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Chinese Neocolonialism or a Pacifistic, Educational Aid? – Confucius Institutes in Latin America

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Introduction

Two decades have passed since the launch of the Confucius Institute program, a cultural and language initiative by China. Since then, a total of 518 institutes have been established globally, with 44 of them located in Latin America. The countries in this region, abundant in resources but deficient in financial means and skills for self-development, are seeking a partner that contrasts with the United States. The advent of the Confucius Institutes has led to unprecedented quality in higher education cooperation between China and the Latin American nations. This program has unlocked doors for millions of students, offering possibilities that were once deemed unattainable for many.

However, the question arises - is this degree of higher education collaboration secure for a region that is still striving to establish its place in the global community, independent of the continuous influence of the United States? Is China on the verge of replacing the United States as the dominant regional power on the continent? If this is the case, would it be a more suitable pairing for the region? Finally, is it possible that a deeper partnership with China could contribute to the development and further independence of Latin America?

In this study, we will explore these questions, with special attention to the works of scholars such as *Raúl Bernal-Meza*, *Jeffrey Gil*, *Stephen Hoare-Vance* and *Ralf Leiteritz*. The examination will include finding the reason behind the establishment of Confucius Institutes, with an in-depth examination of their organisational structure, management, and curriculum. A significant emphasis will be placed on Latin America, exploring China's interests in the region, the presence and role of Confucius Institutes, and the perception of the institutions within the academic community and the general public. A case study of Peru, based on the research of *Jae Park*, will also be included to offer deeper insight.

China's answer to the 'China threat'

China is known as the land of bamboo, pandas, harmony and peace. At least that is what the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been attempting to sell to the rest of the world since their 'Go Global' policy that started off in the early 2000s. The reason for this, which Huntington also underlined in his work, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of New World Order*, was that China's pride has been deeply hurt by its defeat in modern history at the hands of Western powers and Japan in the 19th century. Not to mention the events that followed, such as the 'Cultural Revolution' of Mao, the existence of Taiwan, Tiananmen square in 1989 and their continuous violation of human rights, all have further damaged their international image

and prestige. This kind of image was not attractive, the CPC has realised it as well, and they needed to „rebrand” the country to make it attractive both for foreign investors, and later on, for under-developed countries who are rich in resources – that conveniently could support the maintenance of China’s giant economy. Therefore, China turned to its fascinating and diverse culture that has its roots all the way back in the 2000 BC. Chinese leadership broadened Nye’s understanding of soft power and as a result the world got introduced to, for example, the Confucius Institutions.

Red soft power

“A state’s soft power derives from culture, domestic values, policies and institutions and foreign policy.” (Nye, 2004, p.44-68, 2005, p.61)

“When a country’s culture is seen as attractive, vibrant and futuristic, it often leads people to be more open to the policies of the government of that country” (*Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.51*), for instance Japan and South Korea. Both became increasingly popular over the decades, not only in Asia, but in the West as well, thanks to their contemporary cultures (anime, jpop, kpop and kdrama) and the enormous industries they built based on them. Many Westerners wish not only to visit these countries, but also potentially start a new life there because they are enamoured with the image the countries have been portraying internationally, and most of the time they fail to realise the harsh realities of those societies. Both countries have done a great job at veiling their extremely conservative, sexist, discriminative and hierarchical societies, to the point that many Westerners are shocked when their new life contains the violations of their dignity and several rights that they have enjoyed since birth.

China has been eager to be a similar master of disguise since the late 1990s and early 2000s. The leadership has recognized that their use of hard power (activity on the South-China Sea, Taiwan, Uyghur minority genocide, Tiananmen square) is only alienating them from the rest of the world (*Gil, 2009, p.61*). The early years of China’s opening up after Mao’s Cultural Revolution, was mainly fostered towards foreign investors to show the country is mature enough to enter the global market. However, even foreign investments cannot undo Communism, several violations of human and labour rights, and intense lobbying against Taiwan in the international community. There was an urgent need for a new international strategy, something that would make China accepted and sought-after globally.

After Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power has entered the academic circles, the term “soft power” has become omnipresent in the circles of Chinese scholars and policy makers. Although

at first politicians were keeping their distance from the idea, by the time the 21st century had started, members of the Communist Party had a change of mind and now were using the term “soft power” even more actively than the academic community of China (*Gil, 2009, p.60*). The party’s view on soft power is even broader than Nye’s, because they would apply it to not only world politics, but to individuals, organisations and domestic politics. They also firmly believe that nowadays, the real arena of competition in world politics is soft power (*Gil, 2009, p.61*), hence why the Chinese political elite is convinced that it is a potential cost-effective tool that, paired with their mammoth economy, would be able to fill the power gap between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (*Zanardi, 2016, p.433*).

Consequently, China has started voicing its dissatisfaction with the West’s lack of understanding of the country and its motives. Numerous times their response to the Western criticism regarding their actions and policies was that the world does not have a “correct” understanding of China- therefore, that is the real root of the international perception of the country, and not their troubling activities (*Lahtinen, 2015, p.2; Gil, 2009, p.65; Zanardi, 2016, p.443; Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.17*). In some ways it could be even valid, as Chinese is a higher-context culture and language, each character having encoded messages and contextual meanings that reference ancient thinking and mythology (*Selmier, 2016, p.264*). For sure, this is something that could easily be misunderstood by people of other cultures, and would make it harder for China to present a true picture of itself in the international community.

In that case, how can we, the rest of the world, understand China better? Is the use of Chinese soft power enough to aid the global community in seeing the “correct” China?

The Confucius brand and the “Charm” Project

Instead of the contemporary, China saw it better fit to use its traditional culture as a source of its charm. It does not come as a surprise, since Ancient China fosters a wise, peaceful and harmonious image in the heads of many outside of Asia. Up to this day it is regarded as one of the great civilizations of the world, not to mention, they have the most significant thinker of East Asian history; Confucius.

