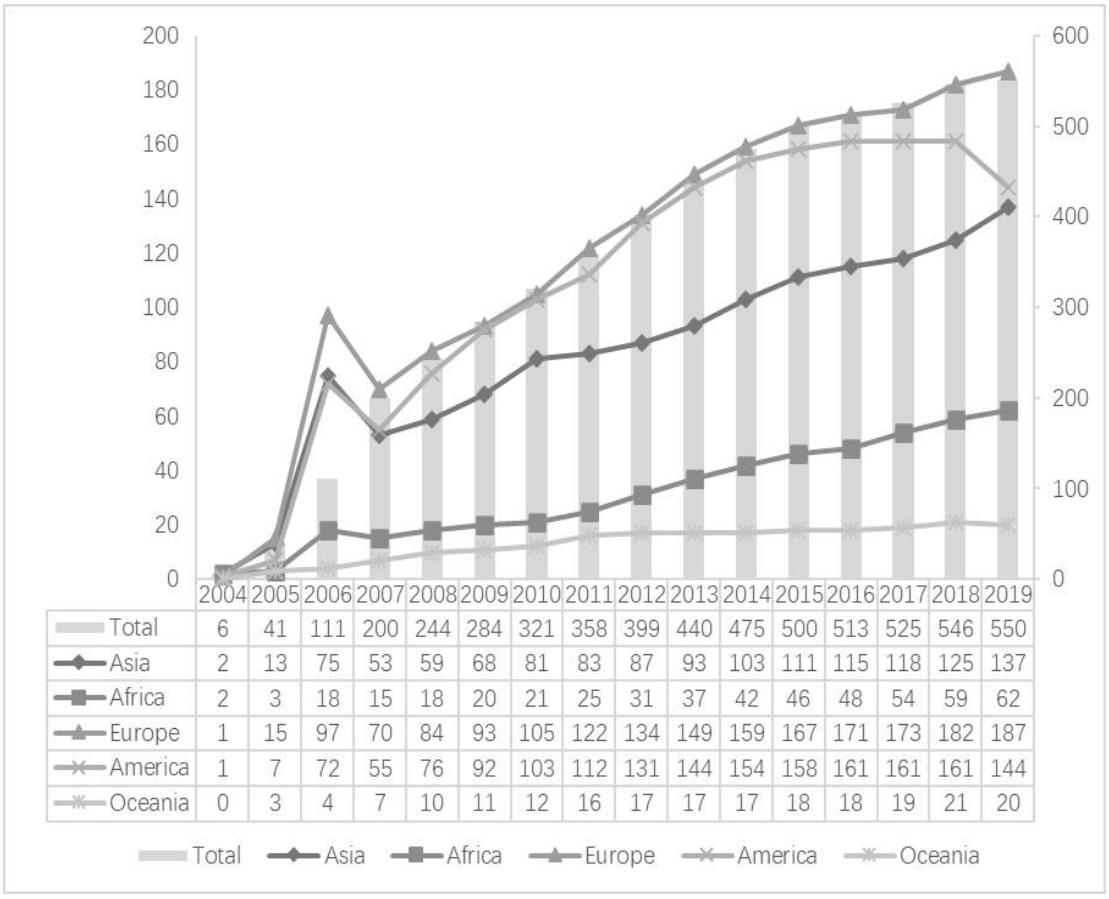
Abstract

Since the inception of the inaugural Confucius Institute (CI) in Seoul in 2004, China has swiftly broadened this project as a means of transnational higher education to advance the global dissemination of Chinese language and culture. This swift growth has drawn increasing scrutiny To systematically examine how Cis function across different international contexts, this study conducted a scoping review of 104 peer-reviewed articles published between 2004 and 2021. The findings reveal three clear trends: (1) research clusters in North America, Europe, and East Asia mirror both the rapid growth of Confucius Institutes and the intensity of the debates surrounding them; (2) scholarly attention has shifted: early studies emphasized educational partnerships and cultural exchange, whereas recent work zeroes in on academic freedom, national security, and international rivalry; (3) soft power has emerged as the dominant theoretical lens, framing Chinese educational outreach as a strategic endeavour and situating host-country responses within the broader dynamics of international relations. This study contributes valuable insights for scholars, educators, and policymakers navigating the increasingly contentious landscape of cross-border academic collaboration.

