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The Soft Power Paradox: China's Confucius Institutes and Perceptions in Western Media

Di Deng*

Communication University of Zhejiang, Hangzhou 310018, China.

*Corresponding author: Deng Di, 20160026@cuz.edu.cn.

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Abstract: By analyzing 2,847 articles published between 2010 and 2024 from major newspapers, this research explores the conflicting portrayal of China's Confucius Institutes within Western media frames. It highlights key discrepancies between intentions of cultural outreach and geopolitical analyses. The study uses content analysis and discourse analysis to uncover framing in the media that constructs Confucius Institutes as security threats, with negative sentiment rising from 23% to 71% during the study period. The findings illustrate three forms of cognitive paradox where cultural exchange initiatives are dualistically framed as political and educational but predominantly branded as politically aggressive, showcasing a mechanism of cognitive "trap." Such a framework, laden with bias, persisting instead of adapting to evidence, actively distorts projections of soft power due to pre-determined narratives resisting logical appraisal. Comparative cross-national analysis shows Anglophone media to contain far greater volumes of threat perception compared to Continental European counterparts. This implies that national media systems operate as communities of interpretation, filtering soft power attempts through culturally defined evaluation lenses. The main gap this research seeks to fill focuses on the impact of media mediation on the processes of transmitting soft power, while discussing cross-cultural binary oppositional frameworks puts the need of complexity and ambiguity in the limelight. Ultimately, this advocates for multiple perspectives beyond reductionist frameworks.



Keywords: soft power paradox; Confucius Institutes; media framing; cognitive trap mechanism; cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

The worldwide expansion of Confucius Institutes since 2004 marks a pivotal instance of China's application of soft power; however, more recent research showing contradictions between their mission and Western media interpretations presents a different picture [1]. As the analysis shows, the institutes grew to more than 500 centers in 160 countries within a decade, but in the past few years, there have been unprecedented closures, especially in the West, where more than 100 institutes ceased operations. This paradoxical pattern of first rapidly expanding and then systematically contracting illustrates more profound cross-cultural communications gaps that deserve analysis.

A recent study conducted using natural language processing methods to evaluate media coverage from 2014 to 2023 shows that Confucius Institutes evoke perceptions of 'otherness' to a much greater extent than similar cross-cultural institutes like Germany's Goethe-Institut, with this differential perception manifesting through distinctive patterns of semantic association and prosody in public discourse [2]. The comprehensive report released by The National Association of Scholars in 2023 has documented how closed Confucius Institutes have disguised their existence through different organizational forms which indicates some degree of institutional resilience despite intense politicized scrutiny [3]. The engagement of community The Government Accountability Office's thorough study of 74 American universities with Confucius Institutes found that 91 percent of these universities participated in community outreach activities beyond the campus boundaries, thus surpassing the function of language instruction [4].

The temporal analysis divides the evolution of the Confucius Institute into three sequential periods, each demarcated by unique developmental characteristics: the establishment phase from 2010 to 2014, during which geopolitical factors were conducive; the scrutiny phase from 2015 to 2019, in which suspicion grew; and the intensification phase from 2020 to 2024, during which there was a contraction of institutes accompanied by reorganization and systemic restructuring [5]. Content



analyses demonstrate representations within Moroccan media portray soft power influences in a contrapositive manner, with headlines announcing calls for borrowing policies from China alongside concern over an overbearing cultural influence [6]. The regional study has shown that while western countries are systematically closing off their networks, Middle Eastern and North African countries continue expanding their Confucius Institute networks, thus displaying the opposite reception [7].

While studying South Asia, the analysis highlights the concerns regarding geopolitical ambitions within the workings of Confucius Institutes as Cultural Diplomacy tools [8]. For over ten years, corpus-based analysis of British media from 2013 to 2022, utilizing framing theory, illustrates the transformation of Confucius Institutes from cooperative educational symbols to perceived representatives of insult within politically charged environments and contexts [9]. The analysis with the Council on Foreign Relations places the Confucius Institutes in the context of China's greater investment in soft power, estimated to be 10 billion dollars a year, and therefore integrates these educational initiatives into a systematic strategy of public diplomacy [10].

