



International Communication of Chinese Language and Culture in the Context of Media Convergence

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in Chinese language and culture around the world, in response to which China has set up Confucius Institutes in many countries to promote international cultural exchanges. Confucius Institutes have achieved great success globally but also suffered major setbacks in the process of development. This study adopts a network ethnographic approach to examine the websites of Confucius Institutes and social media platforms, and uses a corpus-based hypermodal discourse analysis to find out the problems and difficulties faced by Confucius Institutes. It is aimed at exploring the effective ways to carry out language education and promote cultural communication in the context of media convergence. It is found that Confucius Institutes have not made full use of multimedia platforms to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and communication, and the public opinion reflected on social media also reveals people's cognitive deviation from the educational philosophy of Confucius Institutes. Confucius Institutes can only achieve sustainable development by updating the teaching content to change stereotypical prejudices in people's mind, utilizing various new media platforms to tell Chinese stories in popular forms, and carrying out people-to-people exchanges to better promote cultural communication.

Keywords: Confucius Institute, Media Convergence, Language and Cultural Communication, Network Ethnography, Hypermodal Discourse Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The Confucius Institute, a non-profit educational institution established by China in 2004 for the purpose of teaching Chinese language and promoting cultural exchanges in the world, has played an important role in the international communication of Chinese culture. The recent complicated and volatile international situation has made the development of Confucius Institutes face severe challenges. At the same time, with the rapid development of internet and new media technology, diversified media platforms provide a new path for cultural dissemination and international communication.

This study conducts an ethnographic investigation into the websites of six Confucius Institutes in different countries and examines the discussions about Confucius Institutes on Chinese and international social media. Based on online participation and observation, this paper analyzes the difficulties and opportunities of Confucius Institutes' cultural communication, aiming to explore the effective ways of promoting cultural exchanges with other countries in the context of media convergence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a window for people from all over the world to know China and learn Chinese language, Confucius Institutes have gradually become a bridge for cultural communication and received widespread attention.

In the first decade after the establishment of Confucius Institute, relevant studies mainly focused on its own construction and development, such as proposing strategies and methods to improve Chinese language teaching through summarizing teaching practices (Yang, 2007), comparing different models of development based on case analysis (Zhang & Gu, 2015), proposing sustainable development measures and suggestions for innovation informed by management experience (Guo, 2009), and

exploring how to enhance the international influence of Chinese language and culture in the context of cultural diplomacy (Zhou, 2012). The branding of Confucius Institute and the construction of national image also received attention from researchers (Yang, 2011; Peng & Yu, 2016). The review of early studies shows that there are huge differences in research perspectives and tendencies among researchers from different countries. Chinese researchers focused on the practical aspects of the Confucius Institute, such as teaching methods, teaching materials, communication effects, etc., while scholars from western countries mostly emphasized the political influence of the Confucius Institute from the perspectives of China's foreign policy, the rise of China, and cultural soft power (Chen, 2015). In terms of research methodology, Chinese studies presented too much experience summary but little scientific evidence, while western studies were full of biased ideological criticism and unsubstantiated argument (An et al., 2014).

The recent setbacks suffered by Confucius Institutes have prompted a shift in research perspective and methodology. The integrity and innovation in the construction of Confucius Institutes in the new era have become new research concerns (Li & Zhuang, 2021). For instance, the diversified communication patterns are explored through typical case studies (Liu, 2022), the challenges and countermeasures of Confucius Institutes are examined from the perspectives of global governance and community of a shared future for mankind (Zhang & Hu, 2017), and it is pointed out that cultural self-confidence is essential in the process of higher education's internationalization (Wang, T. 2020). The closing of Confucius Institutes in some western countries has drawn attention to dealing with public opinion and taking publicity measures to enhance Confucius Institutes' cultural image (Zhang, 2021). Multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks have been adopted to carry out more scientific and systematic research. By examining the global distribution of Confucius Institutes, Zhou and Ning (2017) attempted to reveal the spatial distribution patterns and their relational issues. Chen and Lai (2019) used the econometric analysis tool CiteSpace to investigate the progress, hotspots and frontiers of Confucius Institute studies, which provides quantitative data for research in this field. The phenomenon of subjective speculation and limited empirical research has thus been changed.