1 Introduction

Drawing on the experiences of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Spain, China also began to promote its language and culture throughout the world by the means of expanding its Confucius Institutes (CI). The institute collaborates with local partners, mainly higher education institutions, to set up its overseas operations [1]. Organized in accordance with the Regulation of Confucius Institute issued in 2006, the Confucius Institute was founded as a non-profit educational organization under the supervision of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, and supported by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (also known as Hanban or Confucius Institute Headquarters) with the goal of coordinating the resources in Chinese language and cultural education. With an institutional development strategy similar to that of Germany's Goethe-Institut, France's Alliance Française, and the British Council, the Confucius Institutes was able to experience a gradual expansion internationally. Since its first establishment in the Republic of Korea in 2004, CI has grown to 548 institutes in 154 countries by 2018 (Figure 1). According to the Confucius Institute Development Plan (2012-2020), China plans to establish 1,000 Confucius Institutes throughout the world by 2020. However, there are only 550 CIs in the globe as of the end of 2021, and this number has been frozen since 2019. CI has not only failed to meet this institutional goal, but has been facing rising international criticism [2-4].



	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total	6	41	111	200	244	284	321	358	399	440	475	500	513	525	546	550
Asia	2	13	75	53	59	68	81	83	87	93	103	111	115	118	125	137
Africa	2	3	18	15	18	20	21	25	31	37	42	46	48	54	59	62
Europe	1	15	97	70	84	93	105	122	134	149	159	167	171	173	182	187
America	1	7	72	55	76	92	103	112	131	144	154	158	161	161	161	144
Oceania	0	3	4	7	10	11	12	16	17	17	17	18	18	19	21	20

Figure 1 Growth number of Confucius Institute in the World.

Source: Organized from Confucius Institute Annual Report 2004-2019.

The rise of China has been one of the most significant turns of events in twenty-first-century international affairs. Although its rapid economic growth has prompted scrutiny and debate. Some analysts and media outlets have increasingly advanced the "China threat" thesis, positing that Beijing aims to reshape

the post-World War II international order through an assertive soft-power strategy [5]. The global proliferation of Confucius Institutes is often highlighted as a salient instrument of this strategy. This perception has coincided with a series of partnership terminations by universities, beginning with the University of North Florida in 2018 and followed by others such as the University of Chicago and Pennsylvania State University in the United States, McMaster University in Canada, Stockholm University and the University of Lyon. Several national governments have gone further, formally discouraging or prohibiting public universities from hosting CIs altogether.

Existing scholarship has predominantly framed CIs as either language-teaching entities or instruments of state influence [6-8]. The expansion of Confucius Institutes worldwide has prompted sustained scholarly and policy debate regarding academic autonomy and political neutrality. Criticism argues that the administrative arrangements of Confucius Institute diverge-sometimes markedly-from those of host universities, especially in Western contexts [9,10]. On the other hand, a large number of literatures highlights the reputational and market advantages that accrue to universities through international partnerships — benefits that simultaneously augment the soft power of both sending and receiving states [11-13]. The CI network has, at least in principle, provided precisely such collaborative infrastructure on a global scale.

To interrogate how CIs have been identified and defined in various regions and to assess their viability as a TNHE actors, this study undertakes a systematic review of worldwide CI research. A corpus of 119 peer-reviewed publications indexed in the Web of Science (2004-2021) was collected and analysed through a visual bibliometric approach using VOSviewer. By situating these findings within a international framework, the article both maps the evolving thematic landscape of CI scholarship and offers empirically grounded projections for the network ' s future institutional and research trajectories.

2 Literature review

Based on the Regulation of Confucius Institute issued in 2006, Confucius Institutes development goals can be summarised as follows: to promote the Chinese language and culture internationally, to develop friendly relations between China and other countries, to promote multiculturalism, and to contribute to the harmonious world. Its primary mission includes teaching the Chinese language, training teachers, administering Chinese language exams and teacher qualification certifications, introducing Chinese culture and society, and conducting research related to China.