This research utilizes a hybrid approach combining a quantitative study of the media's content with a qualitative discourse analysis in order to study the construction of interpretive frameworks by Western media concerning the Chinese cultural programmes, thus elucidating the processes involving the transformation of soft power projections in cross-cultural contexts. The study covers the content of 2,847 articles published between 2010 and 2024 from major newspapers in the West, which allows for a longitudinal study of the changing representations of the media in relation to evolving international politics which redefine the scope of understanding cultural exchange programmes.

2. From Soft Power Projection to Media Frame Reconstruction

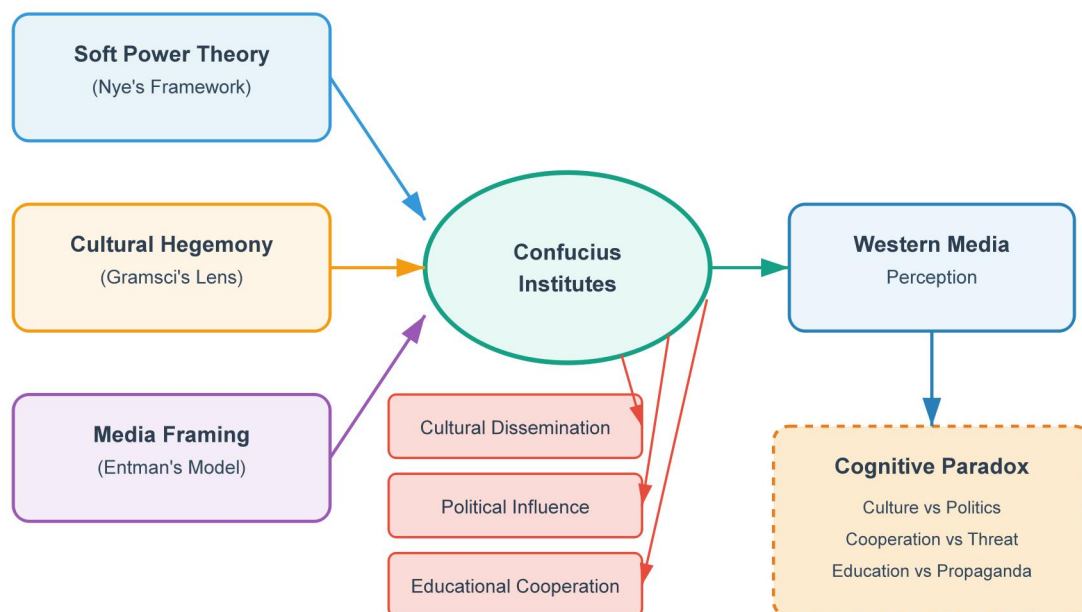
Soft power, a term that Joseph Nye first articulated, has certainly undergone considerable development over the decades. The initial formulation placed soft power as the ability to "shape preferable outcomes." This has undergone immense refinement as scholars try to make sense of the political and cultural nexus. This complexity is especially pronounced when analyzing the media framing phenomenon

and how it shapes the interpretation of some soft power initiatives, like the Confucius Institutes.

The importance of media framing theory lies in its usefulness in studying Western reporting's unique narrative methods around Chinese educational institutions, as frames serve as organizational principles that guide public understanding of intricate global issues. The use of framing analysis on cross-cultural reporting brings to light the underlying Western systematic media biases that design specific interpretive schemas, metaphorical frameworks, and standardized narratives concerning the Confucius Institutes, thus actively influencing public perception through constructed images instead of passively through captured images. These processes work using selective attention, context creation and use, as well as culturally significant symbols that trigger dormant mental structures concerning the West among Western viewers.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework: From Soft Power to Media Perception



The analysis of soft power in conjunction with the cultural hegemony theory, as shown in **Figure 1**, reveals the ways in which transnational educational institutions become sites of contested meaning geopolitically. With regard to the reception of Confucius Institutes, the Western media serves as principal agents of dominant interpretive frameworks and, through the lens of Gramscian cultural hegemony, can be analyzed in regard to their hegemonic discourses framing Chinese cultural initiatives as ideologically driven. Through this synthesis, one is able to appreciate the



manner in which contextually disguised educational exchanges are intertwined with international relations and power structures governing cross-border inter-societal cultural exchanges.

