



Discourse framework and reshaping path of British media report on Chinese Confucius Institutes

Leiya Tian¹

Abstract

The historical differences between China and Western countries and the dominant discourse of Western media have led to doubts and biases in international public opinion regarding the reporting of Confucius Institutes. The British media serves as a typical example of shaping this negative perception. This study aims to analyze how major British media outlets frame reports on Confucius Institutes using the theory of framing analysis. Through an examination of seven major news media in the United Kingdom, the study finds that reporting on Confucius Institutes is primarily framed within three core themes: the "China threat theory," "Chinese government autocracy," and "controversy surrounding Confucius Institutes." Overall, the media narratives tend to be negative. By applying the concept of "frame device" within Gamson's "interpretive package" theory, the study reveals that behind the negative public opinion of Confucius Institutes in the UK, there are underlying factors such as the dominance of Western media discourse, Western concerns over Chinese cultural influence, and operational challenges faced by Confucius Institutes on a global scale. Based on these findings, the study recommends strategies for optimizing and reshaping the international public image of Confucius Institutes. These strategies include fostering pluralistic dialogue between China and Western countries, implementing more localized management of Confucius Institutes, and promoting a positive international communication agenda for Confucius Institutes. By enhancing the effectiveness of China's global communication efforts, Confucius Institutes can mitigate misunderstandings and establish a more objective and balanced image on the international stage.

Keywords: *Confucius Institute, Framework analysis, International discourse, Interpretive package.*

A. Introduction

Language is the carrier of culture. From a global perspective, Chinese Confucius Institutes seek to establish an independent discourse system through the Chinese language as a cultural medium. They aim to present China as a nation with a profound cultural heritage despite the prevalence of Western "universal values" and the dominance of English in non-English-speaking cultures. The first Confucius Institute was officially established in Seoul, South Korea 2004 (Chen, 2020). At a time when international Chinese language education is expanding rapidly, Confucius Institutes—non-profit institutions founded through Sino-foreign cooperation—have become a global hub for promoting Chinese culture and supporting the "Chinese culture going global" strategy. Drawing inspiration from institutions like the British Council, Alliance Française, and Goethe-Institut, Confucius Institutes collaborate with universities worldwide to train Chinese language educators and disseminate Chinese language and culture. In 2005, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London and Beijing Foreign

¹ School of Business and Media, Lanzhou University of Finance and Economics, Lanzhou City, Gansu Province, 730000, China. 2318382171@qq.com

Studies University (BFSU) jointly established the first Confucius Institute in the United Kingdom (Wang, 2018). Over the past eighteen years, Confucius Institutes in the UK have played a central role in Chinese language education, making the UK the most prominent Chinese language center in Europe. Currently, the UK not only hosts the highest number of Confucius Institutes in Europe but has also developed specialized Confucius Institutes, including six unique institutes focusing on Chinese medicine, business, publishing, and the arts.

However, research indicates that Confucius Institutes' effectiveness remains limited and has faced criticism, particularly from English-speaking countries. Western media have sometimes labeled them as cultural infiltration or political propaganda tools, diminishing their international influence and reputation. In comparison, institutions such as the British Council, Goethe-Institut, and Alliance Française enjoy broader recognition and acceptance (Liu, 2019). Regarding scale and influence, Confucius Institutes lag behind the British Council, which dominates the global cultural landscape, and remain less impactful than Alliance Française, which boasts a 130-year history and over 800 institutions worldwide. At the level of global public opinion, scholars have observed that the Goethe-Institut maintains a stable, peaceful, and creative image. In contrast, Confucius Institutes have faced persistent scrutiny and skepticism due to Western media narratives (Huang, 2023). Western media tend to highlight negative news—such as the closure of Confucius Institutes, alleged restrictions on freedom of expression, and accusations of espionage—rather than the achievements of Chinese language education. As Confucius Institutes transition toward greater privatization and market-oriented operations, Western media have continued to frame them within a critical and adversarial discourse (Zhang, 2021).

The negative public perception of Confucius Institutes stems from political, cultural, and ideological differences between China and the West. In the UK, the relationship between media and politics suggests that media are not an independent "fourth power" separate from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; instead, they represent political discourse and often trace controversial topics back to deeper ideological conflicts. Culturally, an article in *The Economist* described China's "sharp power" as a force capable of penetrating cultural boundaries and altering Western values, citing Confucius Institutes as a prime example. This reflects Western societies' instinctive reaction to China's rise and tendency toward "selective misinterpretation" of Chinese culture and Confucius Institutes (Liu, 2021).