Differ from transnational language institutions such as Germany ' s Goethe-Institut, France ' s Alliance Française, and the British Council, the Confucius Institutes is placed within existing universities, colleges, and other higher education institutions, which offer classrooms, teaching facilities, accommodation for instructors, and support staff [14]. Notably, the majority of the Confucius Institutes are held at prestigious universities in the United States and Europe (144 and 187 separately). Under its development aims and orientation, the Confucius Institute's operating and management model is notably different from that of other transnational higher education institutions.

While Confucius Institute is located in cross-border areas, it was managed by the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (also known as Hanban) and supervised financially and managerially by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. The competent agency of CI, Confucius Institutes Headquarters, is administered by a council composed of a chairman, vice-chairmen, executive

directors and other directors, as well as ten directors led by the chairman of overseas Confucius Institutes. Although there have been three approaches to set up an overseas branch of Confucius Institute under equal collaboration principle: full investment by Hanban, collaboration with Chinese institutions, and Hanban-authorized franchise, the majority of these branches are created jointly by the Confucius Institutes and its counterparts [15].

In order to set up a Confucius Institutes branch in its campus, the host university requires cooperation with a Chinese university, which serves as a bridge between Hanban and international partner universities. The financial and educational expenditures would be shared by both the Confucius Institutes and its host institutions. And both institutions would jointly manage the overseas branch by sharing and integrating academic and institutional resources. Thus, unlike other educational institutions for language study and cultural exchange, organizer agencies and partner universities all play important roles in the development of Confucius Institute [16].

Operating under an unprecedented and inherently fragile cooperative model—one that is simultaneously overseen by the Chinese state and embedded within foreign university campuses—the Confucius Institute has become the focal point of sustained scrutiny from both "insider" practitioners and "outsider" policymakers in host nations. The National Association of Scholars' 2017 report has crystallized these objections within the U.S. context, identifying four principal areas of concern: threats to academic freedom, deficits in institutional transparency, constraints on open critique, and the projection of Chinese soft power [17]. Subsequent scholarship has extended this analysis to encompass questions of financial viability, long-term academic sustainability, pedagogical quality, and the asymmetrical power relations that structure partnerships between host universities and their Chinese counterparts. Notwithstanding the growing body of critical literature, the academic community has yet to converge on a coherent framework for assessing either the effectiveness or the broader impact of the CI initiative [18].

This study intended to conclude the existent advocacy of scholars by providing a scoping review of published literature. Rather than concentrating on pedagogical design or language transmission alone, the study interrogates CIs as a typical case through which to examine how cross-border higher-education institutions negotiate, mediate, and reconfigure their roles when international conditions evolve [19]. By synthesising the trajectories that prior research has delineated for CIs' functions and prospective development, the review advances a nuanced understanding of transnational educational engagement under conditions of international contingency.

3 Methods

In order to address the identified research gap, this study conducted a scoping review, examining the published literature related to the Confucius Institutes. Scoping studies are especially useful for defining conceptual boundaries, mapping the scope and character of a varied and quickly growing corpus of study [20]. A search of the Web of Science Core Collection was conducted on 19 April 2022, retrieving all peer-reviewed publications indexed under the topic "Confucius Institute" between 2004-the year the first Confucius Institute was established-and 2021. The upper temporal boundary was chosen to delimit the corpus prior to the significant international and public-health disruptions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic around 2022. This ensures a more coherent and stable analytical context, as the pandemic introduced major global shockwaves that could have substantially altered the landscape

surrounding CIs.

The search keywords "Confucius Institute" or "Confucius Institutes" were entered in the "topic" field, thereby interrogating titles, abstracts, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. All primary indexes within the Core Collection were activated: Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED), Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), Conference Proceedings Citation Index (CPCI-S & CPCI-SSH), and Book Citation Index (BKCI & BKCI-SSH).

Document-type filters were applied to exclude conference abstracts, corrections, news items, and these formats seldom undergo rigorous peer review and may distort bibliometric indicators of scholarly impact. After the initial retrieval, records were screened for topical relevance to Confucius Institutes; studies whose primary focus was unrelated (e.g., those centred on mathematics anxiety) were removed. The remaining corpus comprised 119 documents: 103 journal articles, 10 book reviews, 4 editorials, and 2 conference papers. Consistent with the scoping review's temporal scope (2004-2021), only peer-reviewed journal articles published within this interval were retained. Consequently, 104 journal articles proceeded to the subsequent stages of screening, data charting, and thematic clustering (Figure 2).