Often referred to as the ‘Great Sage’ or the ‘Socrates of the East’ by scholars, among many other things, Confucius was mainly a teacher, advisor, political theoretician and philosopher (*Csikszentmihalyi, 2020; Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.38*). Everyone knows at least one quote from Confucius, yet most of the time they are not even aware that it is from the Chinese philosopher. Him and his students, *Lao Tzŭ* and *Mencius*, are credited to founding some of the pillars

(Taoism and Confucianism) which the Chinese culture was built on (*Du Toit, 2015, p.5; Kajawo, 2019, p.2*). His role was exceptional in both ancient and modern China, however in a more polarising way than the rest of the world imagines.

Confucius (or as the Chinese know ‘*Master Kong/Kong Fuzi*’) lived between 551 and 479 BC during an era when most of China lived in a state of disturbance but still placed a great emphasis on respecting traditions and authority (*Csikszentmihalyi, 2020; Kajawo, 2019, p.7; Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.13*). At the core of his teachings there are four that have key importance in Confucianism: *li* (ceremony), *yi* (righteousness), *zhong* (loyalty) and the most important one, *ren*, the noblest human virtue, which means to be respectful, generous, honest, diligent and kind. He also placed great significance on harmony and *hexie shehui* (a harmonious society), as well as filial piety and family as a whole (*Lahtinen, 2015, p.11; Csikszentmihalyi, 2020*) which also serve part of the traditional Chinese thought (these can also be found in the ancient beliefs/thinking of several African tribes, that will serve as another “similarity” between China and the African continent later on) (*Du Toit, 2015, p.5*). He used to play an advisory role to the political leadership on morales and proper governance, furthermore he believed that education and learning should be open and accessible to everyone. Underlining his role in envisioning the idea of “education for all” (*Kajawo, 2019, p.5*), it is clear why the Chinese government would want to name their country “rebranding” project after the Great Sage. Yet Confucius and the Chinese government’s relationship is more complex than what it seems on the surface.

Since the foundation of the Communist Party of China, the CPC was both drawn and repelled at the same time by Confucianism and its ideology. Because on the one hand, it legitimated their leadership, but on the other it was against revolution. As a consequence, the party was passionately fighting Confucianism, as they believed that Confucius and his ideas symbolise everything the party was against. In their perception, Confucianism was nothing more but the emblem of ‘feudal traditions’ and the root of Chinese society’s problems- simply, for them Confucius represented the old customs that were now seen as dissolute (*Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.38*).

In the course of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Great Sage became history’s greatest villain. Him and his teachings were attacked in every possible aspect, and the political leadership, especially Mao Zedong, used him to criticise and censure his political “enemies”. In spite of all of this, Confucianism was never sanctioned. Following the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping became the new leader of the CPC and Confucianism was allowed to be researched

and studied again, slowly but surely bringing him back to its place in the culture where it belongs (Zhang and Schwartz, 1997, p.205; Zanardi, 2016, p.437).

He is accredited to be the moulder of the Chinese mind and thought, his ideas are part of heritage (Zanardi, 2016, p.436) hence it comes as no surprise that even the most vicious opposers of him couldn't bring themselves to attempt to abolish his legacy- it is another question if they would have ever succeeded with it.

We can see that the topic of Confucius and Confucianism in China bring polarising views to the table, and rightfully so. He was never a saint, he emphasised several times the importance of subjects beneath their rulers/leaders as the latter one governs by virtue, and their legitimacy is established by their superior moral values. He is believed to be the originator of the hierarchical educational system, on top of that he has claimed that what his writings were not his own original ideas. It is challenging to find "correct" interpretations of his views as his important position in Chinese history and culture complicates neutrality (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020; Kajawo, 2019, p.6).

But how does he fit into the ideology of the CPC and how can the party utilise him? *"Confucius is nothing more than a brand like Louis Vuitton or Dior."* Quote from a French Confucius Institute's Chinese co-director, 10. March 2011, (Zanardi, C. (2016) - *China's Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, p.437)

He has an important teaching on leadership that says, the subject "should respect the ruler at all cost in order to achieve order and harmony" (Kajawo, 2019, p.7). The concept of "harmony" has been used by the CPC as a long-term reason behind its activities that are questioned by the international community. They also apply it domestically to silence opposing views and arousing questions regarding the legitimacy of the party (Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.38). Luckily for them, the Cultural Revolution did not wipe the memory of Confucius out of the minds of people, and now they can easily rely on his teachings to solidify their position not only abroad but also at a national level.

To non-Chinese people, "Confucius is the poster child of Chinese culture", wisdom and his name is synonymous with education and learning. For the rest of the world he is seen as a peaceful individual (Selmier, 2016, p.264) - perfect to be nominated as the "face" of the Confucius Institute "brand". The name of the institutes could not be too political or called "Chinese" as it would turn down interest as well as it would question the role of Taiwan as standard Chinese is still the official language. Confucius is a safe and peaceful option, exactly how the Chinese government wants to present itself (Zanardi, 2016, p.437) It was a really smart, well-thought out, self-aware decision that assists well with selling the new image overseas.