In the context of media convergence, how to carry out cultural exchanges with other countries more effectively through network communication is put on the agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic used to make face-to-face communication difficult, and social media platforms have played a more important role in information dissemination and public opinion diffusion. A large amount of information on the Internet and various media platforms also provides rich data for empirical research. However, studies of Confucius Institutes have not systematically discussed how to make use of media convergence to better promote cultural communication.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Media convergence refers to the trend of reconstructing the entire communication ecology brought about by the innovation of communication technology, including the integration of technical media and the transformation of communication modes. In the field of cultural communication, traditional media and emerging media are in a state of coexistence. The new cultural form based on network technology and centered on online existence is currently shaping a brand-new system of cultural value norms (Feng, 1999). Various media platforms collaborate with each other, showing a trend of multi-functional integration, which greatly enriches the forms of communication and jointly strengthens the effect of communication.

Communicators and audiences can achieve more open interaction and communication by using different platforms and communication methods, and the diversification of media has also produced a variety of modalities of communication content such as texts, pictures, audio and video messages and hyperlinks. The framework of hypermodality proposed by Lemke (2002) can be used to examine the multimodal features of webpages. The multiplicative combinations of the presentational, orientational, and organizational resources used on webpages convey the representational, interactive and compositional meanings, which reflect the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions respectively as proposed in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Lemke, 2002; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

With the advent of a new form of community—the online community—the research method of network ethnography has gradually gained attention, which can be defined as “participatory observation grounded in online fieldwork” (Kozinets, 2010). This approach is an extension of the

traditional ethnography to the network space, involving shifts in both the research focus and specific operational strategy (Guo & Zhang, 2017). The field in the network is not limited to a specific geographical space, and is constantly changing. Any network community with enough people participating in interactive discussions can be regarded as an online field, including various websites, forums, blogs, social media platforms, etc. Participatory observation of these communities, and description of online discourse and hypertexts have become the main method of studying online culture (Sun, 2017).

This study integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine Confucius Institutes' communication on network platforms through online participatory observation and corpus-based multimodal discourse analysis.

The research objects of this study are six Confucius Institutes which work in partnership between a university in Beijing and six universities in different countries respectively. They are located in six countries, including the UK (CI-1), Greece (CI-2), Russia (CI-3), Japan (CI-4), Brazil (CI-5) and Mexico (CI-6). Through browsing the websites of the six Confucius Institutes and navigating the multi-layered webpages directed by the interactive hyperlinks, the researcher collected multimodal messages on the webpages, downloading the texts, pictures and videos through the WebZip software. A hypermodal discourse analysis is conducted to describe the multimodal and hypertextual features of Confucius Institutes' websites. Chinese and international social media are also investigated through online participatory observation. The posts and comments about Confucius Institutes on Weibo and YouTube are downloaded through the Python software. The self-built corpus of online discussions about relevant topics is used to do a corpus-based discourse analysis of the public opinion.

Based on the observation and analysis of the websites and social media, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the contents and functions of Confucius Institutes' mediated communication on their websites?

RQ2: What is the public opinion about Confucius Institutes among Chinese and international netizens?

RQ3: How can Confucius Institutes enhance the effectiveness of language and cultural communication in the context of media convergence?

This study aims to explore how Confucius Institutes utilize the trend of media convergence to overcome difficulties and face challenges, and achieve further development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Contents and Functions of Confucius Institutes' Communication on Websites

Confucius Institutes have earned a general recognition in many countries, but their influence is often limited to the local area and rarely spreads throughout the entire country. The participants in regular large-scale events are usually a fixed group of people, and few others are involved in the cultural activities held by Confucius Institutes. There is little positive coverage or advance publicity about these activities in the local mainstream media. In terms of online communication, Confucius Institutes typically maintain their own websites for promoting and reporting cultural activities, and they also use social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to broadcast major events. However, these functions are usually performed by dedicated support teams assigned by the local universities to oversee content publishing on their websites and other platforms, and the Chinese side has no autonomy in the management.