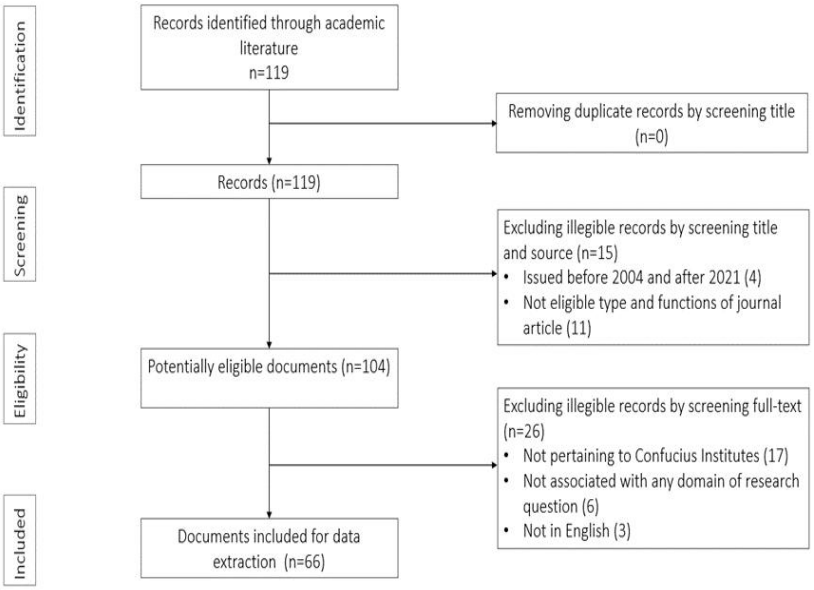


Figure 2 Scoping review PRISMA process.

Source: organised based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement [21].

To map the publication trend and thematic evolution of scholarship on Confucius Institutes, this study employed an integrated bibliometric – qualitative approach. Bibliometric visualisation was selected since it permits the objective identification of publication patterns, collaboration networks, and conceptual clusters across a defined corpus [22]. All descriptive and network analyses were executed in VOSviewer (version 1.6.18), a scientometric software package recognised for its robust algorithms and high-resolution mapping capabilities. The following relational indicators were generated: bibliographic coupling at the levels of sources, authors, countries, and institutions; co-authorship networks; and co-occurrence analysis of author-supplied keywords. Building on the bibliometric evidence, the full texts of the retained articles were imported into NVivo 14 for inductive, thematic coding.

4 Findings

4.1 Descriptive analysis

After matching the inclusion criteria, a final corpus of 100 peer-reviewed publications underwent thematic and bibliometric analysis. Two notable increases in publication production are observed in 2015 and 2019-2021 (Figure 3), suggesting increased scholarly interest throughout these times. Thirty-one Web of Science subject areas contain the literature. Economics, Area Studies, Education & Educational Research, International Relations, and Linguistics are the five most often represented areas.

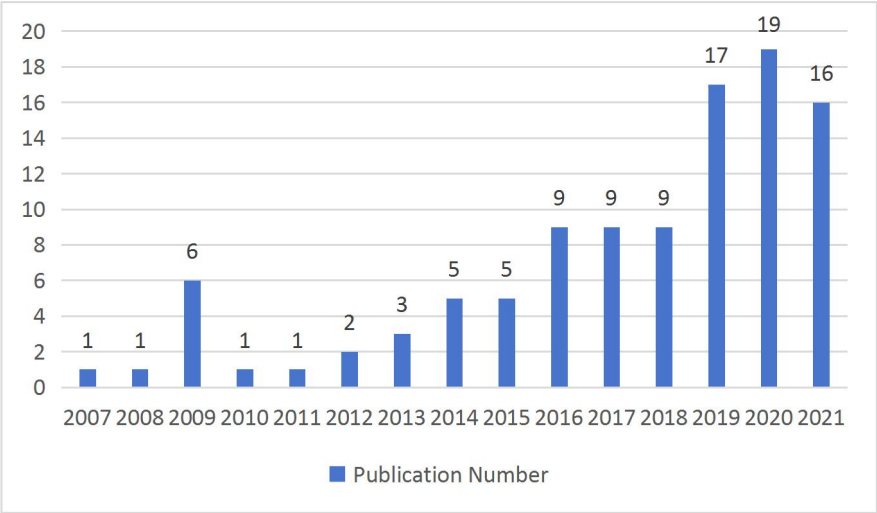


Figure 3 Publishing trends by years.

