

# What does the post-COVID-19 future hold for Confucius Institutes?

By Jeffrey Gil | July 10, 2020 | Covid-19

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Editor's note: The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a major shift in global linguistic and cultural flows. In this latest contribution to [our series of language aspects of the COVID-19 crisis](#), Jeffrey Gil examines how Confucius Institutes and Classrooms are likely to change in a post-COVID-19 world. [The call for contributions to the series continues to be open.](#)

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As vehicles for the promotion of Chinese language and culture, [Confucius Institutes](#) and [Classrooms](#) are a kind of global cultural flow. They can be considered



*(Image Credit: Confucius Institute Adelaide)*

a global project, which Nederveen Pieterse (2009) defines as the actions of people, groups,



organisations and governments “to shape global conditions” in their favour (pp. 16-17). This is particularly the case considering they have recently been identified as an important aspect of achieving the Chinese Dream (中国梦 *zhōngguó mèng*) of making China a global power. China hopes that the Chinese language teaching and cultural activities conducted by the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms will create a positive image and narrative of China, and thereby increase understanding of and sympathy for its positions and goals in global politics.

In my previous research, I adapted Held et al.’s (1999) framework for studying global flows to map and evaluate the Confucius Institute project. This framework consists of four components:

- *Extensity*: the geographical coverage of the Confucius Institute project
- *Intensity*: the volume of the Confucius Institute project
- *Velocity*: the speed of development of the Confucius Institute project
- *Impact*: the consequences or outcomes of the Confucius Institute project

I concluded the Confucius Institute project was a diffused global project because it covered much of the world (high extensity); the number of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms and the volume of their activities was substantial (high intensity); and it had reached these dimensions in not much more than a decade (high velocity). Its impact was low because, although it made a valuable contribution to Chinese language and culture education, it did not influence the policies and actions of other countries in ways favourable to China, or create more positive views of China (Gil, 2017).



At present though, global cultural flows are being reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most obviously, Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, like other educational institutions, have suspended or altered their normal activities. The [University of Adelaide Confucius Institute](#), for example, has moved many of its activities online, including a Chinese conversation corner, HSK exam preparation classes and cultural

activity classes.

But another change is also underway – Confucius Institutes and Classrooms are closing in increasing numbers and with increasing frequency. Sweden recently became the first

European country to [close](#) all of its Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. In January, the University of Maryland – the first American university to host a Confucius Institute – [announced](#) its Confucius Institute would close at the end of the 2019 to 2020 academic year. The [University of Delaware](#), [University of Kansas](#), [University of Arizona](#) and [University of Missouri](#) also indicated late last year or early this year that their Institutes would be closing. In the USA alone, some 29 have [shut](#) since 2014, most in the last two years. Globally, around 50 [closed](#) between 2013 and 2020. This is a remarkable reversal of the previous growth in the Confucius Institute project. In the years 2008 to 2015, for example, there was an average annual increase of 37 Confucius Institutes and 122 Confucius Classrooms (Gil, 2017).

How are these closures connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what might the Confucius Institute project look like in a post-pandemic world?

Like any global project, the Confucius Institute project has received mixed reactions. Some regard it as beneficial for Chinese language and culture education because Confucius Institutes and Classrooms provide valuable resources, such as teaching materials, teaching staff, language classes and cultural activities. Others regard it as a threat. Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, according to proponents of this view, restrict academic freedom, spread propaganda, engender self-censorship and allow China to influence universities and schools.

This second view of the Confucius Institute project is the driving force behind the closures. It is founded on opposition to the nature of China's political system, as well as its policies and conduct, domestically and internationally. Most recently, China's treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, actions in the South China Sea and handling of the Hong Kong protests have all negatively impacted its reputation and the way it is perceived. There is growing reluctance on the part of foreign universities and schools to be involved with a project with connections to the Chinese government.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also affecting China's reputation and image in the world. Because China is where the virus most likely originated, and the government mishandled the initial stages of the outbreak, negative views of China have increased. China's attempts to spread disinformation about the virus, as well as its sometimes aggressive responses to concerns raised by other countries, have also [created](#) suspicion and mistrust. A recent poll by the [Pew Research Centre](#), for example, found that 71% of Americans had no confidence in President Xi Jinping, 66% had an unfavourable view of China and 62% saw China's power and influence as a major threat.