The contents of the six Confucius Institutes' websites are analyzed according to the hypermodal framework (Lemke, 2020), and the multimodal and hypertextual resources and their functions are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. *Hypermodal Features of the Webpages of Six Confucius Institutes (CIs)*

No.	Functions	Multimodal and Hypertextual Resources
CI-1 (UK)	Presentational	website navigation bars and content menus; photos of events (clickable to scroll); name and mission of CI in Chinese and English; news columns; pictures and titles of blog posts

	Oriental	links to the Chinese university and the CI headquarters; links to the departments of the local university; subscription button; links to social media (Facebook, Twitter, Blog); links to tweets
	Organizational	English webpages with navigation bars in both English and Chinese; black text against white background, and white text against black background
CI-2 (Greece)	Presentational	website navigation bar; photos of two partner universities (clickable to toggle); logos of collaborating organizations; courses, exams and registration; guidelines for healthcare; introduction to CI with photos; news and events section with featured images and headlines; notices for contests, jobs, and scholarship opportunities; statistics of the number of courses, students, and teachers
	Oriental	telephone, email, address, contact information; Greek-English switch button; links to registration and recruitment; clickable interactive links with other institutions; newsletter subscription button; links to social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
	Organizational	Greek and English webpages, white-background pages, multi-color sections
CI-3 (Russia)	Presentational	website navigation bar and content menus; Chinese landscape photos (timed scrolling); titles of announcements and activity previews; introductory texts, videos, and photos of CI certificate; logos of other institutions; frames of activity videos
	Oriental	telephone, email, address, contact information; links to the CI headquarters; links to the homepage of the local university; forums and solicitation of opinions; frequently asked questions; links to other pages; links to social media (VK Community, YouTube, Facebook)
	Organizational	Russian webpages with the Chinese translation appearing when the cursor points to Russian titles; white background with light blue tone
CI-4 (Japan)	Presentational	website navigation bar and content menus; scrolling photos of Chinese scenery; photos of the university; lectures and introductions to lecturers; texts and photos
	Oriental	contact information; links to inquiries; links to other universities; links to other pages
	Organizational	Japanese webpages, white background with orange tone
CI-5 (Brazil)	Presentational	website navigation bars of the university and the CI, content menus; photos of events; names of faculties, institutions and courses
	Oriental	clickable interactive links with other institutions; links to map locations; links to media; links to social media (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter)
	Organizational	Portuguese webpages, fabric texture background, colorful photos
CI-6 (Mexico)	Presentational	website navigation bar, name and logo of CI in both Chinese and Spanish; scrolling photos of events and pictures of learning activities; titles of introductory texts and activity previews; notices and announcements; new book launches, pictures of Chinese cultural knowledge and corresponding videos
	Oriental	telephone, email, address, contact information; links to media; links to solicitation of opinions
	Organizational	Spanish webpages, white background with light green tone, joyful atmosphere in photos

The hypermodal features of the six Confucius Institutes’ websites illustrated in Table 1 show that all these institutes use texts, images and hyperlinks on their websites to inform viewers of teaching arrangements and report cultural activities, achieving better communication effects than traditional media. Particularly, the photos or videos with bright colors and happy atmosphere on the homepages are very eye-catching, vividly presenting the images of Chinese culture. The multi-layered webpages connected by hyperlinks expand the space of information exchange, and the interactive links further promote the communication between the Confucius Institutes and the enthusiasts of Chinese language and culture. The four Confucius Institutes in the UK, Greece, Russia and Brazil have used various social media platforms to broaden the scope of communication and extend their reach to a wider audience, but there is a lack of social media interaction elements on the websites of the two Confucius Institutes in Japan and Mexico.

Communication through the Internet is global, transcending national boundaries. The viewers of websites are not confined to domestic audiences, thus multi-lingual affordances on the websites are necessary. However, only the Confucius Institute in Greece has two versions of its website in Greek

and English, while the other five Confucius Institutes only have webpages in the native languages of these countries. The Confucius Institute in the UK has a bilingual navigation bar in both English and Chinese on its English website. The Russian website of the Confucius Institute provides Chinese translation for Russian titles on the navigation bar when the cursor is positioned on the titles. But for Confucius Institutes that use languages such as Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish, the lack of English webpages limits their global reach to some extent. Some websites also have problems of low frequency of information release and delayed updates of pictures and videos.

4.2. Public Opinion about Confucius Institutes on Social Media

Based on a six-month immersive participatory observation on the Chinese microblog platform Weibo, the researcher followed the posts related to the Confucius Institute and browsed relevant comments under the hashtag Confucius Institute (#孔子学院# in Chinese). The posts published on Weibo from January 1, 2018 to December 31, 2024 are collected, with ambiguous, repetitive, and irrelevant messages deleted. The self-built corpus consists of 1000 Weibo posts and is processed through a Chinese word segmentation software after all the non-verbal symbols are removed. A corpus-based discourse analysis is conducted with the corpus tool AntConc to investigate the lexical features and the thematic content of the data.