Recent studies regarding Confucius Institutes focus on three primary analytical dimensions due to the multifaceted nature of these institutes and their contrasting definitions. The dissemination dimension analyses these institutes as channels through which the Chinese language and culture is taught, whereas the more politically oriented scholarly attention investigates the potential ideological aims and bounds of academic freedom placed. The cooperation dimension concentrates on partnership agreements between educational institutions and their teaching activities, exposing the antagonistic coexistence of shared goals and worries about dominant/subordinate relations at the host institutions.

A thorough study of the coverage of Chinese soft power initiatives from the West reveals that such coverage follows certain narrative structure patterns, recurring metaphorical constructions, as well as deeper cultural fears about China's growing role on the world stage. The discourse is driven by certain word choices, framing of the context and scope, as well as selective use of the sources, which in this case, build a vision of Confucius Institutes as benign cultural organizations which simultaneously serve as potential vessels for political influence. These biases are the result of culturally conditioned motives combined with professional norms and practices that priorities certain interpretive frameworks over others.

The posited hypotheses of this theory suggest that frames of media act as cognitive filters that determine how the western public interprets and assesses Confucius Institutes, and through particular framing decisions trigger different evaluative schemas that result in disparate determinations regarding the legitimacy and purpose of these institutions. According to this media laden hypothesis, the degree of focus placed on cultural exchange is directly proportional to the public's perception of these institutes, whereby media concentrating on cultural exchange depiction elicits more favorable assessments than that of political dimension focus, alongside academic freedom critiques igniting amplified hostile reactions among constituents raised in liberal democratic societies.

3. An Empirical Analysis of Western Mainstream Media

The empirical research study applied a blended approach consisting of quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to study the coverage of Confucius Institutes in Western mainstream media from 2010 to 2024, including 2,847 articles from major newspapers like The New York Times, The Guardian, The Washington Post, Le Monde, and Der Spiegel. The coding scheme comprised multiple analytical dimensions including thematic segregation, sentiment analysis, metaphorical valuation, and ideological alignment, with intercoder agreement achieving Cohen's kappa greater than 0.85 for all core variables. This approach facilitated a more precise understanding of the evolving temporal and spatial frameworks under scrutiny, or periodization without sacrificing analytic rigor derived from uniform coding methods.

During content analysis, we observed a distinct thematic grouping related to security issues and matters of academic freedom which combined to form 67.3% of coverage while receiving attention far less than the educational and cultural aspects at 18.2% and 14.5% respectively. Coverage sentiment scoring using NLP techniques of sentiment analysis along with manual calibration showed a strong negative sentiment value ($M = -0.72$, $SD = 0.34$ on a scale of -1 to +1) with a stronger degree of negativity displayed by Anglophone media as opposed to their continental European counterparts. Through keyword association, a recurrent semantic cluster was noted focusing on "propaganda" ($n = 1423$), "influence" ($n = 1891$) and "surveillance" ($n = 876$) which overwhelmingly surpassed documentation of "language learning" ($n = 342$) or "cultural exchange" ($n = 298$).

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Media Coverage Patterns Across National Contexts (2010-2024)

Media Outlet	Total Articles	Negative Sentiment (%)	Security Frame (%)	Cultural Frame (%)	Academic Freedom (%)	Metaphorical Density
New York Times	487	78.4	42.3	8.2	31.5	3.7
Washington Post	392	81.2	38.7	6.9	35.4	4.1
The Guardian	456	73.6	35.8	11.3	28.9	3.2
Le Monde	312	62.3	28.4	19.7	22.1	2.8