Not to be mistaken, this does not mean that the CPC has completely warmed up to Confucius. *“He is nothing more than a brand name, the ‘Father Christmas’ of the Chinese government, that they are using for self-promotion, but do not believe in what he stood for (Zanardi, 2016, p.436).*

The Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes are non-profit institutions that offer both degree and non-degree programs at the higher education level, as well scholarships and exchange programs to China, that are all made possible with an official agreement between a foreign host university, a Chinese partner institution and the Chinese International Education Foundation (before 2020 it used to be Hanban). Depending on the demand of the host university, the Confucius Institutes have the ability to also set up research centres on campus. These language and cultural centres were created with the aim to help foreigners to learn and to understand the Chinese language and culture. They are strategic tools in the Chinese government's mission to cultivate a favourable image in order to secure great power for the state in international relations. Confucius Institutes are the CPC's answer to the ‘China threat’ accusations of the Western world, further highlighting that there is a lack of global understanding of the essence of Chinese culture and thinking- the issue is now combated with the introduction of the Confucius Institute project (Nisley, 2022, p.32; Chew, 2007, p.13; Lahtinen, 2015, p.2; Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020, p.36). Strictly speaking, the first Confucius Institute was built in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in June 2004 as a pilot institute, nonetheless the first official Confucius Institute was set up in Seoul, South Korea in November 2004 (Martinelli, 2022, p.4). Currently (as of December 2023) there are 548 Confucius Institutes (CI) around the world (Dig Mandarin, *Confucius Institutes Around the World*, last updated: 05.02.2024, accessed: 19.02.2024).

Apart from offering standard Chinese (*Putonghua*) language courses at varying levels, CIs offer a diverse set of cultural activities as well, for instance gastronomy, history, literature, poetry, music, calligraphy and geography classes, business seminars, Tai Chi and Chinese zodiac and clothing classes and the list goes on (Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020, p.42).

These public educational and cultural promotion programs are funded and arranged by the Chinese International Education Foundation, a government organised non-governmental organisation under the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. It used to be coordinated by the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, also known

as *Hanban* in Chinese, the executive body of the Chinese Language Council International, however after June 2020 they re-named themselves to the Ministry of Education Center for Language Education and Cooperation and launched a new program, the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF) that is now the funder and organiser of their CI projects (Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020, p.36-37). The headquarters remained in Beijing. The headquarters responsibilities include formulating the rules and regulations of the institutes, assessing the applications for the establishment of new CIs, approving the annual programs, their budget and supplying teaching and management staff when it sees fit (Chew, 2007, p. 16-17; Lien & Oh, 2014, p. 438; Gil, 2009, p.62).

Functionally the Confucius Institute Leadership Council is led by the CPC' External Propaganda Leading group (Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.80). The Confucius Institute Leadership Council has 33 members that are composed of the following: a Chair, 5 vice-chairs, 12 executive council members from related state departments which are; "the General office of the State Council, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, the State Press and Publications Administration, the State Council Information Office, and the State Language Committee" (Chew, 2007, p.14). Furthermore, there are 15 non-executive members from which 10 are foreign representatives and 5 are from partner Chinese universities (Hoare-Vance, 2010, p.37).

A Confucius Institute is set up in the following process; the host institution (it could be a foreign organisation as well) must submit an application to the headquarters of the Chinese International Education Foundation to host a Confucius Institute on the basis of 3 requirements that have to be met in order for the application to be approved: 1. There has to be a strong demand for learning the Chinese language in the host institution and the local community, 2. The potential host institution has to be willing/able to physically and fiscally contribute to the establishment and growth of the Confucius Institute, and 3. Before submitting the application, the host institution must pre-select a Chinese partner institution that also meets the requirements relating to them, which includes the ability to provide teaching materials and personnel, and contribute to the stable and continuous running of the program in any other way that is necessary (Lien & Oh, 2014, p.438).

There are 3 types of Confucius Institutes according to the model of cooperation: The first one is managed by the headquarters entirely, the second option is managed by the host country and licensed by the headquarters, and the third option is, the most usual arrangement, the

management in partnership with the host institution, the headquarters and a Chinese partner institution (*Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020, p.37*).

Generally, it takes around a year for the application to be approved by the headquarters. The agreement must be signed by the host institution and the CIEF, between the host institution and the Chinese partner institutions, and approximately after 18 months of the submission of the initial application the Confucius Institute will be ready for official operation. Within the Confucius Institution, there are 2 co-directors - one gets appointed from the host institution and the other gets appointed by the partner institution -, who manage the staff and the activities of the institute (*Lien & Oh, 2014, p.438*). The finances are split between the partners of the agreement, on paper, and the headquarters provide the start-up funding of the program. In spite of that, in the early 2000s and 2010s, the beginning of the project, Hanban was allegedly willing to cover the complete funding of the programs that would be set up in developing regions, such as Latin America and Africa (*Chew, 2007, p.14*).

The Confucius Project in Latin America

“Latin America is no longer anybody’s ‘backyard’.” (*Rodríguez, 2022*)

As indicated in the previous chapter, in the early years of the Confucius project Hanban had already recognized the potential of Latin America in the future development of the program and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). By the early 2010s, the continent turned into one of the most important regions not only for economic relations, but also for the expansion of Chinese cultural influence.

Latin America has a prosperous history, and is still one of the great civilizations of the world. In the 19th century, most of Latin America gained independence from European colonial powers, such as Spain and Portugal. However, this independence was followed by struggles to establish stable governments and consolidate nation-states. The newly formed republics faced challenges such as economic crises, political instability, civil wars, foreign interventions, and border disputes. During the 20th century, Latin America saw various political movements, including the rise of nationalism, populism, authoritarian regimes, military dictatorships, and democratic transitions. The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the emergence of democracy, neoliberalism, and globalisation in Latin America, as well as the challenges of inequality, violence, corruption, and environmental issues (*Lockhart, Bushnell, & Kittleson, 2024*).

Due to geography, Latin America has close relations with the United States that has both advantages and disadvantages. In this chapter we are going to investigate if the Confucius Institutes are one of those problems brought on the region along with China, a new hegemon trying to undermine the United States' cultural influence to eventually replace it? Or is it something that can indeed be beneficial for the further development and self-determination of Latin America from the United States?

