

Confucius Institutes as Globalizers in the World

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As this conference is organised by UNESCO in cooperation with Hanban, the headquarters of the worldwide net of Confucius Institutes, and as I have been the director of one of these institutes, the only one in Hungary, for more than five years, it is my duty – and it gives me great pleasure - to contribute to this conference from the perspective of the Confucius institutes. When I started my studies at the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University twenty-five years ago and then embarked on my academic career, I thought that through my work, teaching Chinese language and culture to the university students and publishing academic work, I could contribute, to some extent, to an understanding of Chinese Culture, or as we put it, it to the „friendship of two nations”. I have to admit that twenty-five years ago China seemed to be very far away from our world, and it was only the experts who were thought to have any connection with this distant culture, and any appearances of China or Chinese culture were deemed to be strange or even exotic.

Due to the extraordinarily rapid development of the Chinese economy, nowadays this situation has changed radically. More and more often, news about the Chinese economy, politics and culture appears in the media, and people have become aware that China is not only the source of cheap products, mainly clothes, but also of high-tech equipment, computers, mobile phones, and so on. Chinese companies such as Huawei, ZTE, or Wanhua have started to invest in Hungary, and our government is keen to attract more investments from China. Hungarian people no longer find Chinese culture merely exotic: they also realise that learning Chinese and discovering the culture can be helpful in their lives, they can find jobs more easily, or at least they can understand this world much better.

This change in peoples' attitude toward China must have played an important role in the success of our Confucius Institute in Hungary, and, I think, the general success of the Confucius Institute network worldwide. We have taught Chinese language to more than five thousand people in primary schools, high schools and universities and have organised classes for adults throughout the county. Five years ago, I had to persuade high school head teachers to introduce Chinese as a subject; now I cannot provide enough teachers for all the schools where they are determined to teach Chinese as a second foreign language. In addition, our institute organises cultural programs that attract many people who want to understand Chinese culture, to have some own experience of practising calligraphy, tai chi, cooking and so forth.

However, even if the declared aim of the Confucius Institutes is to teach Chinese language and culture in foreign countries, it must be acknowledged that through spreading Chinese culture it is inevitable that Chinese thinking, a kind of value system is also being transmitted. Eventually, Confucianism, Confucianist concepts, are intertwined with Chinese culture, even if a practitioner of Chinese culture is not necessary a devotee of Confucianism, or has not even learned about Confucianist philosophy and concepts as such, just as for a European, the value system of Christianity can be reflected in one's world view even if one is not a believer of Christianity.

I think in this globalised world, which is sometimes called a global village, referring to the disappearance of distances, we need to know other cultures and value systems. We might be able to travel to the other side of the world in a few hours, we might find the same products all over the world, we can have the same hamburger in Europe, America, or Asia, thus it might seem that globalisation means that we have the same standards. In fact, I think, we are very far from that. As cultures developed autonomously, they created their own value systems, religions and ways of communicating, thus we find that we live in a world with diverse cultures, and we must admit that sometimes different cultures give

different answers to the same question. I think this kind of diversity makes human life more colourful, thus we should strive to maintain it. However we must find a way to harmonise the differences, find a common base of humanity that is acceptable for all. Certainly, it is a great challenge as this diversity is the result of thousands years of process and development. The isolated development that took place in the past did not require this kind of harmonisation, and at the beginning of globalization, in the process of colonization when the diverse cultures first made contact with each other, the desire for mutual understanding was lacking. Instead, the tendency was for one value system to be imposed on another, and the results were disastrous.

To make a bridge between cultures and value systems is much more difficult than building MacDonald's restaurant. We must learn other cultures, must know how people in other cultures think, what they regard as important, how they communicate, what they say and what they do not say, and what they mean if they say or do not say something. As Ernő Kulcsár-Szabó, Professor of Cultural studies at my University, said: for most people culture means the last page in a journal where you can read about theatre and movie programs, or the books that have just been published. But in fact, culture is much more important, it is our chance to understand each other: culture transmits the values of different peoples.

Cultural institutes like the Goethe, Cervantes, French and Confucius institutes definitely contribute to the process of harmonising diversity. These institutes open windows to other cultures, provide opportunities for local people to learn foreign languages and cultures, and through the process of learning the individual can be introduced to a new world. Every month our institute runs two-week free Chinese language course open to the public, and these courses are booked up in advance. We ask participants for feedback when the course is finished, and people are very grateful for this chance to learn Chinese free of charge. Usually half of the students go on studying Chinese, but even if

somebody drops out, I think that in these two weeks, they must have gained an individual experience of Chinese language and culture, which can change their view on the culture of this distant country.