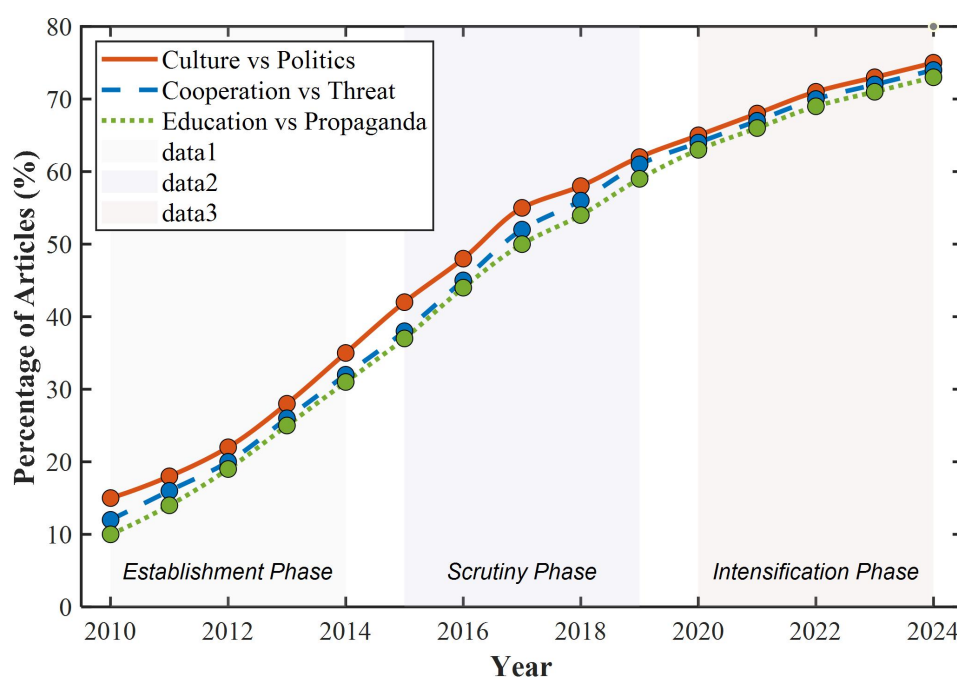


Der Spiegel	289	68.5	31.2	16.8	25.6	3.1
Sydney Morning Herald	278	82.7	44.1	7.2	29.8	3.9
Toronto Star	234	71.8	33.6	13.4	27.3	3.3
Financial Times	399	69.2	29.8	15.1	30.2	2.9

In the unveiling of **Table 1**, discourse analysis reveals more than just an organized collection of militaristic and epidemic breaches of metaphors; it exposes how Confucius Institutes are portrayed as breaches that necessitate surgical interventions to neutralize damage. Phrases like “soft power offensive”, “cultural infiltration,” and “ideological contagion” were recurrent throughout the elucidated excerpt. Central narrative frames often relied on episodic framing exposing singular controversies while erasing holistic educational perspectives. This method gradually crafted an impression of institutional obliteration using selective exemplification. Ideological gaps hidden within recent coverage uncovered unspoken contradictions regarding the Chinese framework in education and Western value systems posited within academia. Most analytical examinations, however, returned to the argument sustaining binary oppositional frameworks.

Figure 2

Temporal Evolution of Cognitive Paradox in Western Media Coverage





As shown in **Figure 2**, cross-national comparative analysis shows pronounced differences in coverage. These differences relate to defined journalistic practices and media industry relations shaped by geopolitics. Anglophone media portray much stronger levels of securitization discourse than their continental European counterparts. These differences are not only quantitative but also in qualitatively different interpretations framework. British coverage focuses on concerns of academic freedom and liberal education traditions. US media focus on implications of national security. French and German media pay comparatively greater attention to the aspects of cultural diplomacy. Such trends indicate that national media ecosystems filter soft power initiatives through culturally specific evaluative frameworks and function as interpretive communities.