The importance of Latin America within the “Charm” project

Before reading any studies about Confucius Institutes in Latin America, or about the China-Latin America relations from researchers of the region, I had the impression that China was attempting to become the new United States in the developing areas of the world, such as in the countries of Latin America. It comes as no surprise, since most of the criticism that I have found during my research was mostly from academics from the Western world, and they painted a picture of China plotting the substitution of the United States. It was easy for me to fall under the impression that China, as a new power, was building its hegemonic network. However, this does not seem to be the case, at least not in the way that I was expecting it. It is easy to misread China's actions as an act towards the US, a counter-regional power candidate, however the answers might be simpler than one would believe.

The Chinese government's official stance suggests that the nation's rise to a position of significant influence, termed as a “peaceful rise”, is designed to align with the interests of current superpowers instead of directly opposing or undermining them. This “peaceful rise” could signal the dawn of a new era in global politics, characterised by harmonious coexistence among powerful nations (*Leiteritz, 2021, p.78*).

But is that statement correct in reality? Would the People's Republic of China truly want to co-exist with other influential states of the world? Who would make the cut to be China's “ruling partner”?

Up until the final decade of the 20th century, China was an unimportant player in the political and economic ties of Latin American countries (*Bernal-Meza, 2022, p.465-466*). China's economic development serves as an example for many countries in the developing world who are eager to strip off the marks of economic underdevelopment and political weakness (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.66*). Therefore, when China began to enthusiastically reach out to these countries, especially in Latin America where the United States has acted as a regional hegemon,

theoretically since the Monroe Doctrine, 1823 and in practice since WW2 (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.64*), the newcomer was received fairly well. Jumping forward roughly 30 years, currently China is the main trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Peru, Uruguay and Argentina, the second most important trading partner of Colombia and the main exporter to Paraguay and Bolivia (*Bernal-Meza, 2022, p.466*).

China feels underrepresented for instance in the United Nations, The World Trade Organization and in the International Monetary Fund (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.73*), and considers most of the crucial decision-making bodies of global governance outdated due to being founded immediately after WW2 or during the Cold War, in an era, when the international power dynamics were different. The Chinese government is in a desperate need for allies from the developing world to legitimise its aspiration to become a great power and act as such in the international forums (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.73*). It would be especially important because of the question of Taiwan/the Republic of China, an uncomfortable “issue” the PRC has been dealing with since 1949. Most of its lobbying abroad is partially to gain favour at the expense of the Republic of China (ROC). And this is where the countries of Latin America become key players for the CPC. At the beginning of the 21st century, half of the states that recognized Taiwan worldwide were located in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Ellis, 2009, p.14-15*). And consequently, in 2011, the Chinese government has named Latin America, among Africa and the Middle East, as one of the regions where they would like to expand their language and culture project, the Confucius Institutes, (*Lien & Oh, 2014, p.441*). The contest in which China is engaged in with Taiwan to win diplomatic alliance from countries around the world, can turn into a profitable business for some (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.75*). For instance, after Costa Rica established diplomatic ties with the PRC in 2007, China bought Costa Rican government bonds worth US\$300 million. In addition, China also spent US\$74 million to build a new national football stadium in the capital, San José (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.75*).

Since the establishment of more CIs in the area, some countries have actually switched their diplomatic relations from the ROC to the People’s Republic of China in the 2000s and the 2010s. There are still 11 countries worldwide who recognize Taiwan, most of them still mainly located in Latin America and the Caribbean (also in Africa), however the CPC is working hard, using both its economic and steadily growing cultural influence in the developing world.

1. *Taiwan's shrinking recognition in Latin America between 1971 and 2023*

Taiwan's shrinking recognition

Countries with official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, 1971-present

1971



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Taiwan's shrinking recognition

Countries with official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, 1971-present

2023



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<https://www.gzeromedia.com/the-graphic-truth-taiwan-s-shrinking-recognition>

The importance of the Latin Americas in the long-term goals of China is not only on account of the competition with Taiwan. The now mammoth economy of China cannot maintain itself, they have used up their resources - therefore they must obtain them from elsewhere. And where else could it be better found than in countries that are rich in these valuable raw materials, but lack the financial and technological capacity to extract them. Latin America is a large market for Chinese manufactured goods and an exceptional exporter of oil, gas, minerals (for example copper) and agricultural products (*Flores & Jatobá, 2016, p.129*), while, in exchange, the Mainland is selling arms, builds ties with the region's militaries (*Lodoño, 2018*), invests in infrastructure and offers huge loans with favourable terms (*Gallagher et al., 2012, p.5-6*). Over the years the PRC developed into a rather popular trading partner among the states of Latin America, this is largely due to China's policy of not tying economic relations to labour and human rights standards, a contrast to other conventional investors in the region, such as European Union countries, who have stringent requirements in these areas ((*Bernal-Meza, 2022, p.472*).

As Latin America drifts further from aligning with the interests of North America and Western Europe, China presents itself as a viable alternative for the region's global integration. This is particularly true given that China's foreign policy generally favours the third world and is supportive of its public diplomacy.