The analysis of high-frequency keywords and Weibo content show that relevant comments are centered around several themes, such as educational philosophy, teaching activities, parties involved, countries and regions, and international situations (as shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Thematic Content of Weibo Comments under the hashtag #孔子学院#

Themes	Keywords	Representative Posts
educational philosophy	culture, education, tradition, Confucius, development, cooperation, exchange, hope, international, world, global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since the establishment of the Confucius Institute Scholarship in 2009, nearly 50,000 students from 166 countries have received various kinds of Confucius Institute scholarships, cultivating a large number of talents and Chinese language teachers. Some of them returned to their home countries to become teachers of Chinese, some became cultural ambassadors to promote exchanges between the two countries, and some settled in China and became “China hands”. With the strong support of both sides, the Confucius Institute at St. Joseph’s University has gradually developed into a bridge of friendship, a window of cultural exchange and a platform for mutually beneficial cooperation between Lebanon and China, making positive contributions to the promotion of cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries.
teaching activities	Chinese, learning, activities, teaching, work, profession, language, project, hold, participation, first, together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the final display of teaching skills, the four teachers won bursts of applause with their excellent oral Chinese, conscientious teaching attitude and lively teaching methods. Taking Chinese language as a bridge to create unlimited opportunities, and technology as a boat to run towards a better tomorrow, the featured Confucius Institute has a double harvest of language and technology, and makes Chinese teaching more wonderful! “Fantastic Tour of the Lantern Festival”! The opening ceremony of the Chinese Culture Week of the Confucius Institute in Medellin was broadcast online and became the closing work of the Chinese Culture Month “Happy Spring Festival” series of activities in the Year of the Tiger, which was well received by the local audience.
parties involved	Confucius Institute, CI, teachers, students, deans, volunteers, universities, colleges,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I just graduated from university and came to Thailand to be a teacher! Feeling the sunshine in Thailand at 8° north latitude, making friends with lovely children, and looking forward to the life in the coming year. Let’s take a look at the Vlog of a Confucius Institute volunteer’s weekly life! On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Confucius Institute Scholarship Program, the Confucius Institute Headquarters held an Open Day in Beijing. Representatives of the scholarship students

	schools	shared their stories of learning Chinese and Chinese culture.
countries and regions	China, country, US, government, Thailand, UK, Russia, resident, Beijing, local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just after her first trip to China, Raya Mativa participated in the two-week 2018 Chinese Culture Training Program in Confucius Institute Headquarters. The close experience made the picture of China vivid in her mind, “China is developing fast, and Beijing is beautiful.” • The US House of Representatives proposes to require the Confucius Institutes register as foreign agents. The draft proposal is the first legislative measure directed at Confucius institutes. This move once again shows the growing concern of US lawmakers about China’s state-funded projects.
international situations	Pompeo, shutdown, pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After registering the Confucius Institute US Center as a foreign mission, Pompeo demanded that all Confucius Institutes currently in US universities be shut down by the end of the year. • In response to the baseless attack on Confucius Institutes by US Secretary of State Pompeo and his subordinates, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying fired back with two consecutive tweets on September 7th. • In 2020, with the global spread of COVID-19 pandemic, the Confucius Institute at the University of El Salvador has faced numerous challenges in its work, yet it has also achieved significant progress.

The microblog platform is both a channel for information release and a place where public opinions gather. Therefore, through the content analysis of Weibo posts, we can better understand how the public view the Confucius Institute. Under the hashtag #孔子学院#, the official accounts of relevant institutes subordinate to the Confucius Institute are the most active microblog users. Most of them post messages about the teaching and cultural activities of Confucius Institutes located in different countries, aiming to promote Chinese culture and international exchanges. Chinese teachers and volunteers also convey a positive and enthusiastic attitude in their Weibo posts as shown in Table 2.