The bibliometric analysis revealed two prominent publishing clusters (Figure 4). The International Review of Economics serves as the primary source of economic studies pertaining to Confucius Institutes, while the Journal of Contemporary China is the most significant publication for research placing the Institutes into regional and international relations discourses.

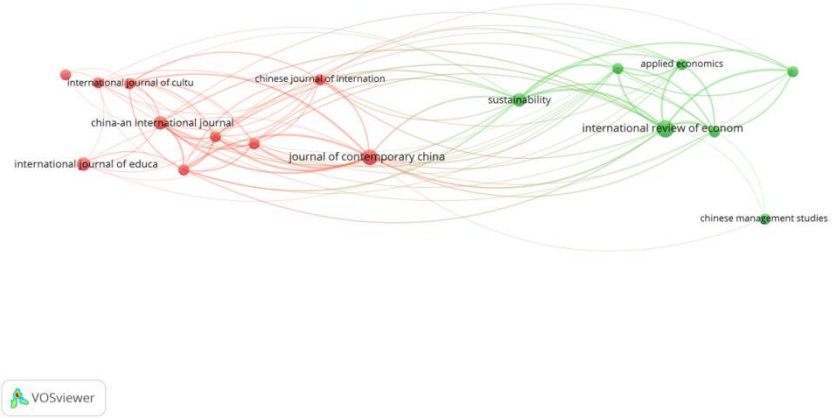


Figure 4 Clusters results of publication sources.

A trans-Pacific dyad is evident from the author- and institution-level analysis in VOSviewer: of all the country/region pairs, the United States and China are the most prominent bilateral axis, with the highest

co-authorship centrality and mutual citation intensity (Figure 5). Based on the number of publications and betweenness centrality, the University of Texas at San Antonio is the most significant node at the institutional level. However, the global footprint of Confucius Institutes extends beyond these regions. For instance, the authors note a cluster of European countries, including Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as a notable concentration of research institutions in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the network exhibits a pronounced geographic proximity effect, with institutions situated in the same nation or region exhibiting disproportionately high levels of mutual citation and co-authorship. This underscores the significance of spatial proximity in influencing the scholarly discourse of Confucius Institutes.

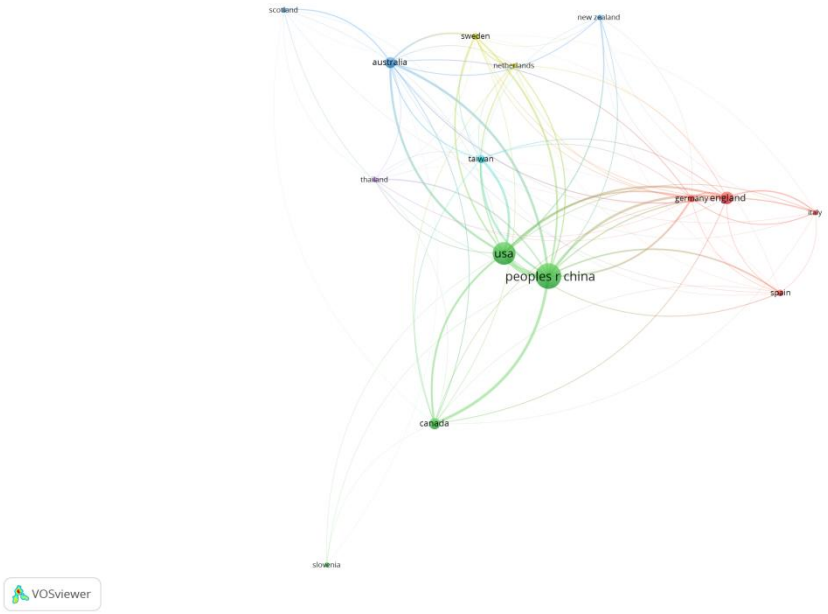


Figure 5 Cluster results of Author information analysis.