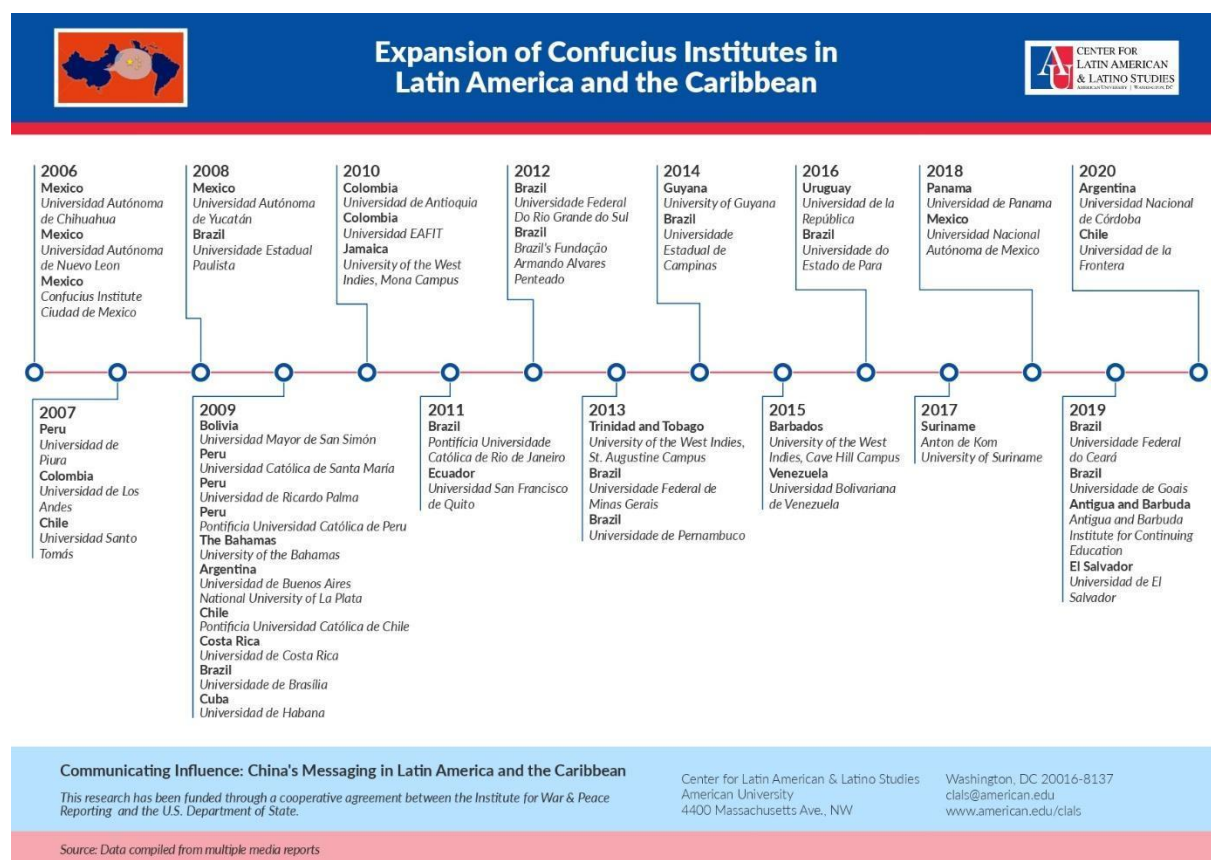
Its arguments about relations with developing countries, as the CPC is attempting to convince the world that China is also a developing country (when it benefits them), coincide with the economic and technical cooperation needs of the Latin American states (*Bernal-Meza, 2016, p.28, 38*). China is also a popular candidate for partnership as it advocates a non-interference policy with respect to the domestic affairs of other countries, emphasising "win-win cooperation" between both parties, and trying to avoid the impression of favouring one group over another (*Leiteritz, 2012, p.56*). Simply put, for the PRC it does not matter whether a country is openly opposing the USA or not, its treatment is solely based on economic ties and if it keeps the 'One China' policy in mind (*Leiteritz, 2012; Bernal-Meza, 2016*).

The Confucius Institutes of Latin America

Currently, there are 44 Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Rouvinski, 2021*) not counting the Confucius Classrooms, which serve an identical purpose as the CIs, however instead of the university level, they are operating on the secondary education level. The region's first CI program was established in 2006, in Mexico (*Nisley, 2022, p.32*), followed

by countries who have already recognized Beijing, instead of Taipei, in the 1970s and 80s, for instance; a CI program was established in Peru in 2007, then in 2008 another one in Brazil and in three other universities of Mexico, but the most active year was in 2009 as several new countries joined the CI network: Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Argentina, Cuba, and the Bahamas, as well as new programs were added to the already existing ones in Peru, Brazil and Chile (*Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, 2020*).

2. Expansion of Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: Center for Latin American and Latino Studies. (c. 2020). *Expansion of Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington D.C.: American University, <https://www.american.edu/centers/latin-american-latino-studies/>

The structure of the CIs and the composition of the offered courses in Latin America do not differ from the CIs in the West. The most usual arrangement of the Confucius Institutes is a partnership between a Latin American university or higher education institution and a Chinese university, overseen by the CIEF (*Chey, 2008, p.14*). The budget is divided more or less proportionally between the partners (*Park, 2013, p.7*). One could say the offered classes are almost uniform, unless the host institution or the community have more specific needs/ideas in

mind, and to a large extent they are on account for the creation of the Centro Regional de Institutos Confucio para América Latina (Regional Center for the Latin American Confucius Institutes aka CIRCAL).

CIRCAL was founded in 2014 by Hanban, the predecessor of the CIEF, in Santiago, Chile, with the purpose of coordinating the work of the programs on the continent, besides creating and designing lines of actions and common activities. (*Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020, p.37*). The Regional Center does not only coordinate the activities of these institutes but also strengthens exchanges and cooperation between them and the host states. This initiative reflects the growing trade and cultural relations between China and Latin American countries. This one was the second regional centre worldwide of the language and culture programs after the first one being set up in Washington. The regional centre in Santiago is led by an 11-member central committee that consists of representatives from Chile, Peru, Brazil and China, and are elected every three years. Moreover there is a director who inspects the work of the committee. The first honorary chairman was the former president of Chile, Eduardo Frei. The building of the centre is provided by the University of Santo Tomás, which is also the first university in Chile to cooperate with Hanban and launched the first Confucius Institute in the country in 2007 (*Confucius Institutes get new Latin American hub, 2014*).