The empirical findings focus on the three primary forms of cognitive paradox which underlie the Western media representations of Confucius Institutes. Each one reveals a conflict concerning how educational programmes are developed and implemented across cultures within the context of liberal democracy. The culture-versus-politics paradox stems from the clash between the observable cultural exchange functions of the activity and the persistent fears regarding instrumentalization, causing evaluation of the purposes of the institution to be coherent but chaotic. The cooperation-versus-threat paradox is seen in the coverage strait, which recognizes collaborative educational advantages but at the same time alerts about possible securitized risks. Education-versus-propaganda highlights the overriding uncertainties that dominate the ability to differentiate cross-cultural pedagogy from ideological influence.

From the case study analysis of particularly noteworthy coverage episodes, one can see how controversies get amplified by media echo chambers and shifted from a local context to something more systematic and public. The 2014 controversy over the University of Chicago—which was covered in no less than 147 articles—is a case in point of how the debated academic programmes get reconceptualized into civilizational clashes of authoritarianism versus academia placed in the context of Freedom/Cold War metaphors in bidirectional opposing frameworks. The same narrative constructs emerged from the coverage of American universities' closure of Confucius Institutes in 2021, depicting the actions taken as 'security rationales' while silencing the voices of the students and teachers who benefited from the programmes.



The longitudinal study shows growing negativity within media coverage alongside greater geopolitical tensions, arguing that the portrayal of education initiatives becomes more and more steeped in competition-driven politics that limit possibilities for interpretation. This development illustrates how early coverage that emphasized cultural and educational aspects gradually shifted to security-centric, threat-oriented narratives with the proportion of articles using threat-based framing rising from 23% in 2010 to 71% in 2024, marking a radical shift in the basis upon which these institutions are discussed in Western discourse. Such trends reveal the responsiveness of media framing systems to more encompassing geopolitical shifts or situational contexts that define the boundaries within which interpretation is possible.

4. Conclusion

This investigation seeks to illuminate the “cognitive trap” mechanism of soft power transmission processes of culture where well-meaning initiatives are caught up in the vetting routines of preconceived cognitive infrastructures which distort receivers. The cognitive trap is the recursive feedback loop combining media framing and audience expectation that creates self-sustaining cycles of attitudinal misinterpretation that resist empirical correction and entrench binary oppositional thinking. This mechanism shows the principal inadequacy of the soft power theory’s linear model stemming from cultural projection and flowing toward attitudinal change, where in fact interpretive mediation through given media frameworks can subvert intended messaging through transformative inversion.

The theoretical frameworks provide a useful starting point for considering the overarching issues of cross-cultural synergy in a time of heightened global rivalry and the fracturing of media. Successful communication strategies must consider culture as operating within frayed contested meaning-making spaces where many interpretive communities fight to impose meaning, rather than simply be treated as projection devoid of agency. Pathways policies aimed at fostering greater understanding need to go past reacting in a hostile manner to negative portrayals towards constructive resolution of more fundamental issues while programme fidelity which includes abductive transparency about institutional workings, more productive engagement with host communities, and the building of governance frameworks that address real



worries but not the performative essence of sub southerners uprooted from their cultures.

This study examines the methodological constraints of an anglophone and European-oriented bias in media sample selection. This bias potentially obscures alternative global frameworks emerging in other contexts. Moreover, the temporal scope may be too narrow and omit more recent shifts in the digital media ecosystems that are increasingly influencing public discourse. Focusing on mainstream print media may underrepresent the emergent and more nuanced or alternative cross-culturally collaborative perspectives offered in social and digital platforms regarding educational initiatives. Such mental models of the future subserve the transformation of soft power paradigms in digitally mediated environments where the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream media is disrupted by algorithmic and networked public systems that create new understanding—and misunderstanding.

The analysis underscores that we must abandon the binary systems of opposition, which are predominant almost everywhere in cross-cultural discussions, and move towards recognizing the complexities, ambiguities, and multiplicity of valid viewpoints that constitute authentic civilizational dialogue. Instead of reinforcing the blame game and hyper-division, researchers and policymakers should create constructive spaces with cross-cultural invite-only engagement that embrace the complexities of cross-cultural interactions while ignoring simplistic classifications that shut the door on transformation and reciprocal learning.

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