The citation-centrality analysis shows there are three papers make the most authoritative contributions to the area, as evaluated by normalised citation share within the sampled corpus (Figure 6). Paradise frames CIs as a key strategy of higher education internationalisation, demonstrating their dual function in advancing Chinese language and culture while simultaneously facilitating Chinese universities ' integration into global academic networks [6]. Wu adopts a comparative lens, situating CI development within Chinese broader "outward-oriented" higher-education internationali- sation strategy-alongside fiscal aid and international student recruitment-and documents divergent perceptions among host stakeholders [23]. Notably, Wu underscores internal contestation within Chinese universities, where administrators articulate conflicting rationales for sustaining CI programmes [23]. Externally, host institutions in developing and developed states exhibit markedly different assessments of CI legitimacy and purpose. Collectively, these three studies reposition CIs from peripheral language-teaching consortia to central actors in contemporary soft-power competition and diplomatic strategy.

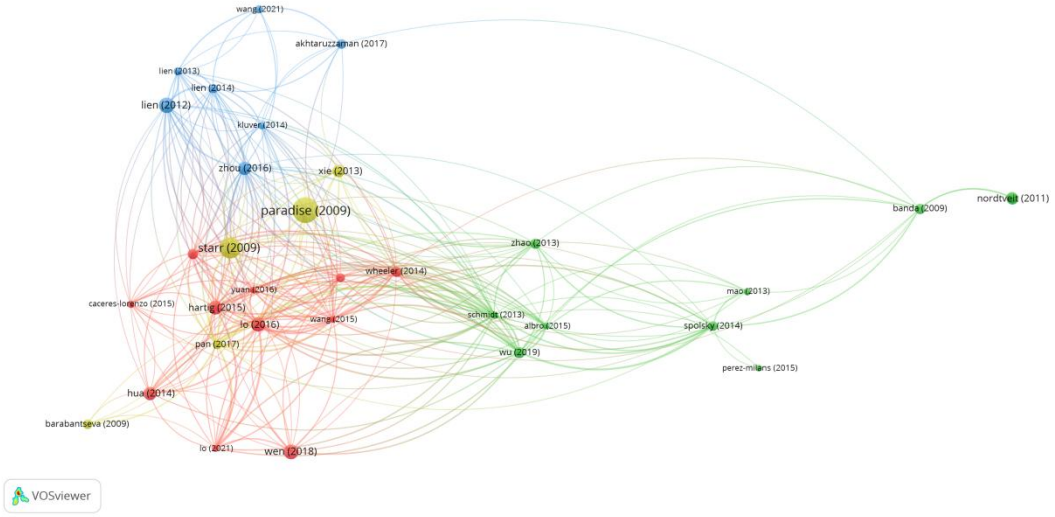


Figure 6 Cluster results of citation centrality analysis.

4.2 Exploratory findings

By thematic coding of the selected articles, three domains of Confucius Institutes identification and function definition can be recognised: the classroom for cultural language promotion, the higher education internationalisation instrument, and the political-diplomacy channel.

A prominent focus in the existing literature views the Confucius Institute as a strategic tool for furthering the internationalisation of Chinese higher education. Using longitudinal case-study methodologies, Haughton and Han examined sister CIs in paired Chinese and US sister cities and found long-term, positive effects on the global participation of their host Chinese institutions [24]. Similarly, Lien and Miao found that CIs strengthen collaborative links between Chinese institutions and their Western counterparts, increasing Chinese incorporation into transnational higher education networks [25].

A second key study focus perceived Confucius Institute as a diplomatic tactic and propaganda channel to strengthen soft power and advance the reputation of China internationally. On the one hand, some publications apply survey and econometric evidence to document CIs' contributions to improving Chinese national image [26,27], as well as catalysing ancillary benefits such as inbound tourism and regional trade linkages, particularly along Belt and Road corridors [28-30]. On the other hand, prevalent in scholarship from Europe and North America, characterizes CIs primarily as instruments of state-directed public diplomacy, expressing concern over their potential to project strategic influence.