In her 2022 study, *Academic Exchange between Brazil and China*, Martinelli asserts that Confucius Institutes play a pivotal role in enhancing comprehensive education for university students. They do this by promoting the learning of multiple foreign languages, which aids in integration and global social mobility. In Brazil, particularly, these institutes are an essential avenue for university outreach, catering to the student demographic. They offer a substantial opportunity for students to broaden their academic horizons through the international mobility mechanisms that the Confucius Institutes provide.

To a great extent because in Brazil, many exchange programs, typically the main programs, benefit/favour the elite with their selection systems, and there is a great need for the expansion of the quotas - that is where the CI programs come into the picture (*Martinelli, 2022, p.14-15*). They offer an alternative that is not only for the thinnest layer of society to gain experience, providing opportunities abroad that previously have been limited (*Martinelli, 2022, p.14-15*).

Case Study of Peru - A historical contact of more than 160 years

Peru and China have an interesting relationship that dates back to the middle of the 1800s. Peru had recently become independent in 1821, and undergone fast-paced industrialization that called for immense manpower (*Park, 2013, p.3*). Meanwhile, China's last dynasty, the Qing, impoverished in the early 1840s and the era of "Hundred Years of weakness and poverty" was on the verge (*Wang, 1993, p.936*). In 1854, African slavery was abolished in Peru, which was a forward thinking step from the recently independent state, however, the abolishment of the law has caused serious problems laborwise. Workers were mostly needed on sugar plantations, copper mines and guano beds; areas where the labour conditions were the most cruel and, especially after getting used to having slaves around, not many Peruvians were happy to fill the void, nor were they enough to do so. That is why when the Peruvian planters and traders came into contact with subjects of the indigent Qing Empire, they saw a solution for their workforce challenge (*Rodríguez, 2001, in the translation of Jae Park, 2013, p.3*). As a result, a large number of Chinese men fell victim to systematic deception and enticement during their recruitment. This was orchestrated by both local intermediaries and foreign traders who exploited the Gold Rush and the desperation of the poor (*Cuba Commission, 1970, in translation of Jae Park, 2013, p.3*). Most of the victims were dishonoured gamblers who sold themselves in an attempt to pay their debts and local revolutionary prisoners who were sold instead of being executed. As a consequence, around 90 to 100 thousand Chinese men were shipped to Peru through a 3-month voyage via the trans Pacific - a journey many did not even survive (*Park, 2013, p.3*).

The 'free' labourers signed an 8-year contract to Peru, however, the contract did not protect their rights, nor they ended with the completion of the said years. The contracts mostly served as a device to repeat the cycle over and over again. Peruvian traders and plantation owners would refer to some sort of administrative mistake in the documents that could nullify the terms of the previous one. Or in other cases, the workers were simply unable to pay for the journey back home (*Park, 2013, p.3*). Following decades of flat denial of human dignity and physical violation of the Chinese 'free' labourers, and an unfair system that used both legal and financial reasons to force the workers to stay in Peru, the Qing Empire finally decided to intervene. The Treaty of TienTsin in 1874 marked the beginning of a proper diplomatic relationship between the Peruvian Republic and the Chinese Empire, and at the same time it brought an end to a dark and shameful era (*Park, 2013, p.4*). During the post-coolieism era, the Chinese have established a significant community in Peru. Their culture has been deeply and extensively integrated into

Peruvian culture, more so than in other nations. The influence of Chinese culture on everyday Peruvians is considered to be the most profound in Latin America (*Park, 2013, p.4-5*).

In the late 1960s, China and Peru crossed paths once again. The power was in the hands of the nationalist feudal lords of Peru until 1969 when a Marxist-leaning military regime came to power and brought not only land reforms, but a wave of leftist political movements in the Andean highlands (*Park, 2013, p.5*). One of them turned out to be the Sendero Luminoso (*Shining Path*) that was led by academics and university activists in the late 60s and defined itself as a Maoist movement (*Zucha, 2007, p.3*). Posterior to the dissolution of the Communist International in 1943 and ten years later, in 1953 following Stalin's death, Mao became the undoubted face of the international communist movement. However, in the 80s, when China saw the crucial need for several policy changes that clashed with Maoist ideas and communism, the Sendero Luminoso considered Deng Xiaoping a revolutionary, as the new direction ideologically undermined the Sendero Luminoso's foundations, therefore the relationship between the People's Republic of China and the established guerilla organisation became unrepairable (*Park, 2013, p.5*). Simultaneously, the leaders of Shining Path came to the realisation that their objectives could not be fulfilled through peaceful strategies. Consequently, they initiated an overt conflict against the Peruvian government starting in 1980. This period in the 1980s was marked by unprecedented levels of violence and harshness within the nation. (*Park, 2013, p.5*).

During the late 90s and early 2000s, the two states found their way back to each other following the purchase of an important iron mine that used to be owned by the USA, but was now in the hands of a state-owned company from Beijing. From then onwards, China's economic activity in Peru has increased and became the most important investor and trading partner of the country. It stands as the largest purchaser of copper from Peru, which is the second most significant exporter of this mineral, following Chile. (*Park, 2013, p.6*).

These antecedents and current contacts serve as the foundation of the establishment of the first Confucius Institution program in Peru, as expressed in the official website of Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, where the emergence of the CI programs in this part of Latin America was due to "*a historical contact of more than 160 years.*" (*PUC website, 2012, in the translation of Park, 2013, p.4*). The first Confucius Institute in Peru was established in 2007 in cooperation with the Universidad de Piura. Since then, the project has expanded to include 3 other institutes (Universidad de Católica de Santa María, Universidad de Ricardo Palma, and Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú) across major cities such as Lima, Arequipa, and Cusco (*Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, 2020; Park, 2013, p.7*).