Beyond macro-level analyses of socio-political and diplomatic factors, micro-level studies focusing on news discourse provide insight into the public opinion challenges faced by Confucius Institutes. Jiang et al. (2023) analyzed the linguistic characteristics of Confucius Institutes' portrayal in UK mainstream media using Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis framework. Yang et al. (2023) conducted a text analysis to compare Western media reports' thematic presentation and emotional tone on Confucius Institutes. However, existing research primarily examines problem representation without sincerely addressing underlying issues such as power asymmetries in international discourse and China's diplomatic challenges. This study seeks to bridge the gap between the micro-level discourse of news texts and the macro-reality of China's international communication strategy. By integrating theoretical perspectives from discourse analysis, diplomacy, and public relations, this research aims to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of Confucius Institutes and their evolving role in global public opinion.

B. Methods

Due to the dominance of the English language in international communication and the unique role of the United Kingdom in the global community, the UK has established itself as a dominant force in the media landscape. As the scale and influence of Confucius Institutes continue to expand, they have garnered increasing attention from the British media, becoming a

high-profile topic of discussion. Currently, the UK hosts the highest number of Confucius Institutes in Europe and has the world's highest per capita ratio of Confucius Institutes. According to the official website of the China International Chinese Language Education Foundation, as of February 2024, there are 34 Confucius Institutes in the UK, compared to 19 in France and 12 in Italy (China International Chinese Language Education Foundation, 2024). At the same time, the UK is also one of the European countries with the most vigorous push to "shut down" Confucius Institutes, particularly after 2022 (Smith, 2023). British media coverage, therefore, serves as a representative case in studying the reputation of Confucius Institutes across Europe.

Several leading British newspapers shape public discourse on this issue. The Times, The Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, The Guardian, Daily Mirror, The Sun, and The Independent are among the seven most internationally recognized British newspapers. Among them, The Times is renowned for its political commentaries and in-depth reports, often reflecting mainstream conservative ideology in the UK. The Daily Telegraph covers international news, arts, and sports and is conservative. The Financial Times specializes in financial news and is known for its rigorous and reliable reporting with a neutral political stance. The Guardian focuses on international news and analytical feature articles with a more radical, left-wing liberal approach. In contrast, The Independent maintains a neutral stance between The Times's conservatism and The Guardian's progressive approach. Meanwhile, The Sun and The Daily Mirror focus less on domestic political and economic issues or international affairs and are considered less representative samples. The selection of these seven newspapers ensures a balanced analysis of political stance, reporting style, and influence.

Three hundred twenty-three articles were retrieved from the LexisNexis global news and information database between January 1, 2014, and May 1, 2024, using the keyword "Confucius Institute" (LexisNexis, 2024). The study retained only articles in which Confucius Institutes were the central focus, removing those that only mentioned them briefly or were repeated within or across media outlets. This filtering process resulted in a final sample of 63 valid articles, as shown in Table 1. The study applied Gamson's (1992) "interpretive package" theory to analyze these texts, particularly its four framing elements: metaphors, examples, catchphrases, and in-depth descriptions. The frequency of keywords appearing in each article was systematically coded and analyzed to identify dominant frames and trends in British media discourse on Confucius Institutes.

Table 1. Sample Statistics of British Media Reports on Confucius Institutes

Media Name	Total Sample Size	Effective Sample Size
The Guardian	73	17
The Times.	98	14
The Independent.	65	12
The Daily Telegraph.	38	10
Financial Times.	38	5
The Sun.	6	3
Daily Mirror.	5	2
Sum up	323	63

The frequency statistics of the study are based on the following two principles: firstly, the text of the same report that further extends and explains the opinion words of the previous article is not included in the word frequency range, such as the overlap between the headline and the main body, the introduction, and the main body, etc. Secondly, words with the same thematic meaning or emotional color can be transformed into each other, such as "controversy" and "debate", "sinister" and "malicious" can be regarded as the same

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Analysis of The Thematic Framework in The Context of The Theory of "Interpretive Package"

The study of "*framing*" originated from the convergence of cultural sociology and cognitive psychology. Framing studies tend to explore the psycho-cognitive mechanisms behind the socio-political and public opinion reflected by the media through the socialization of news texts. Tuchman (1978), an American scholar, put forward a new conception of the news frame theory and the social role of news texts through many field surveys: the news is not only a biased picture of reality but also a kind of frame for constructing reality. To a large extent, the coverage of Chinese issues in the British media stems from the British government's sentimental tendency toward China and the British public's cognitive model of China. At the same time, the related news texts also build and solidify people's original cognitive structure and public opinion tendency in the opposite direction. Under the support of the insufficient communication power of Chinese media, the monopolization of the international discourse market by Western media, and the rigidity of the concept of "*Western-centrism*", the stability of the cognitive base and discourse construction of the UK's China-related issues has gradually increased. It is difficult to be changed once it has been formed.