The third major topic examines the educational micro-contexts in which Confucius Institutes function. Existing qualitative research has overlooked the situated experiences of teachers and students in this transnational educational space [31], whereas complementary scholarship has examined the governance and managerial logics that underpin cross-border institutional arrangements [32]. Parallel research pathways have investigated processes of cultural reproduction and identity negotiation, with CIs serving as crucial places for enacting intercultural discourse in a variety of sociocultural contexts [33]. Recently, academics have used the CI as an empirical locus to study the language acculturation and pedagogical adaptation of transnationally mobile teaching professionals [34,35].

5 Discussion

One of the most significant international realignments of the twenty-first century has been Chinese rapid rise during the last forty years. The People's Republic of China was quickly converted into an industrial, technical, and increasingly international centre by reforms that began in the late 1970s and brought the nation into line with global capitalism. Chinese influence in transnational higher education has grown along with its economic might and diplomatic clout.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power—the ability to influence others' choices through attraction rather than force or payment—is the main framework used in the majority of current studies to understand CI in evolving global context [36]. The ways in which academic collaborations, cultural programming, and language instruction support Chinese public-diplomacy goals have been helpfully brought to light by soft-power studies. Nonetheless, there are two ways in which the soft and hard power distinction may unintentionally restrict analysis. First of all, it downplays concerns about the ways in which educational programs relate to security, military, and strategic-economic goals [37]. Second, it ignores how attraction and compulsion often work together, treating them as separate domains. Hence, although the macro-level international ramifications of the international changes have been examined in extant scholarship [38,39], few studies explore how shifting state power intersects with the governance of transnational higher education.

Drawing on the findings of the scoping review and the identified gaps in the existing Confucius Institute literature, this study develops a structural analytical framework (Figure 7). This framework acknowledges the cultural and diplomatic dimensions emphasized in soft-power literature while also considering how external pressures and national priorities shape their global operation [40].

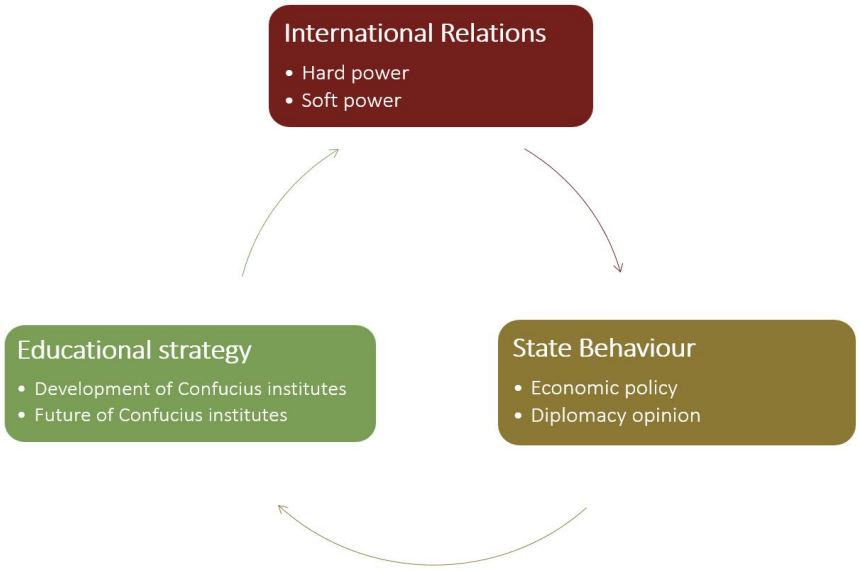


Figure 7 Conceptual framework in transnational education analysis.

This framework posits that international relations and international higher education are recursively related. National education strategy and state behaviours were first reassessed in response to macro-level changes in the international environment, which were reflected in shifting great-power rivalries, alliance arrangements, and national security doctrines. Permissive or restrictive circumstances for the creation, growth, or contraction of CIs are subsequently produced by these recalibrations. Second, CIs' strategic adjustments, whether they be managerial, diplomatic, or curriculum-related, influence national and international conversations, perhaps changing public opinion and guiding future choices about education

and foreign policy. These repeated exchanges have the potential to change the international landscape over time.