All four Confucius Institutes have been established on the campuses of well-known universities that serve as the host institutions of the project. Particularly, the CI located on the campus of the Universidad de Ricardo Palma, the most recently established one in Peru, serves a slightly different objective than the other three. It was created with the purpose to train professional interpreters (*Park, 2013, p.7*), besides this Confucius Institute functions as a national venue for the international Mandarin proficiency test as well (*Park, 2013, p.7*). These institutes offer Chinese language courses at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels to students, professionals, including also the general public, as well as organise cultural events, such as Chinese New Year celebrations, traditional music and dance performances, and art exhibitions, in addition to academic collaborations such as student and faculty exchange programs, joint research projects and scholarships to China (*Instituto Confucio PUCP website, 2024*).

The language courses are fairly popular among the student and non-student population, due to social-mobility serving as a huge motivation for many to start learning the language. However, there is another factor that could serve as a source of motivation: the genealogical background. In his work titled *Cultural artifact, ideology export or soft power? Confucius Institute in Peru. International Studies in Sociology of Education*, Jae Park, (*2013, p.8*), he interviewed a member of the administrative staff, who also happened to be a Mandarin language instructor, according to who, a big portion of her students have Chinese ancestry and that inspires them to join the classes offered by the Confucius Institutions. Taking a look at the history of the two countries' relationship, it comes as no revelation to find that there are a significant number of Peruvian citizens who are of Chinese ethnicity due to the events of the mid-19th century. This background aids creating a hospitable and friendly environment for teaching and learning Mandarin that the CI project certainly utilises to its own benefit. Nevertheless, as expected, there are also obstacles that the Confucius Institutes of Peru have to face. First and foremost racism and the distrust of the locals (*Nisley, 2022, p.33*), that is, unfortunately, at large present in every country and continent in one way or another, consequently makes it troubling for the CIs to gather the support and eagerness that they are aiming for. Furthermore, there are concerns among both the general public and scholars about the political influence of Confucius Institutes and their potential impact on academic freedom and independence, not only in Peru, but on the continent as a whole (*Bernal-Meza, 2022, p.469-471; Nisley, 2022, p.33*). Up to a great extent because the yearly conferences that are held in Beijing regarding the Confucius Institute and research program have been closed to the public

and researchers, for many in the community losing credibility in the educational purpose of the project (Park, 2013, p.8).

“We work towards bridging understanding among people with different cultures and contributing to friendship and the construction of a harmonious world.” (PUC website in Jae Park’s translation, 2013, p.8). To me it appears that the relation between Peru and China, moreover the relationship between Peru and the Confucius Institutes is working rather satisfactory for the PRC. As seen from the quote above, Peruvian leaders have also started to implement the utilisation of the expression ‘*harmonious world*’ that the PRC advertises to be the exact and single reason behind their domestic and foreign activities (Lahtinen, 2015, p.5).

It was quite compelling to follow how the tides of power shifts between the two states that eventually resulted in the establishment of CIs. In the beginning of the relation, the Peruvian government saw the Chinese as an alternative to the slaves from Africa, and nearly 2 centuries later, the Peruvian government found another alternative in the Chinese - an alternative to the United States and its intense cultural and economic influence that is inevitable in Latin America.

China and the Confucius Institutes - A friend or a foe?

Before we could investigate the general ideas Latin Americans have of the Confucius Institutes, it would be important to take a look at what they think of China and the Chinese as well, therefore obtaining a better understanding of why the CI project is seen in a certain way..

China is in favour because it does not get involved in regional conflicts, nor has a desire to support one country over another, and it does not concern itself with the political stance of the countries’ leadership as long as they go along with Beijing’s terms (Flores & Jatobá, 2016, p.; Bernal-Meza, 2016).

It appears that even though it has been over two decades that the PRC became a potent external actor in the region and have been only intensifying its activity, Latin Americans have not formed a stance on China yet (Morgenstern, 2021, p.12; Bernal-Meza, 2022, p.470). It is more likely because Latin Americans have divergent views on what they can expect from the Mainland on the East (Velasquez, 2016, p.28).

Bernal-Meza (2022, p.469-470) has compared varying positions of several Latin American scholars on the future of China and the China-Latin American relations. Gustavo Girado (Universidad Nacional de Lanús, Argentina (2017)) and Fernando Reyes Matta (Universidad Andrés Bello, Chile (2017)) consider China as a major precedent of innovation and tradition.

Simultaneously, Eduardo Tzili Apango (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico (2011, 2022)) emphasises the example of China as a framework for development, as well as adoring it as an international actor who promotes soft power policy. Mikio Kuwayama and Osvaldo Rosales (Chile, (2012, p.121)) encourage Latin American countries to seek strategic partnerships with the PRC and to attempt to turn these relationships into a pivot to improve the quality of their international integration. Adrián Bonilla and Paz Milet (Universidad de Chile & Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2015)) see these relationships play a part in the region's greater autonomy regarding the United States, in the meantime Javier Vadell (Pontificia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Brasil) and Florencia Rubiolo (Universidad Católica de Córdoba, Argentina, 2020)) call attention to and praise the cooperation between China and Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic in contrast to the countries of the West, justifying further collaboration with the East. And finally, there academics, such as Thomas Legler (Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México), Mariano Turzi (CEMA University, Argentina) and Eduardo Tzili Apango (2020 and 2017) who see a beneficial Chinese presence in the region even including the risk of the PRC possibly taking advantage of bilateral forums such as the CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) for their sole benefit as well as there are ones, like Gustavo Girado (2021), who imagine the world according to China's political views. Following the comparison, Bernal-Meza (2022, p.471) further implies the growing belief in the Latin American academic community, which states that China is going to be the new prominent power, therefore it would be strategic for the states of the continent to keep up tight relations with it.