The study of news frames includes the critical discourse analysis of Van Dijk and Fairclough, the discursive structure analysis of Pan Zhongdang and Kocic, and Gamson's "*interpretive package*". Among them, Gamson's theory of "*interpretive package*" argues that frames, as the "*central organizing idea*" of media discourse, play a key role in providing meanings for specific issues through the quantitative statistical analysis and content analysis of the elements of "*framing device*" and "*reasoning device*" (WA Gamson, 1989), through quantitative statistical analysis and content analysis of the elements in the "*framing device*" and "*reasoning device*". Therefore, this theoretical model of framing can systematically expand the extension of the central issue of "Confucius Institutes" and provide more perspectives for the study of British public opinion on Confucius Institutes. According to Gamson, a news report can contain several interpretive packages, each of which is organized into two main parts: "*framing devices*" (Metaphors, Examples, Catchphrase, and Descriptions) and "*reasoning devices*" (sources of the problem, consequences of the impacts, attributions of responsibility, and ethical principles). Using the theory of "*interpretive package*" to interpret the overall discourse framework of the British media's reports on the Confucius Institutes, it can systematically and hierarchically analyze the discourse presentation of each element in the three first-level thematic frames of "Confucius Institutes", namely "authoritarian government", "China's threat theory", and "China's Confucius Institutes' controversy".

Based on the representative high-frequency topics in the sample and previous studies on Western perceptions of China, the "*framing devices*" of the three thematic frames, namely, "authoritarian government," "China threat theory," and "the controversy of Confucius Institutes," are characterized as follows. "The "*framing devices*" of the three thematic frames are characterized as follows.

The theme of "Authoritarian Government"

The discourse of this thematic framework focuses on China's excessive interference in the education of Confucius Institutes in the UK in the form of government funding, which

is regarded as a means for the Chinese government to exercise global control, and the discourse is mostly an airing of dissatisfaction. 53 out of the 63 samples are related to the meanings of "funded by the Chinese government," "government autocracy," "government extension organization," and "government propaganda tool," accounting for 86.9% of the total samples. Of the 63 articles in the sample, 54 articles, or 86% of the total sample, are "funded by the Chinese government (or funded by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the State Council, etc.)", "government dictatorship", "government extension", and "government propaganda tool". "Funded by the Chinese government" is almost always emphasized by the British media when they give an overview of the Confucius Institutes. The negative emotionality of the text in the thematic framework of China's "government tyranny" is related to the West's misinterpretation of China's democratic issues and ideological preconceptions and, at the same time, reflects the multiple dilemmas of the Chinese government's international image.

Metaphors

"Suppressive' China", "an extension of the Chinese government office" (emphasizing its nature as an organization directly under the Chinese Ministry of Education; calling for disclosure of details of the Chinese government's financial support for Confucius Institutes, increasing the transparency of the Chinese government's control over Confucius Institutes). (emphasizing its nature as an organization directly under the Chinese Ministry of Education; calling for the disclosure of details of the Chinese government's financial support for the Confucius Institutes, increasing the transparency of the Chinese government's control over the Confucius Institutes)

Examples

The Chinese Confucius Institutes work with organizations under the Chinese Ministry of Education; British universities should stop the Chinese government and academics from eavesdropping on business secrets; the Chinese government can work with the university system to promote better operation of the Chinese Confucius Institutes instead of issuing top-down decrees; the British government needs to provide better Chinese language programs at all levels of education to improve its educational competitiveness instead of simply banning the Chinese Confucius Institutes from operating in the United Kingdom. The UK government needs to provide better Chinese language programs at all levels of education to improve its competitiveness, rather than simply banning Chinese Confucius Institutes from operating in the UK.