This kind of individual experience is necessary if we want to cooperate. In Hungary there are several Korean factories where the culture-gap, the lack of mutual understanding, led to many conflicts between the local workers and the Korean management. It is not surprising that the introduction of obligatory physical exercise during breaks caused a kind of uprising among the Hungarian workers, who are accustomed to smoking during their time off. Eventually, workers often quit in Korean factories and this cultural gap, and the lack of will to bridge the gap from both sides, can be blamed for it. With the coming of Chinese investors to Europe, some problems of cultural differences might occur. Interestingly, Confucius Institutes can play an important role in solving these problems. Recently, a major Hungarian Chemical factory was bought by the Chinese Wanhua group. A Chinese general manager with his team took over and started to run the factory. The Hungarian PR manager very quickly spotted the problems of communication and culture, thus she started to organise Chinese classes for the Hungarian leaders and Hungarian classes for the Chinese team. The factory strongly supports the plan for the nearby Miskolc Technical University to establish a Confucius Institute in order to bring up a new generation of Chemical engineers who can speak Chinese and understand Chinese culture, and able to bridge the cultural gap. I think this is a very interesting model both for Chinese investors and local educators.

It is fashionable to label the establishment of cultural institutes as the exercise of soft power by the country which establishes its own institute, in contrast to the hard power which is attributed to the United States. I do not doubt the importance of this new term in political science, however, due to the origin of the term, it rather simplifies the importance of Cultural Institutes. In terms of political power it must be true that through cultural institutes one country can

exert some influence on other countries, but we should not neglect their cultural mission, the importance of providing opportunities to understand foreign cultures and languages. The term “soft power” definitely arouses some suspicion, sometimes even fear, in the public mind, which can negatively influence the efficiency of cultural institutes.

Instead of envisioning my work as that of a player in a political game, I would like to regard the Confucius Institute as a school where human values are transmitted, and where through our activities we contribute to the humanism of our students. As the humanist Charles F. Potter writes, "Education is thus a most powerful ally of humanism, and every American school is a school of humanism." Confucius is regarded the most emblematic figure of Chinese civilisation and culture, even if he declared that he was only transmitting the ancient teachings and not creating anything new. Confucius played a key role in the transmission of Chinese tradition. According to Sir Julian Sorel Huxley (22 June 1887 – 14 February 1975), who was an English evolutionary biologist, a famous humanist, and the first director of UNESCO, the formation of tradition is closely associated with language. He says: "The critical point in the evolution of man... was when he acquired the use of [language]... Man's development is potentially open... He has developed a new method of evolution: the transmission of organized experience by way of tradition, which... largely overrides the automatic process of natural selection as the agent of change". (Huxley J.S. 1953. *Evolution in action*. Chatto & Windus, London, p 132.)

Confucius only transmitted, but he definitely created a school where he declared that anybody can learn the ancient moral principles. It is not the privilege of the aristocrat to become a noble man (junzi), but anybody can reach this standard by following the moral principles. Although it would be erroneous to suppose that Confucius was an atheist, yet he kept his distance from the spiritual world, and in advocating moral principles like righteousness, benevolence, loyalty, filial piety, and so on, his main concern was to establish a

harmonious society, and not to follow the rules of a transcendental being, who might turn against people if they did not abide by his moral laws. Even if Confucian society was a patriarchal one, where democracy in the modern sense cannot be found, the welfare of the populace was an important task of the ruler in Confucianism.

In order to establish a harmonious globalised world we must give human values a key role to play. As Confucius said 'Of neighbourhoods benevolence is the most beautiful. How can the man be considered wise who, when he has the choice, does not settle in benevolence?' (Lau)

‘里仁为美。择不处仁、焉得知’ It is definitely no easy task to find an ethical system that can be accepted by all, for diverse religions and cultures have their own, traditional value systems, and sometimes the conflict between them is very obvious. However, we must learn other cultures, and through learning we can appreciate the values of other cultures. Ridding ourselves of prejudices, and keeping an open mind, are the first steps towards finding common values.