While the role of Confucius Institutes in Chinese language and cultural education has been increasingly emphasized by the Chinese government, the link between CI practices and their cultural appeal has imposed various constraints on Chinese international image-building efforts. By 2022, 104 of the 118 CIs that once existed in the United States had closed or were in the process of closing [41]. Recent studies suggest a positive correlation between the presence of CIs and the enrollment of international students in China [42]. However, despite the termination of CI agreements in some countries, political disputes, and pandemic-related restrictions, the long-lasting influence of CIs has not dampened the enthusiasm of international students to study in China.

Nevertheless, there is still a gap in understanding the function of CIs as transnational higher education institutions, particularly their impact on local educational systems, such as primary and secondary education, and the differences in adapting language learning, curriculum, and digitalization to local cultural contexts [43]. More research is needed to explore these aspects and to better understand the evolving role of depoliticise language teaching and influence of CIs in the global higher education landscape [44].

This study reconceptualizes Confucius Institutes not as static cultural entities, but as dynamic platforms whose functions and perceptions are continually adapted in response to the evolving international environment. Through an institutional analysis lens, the research examines how external expectations and internal mandates shape the ongoing renegotiation of their roles. Hence, this study highlights that soft power function of CIs is secondary to, and shaped by, the need to navigate the competing institutional logics of global academic cooperation and national strategic interests. Theoretically, the framework posits that transnational higher education serves as a crucial arena where sovereign nations exercise, challenge, and reproduce influence through knowledge generation and transmission [45].

The conceptual framework proposed in this study could be expanded beyond China practices to other state-linked educational programs such as British Councils, Goethe-Institutes, American Spaces, and burgeoning digital-learning platforms to see if similar international logics hold true. Reframing the discussion with through this analytical lens demonstrates how educational collaboration may benefit both cultural diplomacy and strategic competitiveness. Recognising this dynamic relationship is critical for both researchers and practitioners as we navigate the next phase of global higher education in an increasingly multipolar international order.

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, only publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection were included in the bibliographic corpus. This excluded potentially pertinent material from regional databases, non-English journals, and grey literature focused on policy. Second, the chronological scope was restricted to works published up until and including 2021. The environment surrounding Confucius Institutes has certainly evolved swiftly in the years afterward. Future research should investigate the shifts in dynamics, debates, and academic focus in the post-pandemic era, while thoroughly examining the distinct contextual factors and local responses in specific host countries or regions to facilitate more nuanced comparative analyses of the experiences and perceptions of Confucius Institutes across varied international contexts.

By incorporating disciplinary-specific and multilingual databases (such as Scopus, ERIC, and CNKI) and

more recent empirical data from institutional reports, legal filings, and longitudinal fieldwork, future research should adopt a more expansive evidentiary base. Comparative designs that contrast transnational higher education endeavours in various cultural, legal, and socio-ecological contexts—especially those in the Global South—would shed more light on the ways in which situated institutional logics and macro-level international shifts interact to influence the paths taken by transnational educational actors.

6 Conclusion

This study addresses the key research question of how the Confucius Institute has been discursively formed and institutionally established in various regional settings, as well as assessing its feasibility and sustainability as a transnational higher-education actor. A scoping review of peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 2004 and 2021 was conducting, charting publication trends by year, institutional affiliation, disciplinary provenance, and geographic origin, and identified the three most frequently cited and conceptually influential contributions to the field. Thematic analysis identified three major functional framings-macro-level diplomatic, meso-level managerial, and micro-level pedagogical-that make CIs understandable within global higher education governance. By situating TNHE within a changing international landscape and incorporating insights from realism perspective, the study advances a conceptual framework that transcends the analytical limitations of soft-power paradigms, providing a more comprehensive account of CI sustainability and future evolution in the face of intensifying great-power competition.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author states that he has no conflicts of interest to produce this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Z.T.; Data curation: Z.T.; Formal analysis: Z.T.; Methodology: Z.T.; Writing – original draft: Z.T.; Writing–review and editing: Z.T.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

No ethical approval was required for this review.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Supplementary Materials

Not applicable.

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