Catchphrases

Freedom (46 times, Chinese Confucius Institutes stifle freedom of expression in the UK; impede objective debate on public issues; contradict academic freedom; affect political freedom and freedom of information in the UK, etc.), national security (18 times, Britain's autonomous cultural, supply chain, political and military security is threatened by China), human rights (15 times, strict monitoring of the speech of Chinese overseas students and teachers of Chinese Confucius Institutes; expanding Chinese culture to oppress Chinese minority groups; the belief that the Chinese regime violates human rights is an unquestionable fact, etc.). Human rights (15 times, strict monitoring of the speech of Chinese overseas students and teachers at Chinese Confucius Institutes, the growth of Han Chinese culture to oppress China's ethnic minority groups, the belief that human rights abuses by the Chinese regime are an unquestionable fact, etc.).

The discourse surrounding Confucius Institutes in the UK is shaped by a mix of positive, negative, and neutral perspectives, reflecting broader debates on their role in education, cultural exchange, and geopolitics. From a positive standpoint, Confucius Institutes are described as purely educational and cultural centers, uninfluenced by the authoritarian government in Beijing. Supporters argue that these institutes should not be involved in political matters and call for an end to the politicization of educational exchange programs. They emphasize that Confucius Institutes function as joint ventures between a Chinese university and a foreign host institution, established upon the host university's application. The Chinese side is said to respect the autonomy of these institutions, ensuring that they operate independently and without interference in academic freedom.

On the negative side, critics argue that Confucius Institutes operate under the authority of the Chinese Ministry of Education and serve as an extension of the Chinese government abroad. The significant amount of funding the Chinese government provides is a point of concern, with some viewing it as a means for Beijing to exert influence over foreign academic institutions. Additionally, concerns have been raised that partnerships between Confucius Institutes and the Chinese government could pose risks to national security, particularly if they are perceived as a tool for spreading political narratives. Some voices within the UK argue that the British government has lost control over the operation of Confucius Institutes within its territory, further fueling skepticism about their true purpose.

A neutral perspective suggests that while Confucius Institutes may serve a cultural and educational function, their financial ties to the Chinese government raise concerns about transparency. Some propose that China's financial support for Confucius Institutes in the UK should be discontinued to prevent potential conflicts of interest. Others suggest that China may already be reducing its state funding for these institutes in an effort to sidestep the UK government's increasing scrutiny and regulatory pressure. The discussion surrounding Confucius Institutes in the UK reflects broader geopolitical tensions, with perspectives ranging from support for their cultural mission to concerns over political influence and national security.

The Theme "China Threat Theory"

The "China Threat Theory" is one of the issues derived from the development of China's comprehensive national power, and Western media reports regard China as a "threat" to their own country's politics, economy, military, and culture, reflecting the contradictions of the West's zero-sum game in international relations. 63 samples contain the theme of "China Threat," i.e., "China Threat," "Regime Propaganda Tool," and "Evil Influence." Sixty-one news articles in the sample contain the theme of "Chinese threat," i.e., news reports involving such phrases as "Chinese threat," "propaganda tool of the regime," "evil influence," and so on. The total number of news reports containing the theme of "China threat theory," i.e., involving the words "China threat," "propaganda tool of the regime," and "evil influence," is 49, accounting for 80.3% of the total sample. From China's standpoint, the positive comments related to the "China threat theory" include criticisms and refutations of the theory. However, the discourse criticizing the "China threat theory" in the sample, on the one hand, points to the adverse disputes it may cause in the international arena, e.g., retaliation by the Chinese side (being labeled anti-China by the international community and thus being attacked by China), and on the other hand, it tries to deny China's influence on the Western world in its entirety, labeling the threat of China's Confucius Institutes as insignificant and trivial, as well as the threat of the Chinese Confucius Institutes as a threat to China. On the other hand, it tries to dismiss China's influence on the Western world in

general, labeling threats such as China's Confucius Institute as insignificant, and both approaches portray China in a negative light. The hostile rhetoric of the "China Threat Theory" thematic framework includes sub-frames such as cultural soft power and propaganda tools, arguing that on the one hand, China develops and strengthens its own cultural soft power globally through the Chinese Confucius Institutes as a tool of "propaganda"; on the other hand, it steals the intellectual property rights of the United Kingdom, threatening the Western countries. On the other hand, it stole intellectual property rights from Britain and threatened the interests of Western countries. Neutral statements of the "China threat theory" objectively explain the argument's connotation or demonstrate the assertion's popularity.