It is likely that these general perceptions of China will influence views on the Confucius

Institutes and Classrooms, and contribute to more closures. As a result, the Confucius Institute project is likely to lose ground as a global project.

However, the number of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms which have closed represents a small percentage of the total number.



*Confucius Institute Logo (Source: Confuciusmag)*

According to [Hanban](#), the body responsible for Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, there are 541 Institutes and 1,170 Classrooms in the world, although it is unclear whether this figure reflects the most recent closures. So, a complete end to the Confucius Institute project is unlikely – it will continue in some form after the pandemic.

An important clue to what it might look like is the geography of the closures. So far, they have mainly occurred in North America, Europe and Australia – Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in other regions of the world are not closing. This is not surprising considering Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East have in recent times had [positive](#) views of China and its influence.

Another indication of the future shape of the Confucius Institute project is China's own priorities. In 2019, China announced a plan to "[optimise](#)" the spread of Confucius Institutes, which suggested the emphasis will be on countries included in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Confucius Institute project may progressively become focused on, and possibly even confined to, these countries.

This would mean it moves towards being what Held et al. (1999) call a thin global project – it would maintain its high extensity, but its intensity, velocity and impact would be low, or at least lower than before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the nature of global cultural flows, but China nevertheless remains an important “pole in the global geopolitical, economic and cultural order” (Grey & Piller, 2020, p. 55). It will therefore be influential in generating global flows once the pandemic has passed, and the Confucius Institute project will be part of this, although on a somewhat different scale and scope.

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## Covid-19

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Jeffrey has published widely on applied linguistics topics, including English as a global language, and the global use and status of Chinese. He is the author of *Soft Power* and the *Worldwide Promotion of Chinese Language Learning: The Confucius Institute Project* (Multilingual Matters, 2017).

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Robert Phillipson

July 11, 2020 at 12:50 am

[Reply](#)

This is important locally and internationally. I have referred to Jeffrey's book in one article of mine, possibly more. I heard a vivid couple of lectures at the University of Lund a year or so ago, one by the woman who has made a film as referred to here:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/toronto-filmmaker-confucius-institute-doc-1.5478641>

which is a vivid, shocking, one-hour film on the Toronto School Board being induced to close down the strong Confucius presence in schools. My institution, Copenhagen Business School in Denmark, has dropped its Confucius teaching.

Jeff

[Reply](#)

July 11, 2020 at 2:12 pm

Hi Robert,

Thanks for reading and commenting on my post. I'm also thrilled to hear you referred to my book in your work 😊

The film "In the Name of Confucius" certainly raises some important issues about the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms.

I was lucky enough to meet Anastasia Lin, the lead actress, at a screening in Adelaide at a couple of years ago. She's a very interesting person with a lot to say about the Chinese government.

China recently announced responsibility for the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms would switch from Hanban to an NGO founded by universities and companies:

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1193584.shtml>

I'm not sure this will make any difference to how they're perceived, and expect they'll remain controversial for some time yet.

Jeff..

Paul Desailly

[Reply](#)

July 10, 2020 at 8:13 pm

How are you today Jeffrey? Well, I hope! I wonder, how are we all tomorrow! Today, whether in western democracies (inter alia think Brazil, Hungary, USA) or whether in the 5 communist states such as China, North Korea etc, avoiding in the former authoritarianism and in the latter

despotism depends muchly on the supreme commander of the military or the dear leader in command of everything. Yesteryear's horrendous lessons are like words written on water as WW3 looms. No political system is equipped for the global problems facing us. Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy and Tojo's militarists all waved the flag of democracy and hauled it down with hypocrisy. Leaders rapt (sic) in the flag and waving the Bible scare the hell out of me as a parent of teenagers. The world is drawing nearer and nearer to a universal catastrophe which will mark the end of a bankrupt and of a fundamentally defective civilisation. WW1 resulted in the League of Nations, WW2 in the United Nations. The question becomes what will a mega confrontation, one that makes WW2 look like a foretaste of the devastation facing us in a conflict that no one can win, produce in its wake insofar as establishing a fair and truly representative world body for the one billion or so survivors? And who will want to speak there either of the languages of the primary belligerents if the same mistakes of the past are to be avoided? In every school left standing will we teach our kids Mandarin or their kids English? Welcome our grandchildren to WW4 with sticks and stones if you think either alternative is acceptable. Consider Googling fee and copyright free: PRESIDENTS TRUMP AND XI: TRADE OFF ON CORPORATE ENGLISH

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