Now examining the Confucius Institutes in this light and their support, we can see that there is already a base of supporters of the PRC activity in the region, therefore the language and cultural program is embraced blissfully. One of the main criticisms towards the Institutions is that the Chinese government's hands reach all the way to Latin America and limit freedom of speech by refusing to address several topics that are sensitive to the PCR both domestically as well as internationally, for instance the Uyghurs, Taiwan or Tibet. (Nisley, 2022, p.33). Apart from this, the CIs are not facing any harsh criticism, on the contrary, they mostly seem to be rather comfortable with the idea and practice of the Institutions. As an example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities had to switch to full online teaching, including the Confucius Institutes on Campus as well, from one day to another, resulting in millions of students and professors being disappointed in most of the courses during the first online semester. *Zilberberg and Zhu* (2020, p.39-41) carried out research based on a questionnaire to investigate how well the Confucius Institutes performed during online teaching in Latin

America. 27 host directors of Confucius Institutes answered from Argentina, Bolivia, Bahamas, Brazil, Barbados, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Peru, Suriname and Trinidad, and Tobago, and the results showed that 70.37% of the respondents found the online courses of the CIs satisfactory, 25.93% found them very satisfactory and 3.70% deemed them unsatisfactory (*Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020, Figure 6, p.44*). Reportedly the CIs were undoubtedly active during a difficult time (*Zilberberg and Zhu, 2020*), that paid off in the long run since the beginning of the 2020s, most of the scholars who strictly focus on the work and perception of the Institutions in the region are only highlighting the opportunities and exchange possibilities that the Confucius projects have brought to Latin American students (*Martinelli, 2022, p.15*).

Certainly, reserving a big portion of Chinese government scholarships for Latin American students, and granting more authority to the region with the creation of CIRCAL, that also allows further cooperation between Latin American countries, is for sure to help the CIs to win the public over. However, it is far from enough to mould the minds of future policy makers- if speculations in the West are correct. Evidently, the CI project is serving its purpose in Latin America in providing quality Chinese language education and introducing the diverse culture of China on campus. Unfortunately, their efforts might be more counterproductive than efficient, and the reason behind it is the PRC itself (*Nisley, 2022, p.39*). China's actions in the region are getting bolder by the day, yet their aim to gain cultural influence is not strong enough for the people to ignore the signs.

China is excellent in finding the weak spots in the relationship between the Latin American states and in the relationship of the United States and the region. The introduction of the Confucius project in Latin America and China's heightened focus on the continent do not seem to be aimed at diminishing the United States' status as a superpower. It is about China's own path to rising as a prominent actor in the global field as well as "taking care" of some unwanted competitors (Taiwan) permanently. China's objective is to eradicate support for Taiwan entirely, and its intense activity in the region will persist until all Latin American nations acknowledge the People's Republic of China as the sole China.

It is too early to see if the Confucius Institutes as true educational aids or if they solely serve a greater purpose of the PRC, however it is highly advised to keep an eye on them. The region has learnt a life-long lesson being the "backyard" of the United States, they ought to be, and are more careful with the newcomer along with searching for the right balance to benefit from this partnership, and nothing more.

Conclusion

China is mindful of its own history and is determined to avoid a return to its 19th-century self. The nation's leaders have recognized the significance of maintaining a positive public perception and the application of soft power and public diplomacy. Over the years, they have expanded upon Nye's idea of soft power, and applied it to domestic politics, individuals and organisations. The People's Republic of China's economic success has made it a model for developing countries worldwide, which has contributed to its warm reception by Third World nations, such as the countries of Latin American, which were eager to establish new alliances with anyone who were not the United States.

During the Cultural Revolution, Confucius was portrayed negatively, but he gradually became a symbol of China internationally, despite his philosophies contradicting the Communist Party's ideology. He was an ideal representative because he embodied Ancient China, and at that time, China's modern culture lacked the popularity and influence to impact other countries. As a result, the initiative to create a 'Peace-loving China' was launched. Often feeling misinterpreted and demonised by the Western world, China attributed the West's misunderstanding of its actions to its unique, high-context culture, and argued that learning Chinese would eventually help the international community in seeing the 'real' China.

Hence, the Confucius Institute initiative was established in the early 2000s. These language and culture centres were created through a collaboration between a host university and a Chinese partner institution, with the aim to spread Chinese culture worldwide, located in the heart of university campuses. During the initial stages of the program, it was evident that Latin America would play a significant role in the Confucius Institute project. At the start of the 21st century, half of the countries acknowledging the Republic of China globally were situated in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, by the early 2020s, there was a noticeable decline in the number of countries recognizing Taiwan. Over the years, the Confucius Institutes have offered exceptional higher education opportunities to Latin American students, particularly in the form of exchange scholarships, making it accessible for others beyond just the elite. It stands out as one of the few regions where the program is functioning as intended, providing students with high-quality Chinese language instruction and engaging cultural classes and events. While the collaboration is thriving, Latin Americans remain cautious, drawing from their past experiences as the 'backyard' of the United States.

In conclusion, the Confucius Institutes are falling short in aiding China to reach its primary goal. The influence of Chinese language and culture is insufficient to mould the minds of the youth. While students are becoming more open to China, the country's soft power and

diplomatic efforts are inadequate to conceal its display of hard power in Asia. The understanding of China remains elusive, not due to its complexity, but because it chooses to remain enigmatic - a fragile self-defence strategy that is diminishing as more Confucius Institutes are established worldwide. This mirrors the 'peaceful power' narrative that the Communist party leadership has been propagating for almost 20 decades.

The People's Republic of China does not have hegemonic tendencies, especially in Latin America, and it does not aim to replace the United States as the primary regional power. China is more like a casual friend than a die-hard ally to the countries of Latin America. This relationship is mutually beneficial, particularly for Latin America, which can leverage this 'alliance' as a stepping stone towards further development and less dependence from the United States.

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