However, after the occurrence of major setbacks, some netizens’ comments on Weibo reflect rather negative public opinion about the Confucius Institute. For example, after the closure of Confucius Institutes in some western countries, many supporting voices can be heard online. Although there were a lot of comments disapproving of the shutdowns, the high-frequency keywords of the posts reveal peoples’ concern about Confucius Institutes’ practices. Some think that the Chinese government’s financial support for Confucius Institutes is a waste of educational resources and taxpayers’ money, the culture export is inefficient, and the funds should be saved for domestic educational.

The public opinion about Confucius Institutes in the international community can be revealed on YouTube, the world’s largest video platform. This study built a corpus of comments on the most popular videos in the “Confucius Institute” retrieval list on YouTube. The high-frequency keywords in these comments are *Confucius Institute, Chinese, China, CCP, Trump, video, Russia, Bruce Lee, panda, propaganda, India, culture, mandarin, Jackie Chan, Taiwan, dragon, language, kung-fu*, etc. It can be seen from this word list that quite a number of comments relate the Confucius Institute with CCP, propaganda, and Taiwan, which shows that netizens from other countries tend to associate this education institution with politics and ideology. At the same time, keywords like *Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, kung fu, panda, and dragon* indicate a lack of real understanding of Chinese culture among foreigners, who confine themselves to some outdated stereotypes of Chinese kung fu.

4.3. Using Media Convergence to Enhance the Effects of Cultural Communication

The current situation of Confucius Institutes is closely related to China’s diplomatic relations and the intense international situation. Due to the deterioration of Sino-US relations and Western media’s negative coverage of China, the Confucius Institute has been unfairly ideologized. People from different countries have different perceptions of China, so their recognition and acceptance of Chinese cultural communication are also different. Much of foreigners’ misunderstanding and prejudice against China stems from the stigmatizing propaganda of Western media. Meanwhile, in the context of media convergence, many Confucius Institutes have not fully utilized the multimedia platforms to carry out more effective cultural communication. Therefore, how to make use of novel forms of

communication on new media platforms to show the real China is essential for Confucius Institutes to make further progress.

Although Western media have influenced people's cognition and perception to a large extent, the impact of the rapid development of social media on public opinion cannot be ignored. For example, the popularity of self-media such as TikTok has greatly promoted folk cultural exchanges. Ordinary people tell what they have seen, heard and felt in China, vividly presenting a diverse, vibrant and lively image of China, which is more appealing and convincing than the publicity of official media. The concrete cultural symbols and real scenery of China can embody the spirit of the nation (Wang, Y. 2020)

Confucius Institutes should also give full play to the role of social media in language teaching to strengthen the effect of cultural communication through multimodal presentation and multiplatform interaction. The teaching materials need to be constantly updated according to social development, objectively and comprehensively displaying Chinese traditional culture and modern culture, so that foreigners' understanding of China can keep pace with the times. High quality courses can be developed into multimodal courseware and made into MOOCs to expand their dissemination in the cyberspace. Confucius Institutes should make use of the multilevel webpages, multimedia interfaces, interactive hyperlinks and social media links on their websites to expand the dimensions of communication channels. The cultural communication practitioners (teachers, students, volunteers) should be encouraged to share their personal experience on social media, because their voices on the Internet can resonate with audiences more widely and may have better communication effects than the posts of official institutional accounts.

5. CONCLUSION

Although Confucius Institutes have encountered difficulties in their development, they have played a vital role in international exchange and cultural dissemination in the process of globalization. In June 2020, Chinese International Education Foundation—a non-governmental welfare organization initiated by many universities and enterprises—was established and began to run the Confucius Institute brand, which is no longer a government-funded institution and will play a better role in people-to-people exchanges. The key to sustainable development of Confucius Institutes is to conduct innovative research on the contents and methods of language and culture education and attach great importance to the modes of communication. In the practices of language and cultural communication, Confucius Institutes should keep Chinese characteristics while adapting to the local customs in different countries, fully utilizing the trend of media convergence, and leveraging the advantages of various media to convey Chinese wisdom to those who really love Chinese culture in a form that is acceptable and enjoyable to the public.

In the new era of media convergence, cultural dissemination can achieve full network coverage and deep penetration through the coordinated operation of multiple media platforms. Moreover, the content production by self-media is more timely and has a wider reach than traditional media reporting. With the construction and improvement of the system for integrated media development, the practice of cultural communication, characterized by rich content and diverse forms, is expected to have extensive development potential and exert a profound and far-reaching impact on international exchanges.

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