The analysis of British media coverage of Confucius Institutes reveals distinct framing techniques that influence public perception. These techniques, including metaphors, examples, catchphrases, and descriptive narratives, collectively construct a discourse that portrays Confucius Institutes as instruments of China's cultural and political influence. One of the most frequently used metaphors is "China's Trojan Horse," which appears five times in the analyzed media reports. This metaphor frames Confucius Institutes as a concealed threat, suggesting that their presence in British universities is a covert means for China to expand its influence in a way that could undermine national interests. Similarly, specific examples reinforce this narrative, such as the claim that China is "infiltrating" British universities through Confucius Institutes. This portrayal aligns with concerns that these institutions function as vehicles for enhancing China's soft power, positioning them as a strategic tool for cultural expansion rather than a purely educational initiative.

Catchphrases further amplify the framing of Confucius Institutes as a controversial presence in the UK. The phrase "evil influence" appears 20 times, emphasizing the demonization of China's international role. The term "soft power" is used 17 times, highlighting fears that Confucius Institutes facilitate the spread of Chinese culture in the West, which is perceived as both a challenge to Western values and a potential risk to China's own ethnic minority cultures. Additionally, the term "propaganda tool" appears 15 times, reinforcing the notion that Confucius Institutes engage in coercive and asymmetrical dissemination of information, thereby shaping public skepticism about China's global communication strategies.

Media descriptions of Confucius Institutes can be categorized into three perspectives: positive, negative, and neutral. On the positive side, some reports argue that viewing China solely as a threat is a "willful misunderstanding" of the complexities of the modern world, suggesting that a more balanced perspective is needed. However, the dominant negative narrative portrays Confucius Institutes as a significant threat to the UK's security and prosperity. These reports claim that Confucius Institutes generate negative publicity for the UK and call for greater transparency regarding their influence on British education. Meanwhile, some media outlets adopt a neutral stance by avoiding emotionally charged terms such as "threat," "partner," or "adversary" when discussing China's role, acknowledging the complexity of its global influence without overt bias. These framing strategies contribute to the ongoing debate about Confucius Institutes in the UK, reinforcing concerns about their role and reflecting broader geopolitical tensions between China and the West.

The Controversy Over the Confucius Institute Itself

Compared with the two ideological frames of China's threat theory and Chinese government authoritarianism, the debate over the Confucius Institutes is relatively mild and

neutral. However, it also implies a negative sentiment tendency. A total of 32 reports in the sample, accounting for 51% of the total number of reports, dealt with the controversy over the issue of Confucius Institutes themselves, with sub-topics such as whether the United Kingdom or other countries should ban the Confucius Institutes, whether the disputes and debates over the Confucius Institutes should be sustained, and what kind of identity should be used by the Confucius Institutes to establish a foothold in the world, and so on. In the study of Chinese and foreign news text quotes, some scholars believe that the quotes in Chinese news present a straightforward style of media tendency. In contrast, the quotes in British media tend to indirectly and implicitly side-step the media's stance. The subjects quoted in the sample include national government officials (speaking in their governmental or personal capacity), teachers and volunteers of the Chinese Confucius Institutes, students, ambassadors, scholars, journalists, and so on. While ostensibly balancing the different perspectives of different sectors of society, the texts implicitly rejecting the controversy over the establishment of the Chinese Confucius Institute in the UK, such as "ideological police," are negatively colored. On the other hand, most of the positive "defense" of the Chinese Confucius Institutes quoted in the text comes from Chinese ambassadors and other representatives of the Chinese government rather than from the British public.

The framing of Confucius Institutes in British media often employs specific rhetorical strategies, including metaphors, examples, catchphrases, and descriptive narratives, to shape public perception. These strategies contribute to the broader discourse on China's global influence and the role of Confucius Institutes in education and diplomacy. One commonly used metaphor portrays Confucius Institute workers as "overseas ideological policemen" employed by China. This metaphor suggests that these institutions function as tools of state control rather than as cultural or educational platforms. Similarly, specific examples reinforce this narrative by arguing that while ostensibly promoting Chinese language and culture, Confucius Institutes advance China's strategic interests in the education sector. Some reports claim that Confucius Institutes are directly linked to the Central Propaganda Department and the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China, allegedly attempting to influence elite organizations and individuals worldwide.

Catchphrases such as "closure of Confucius Institutes" appear 48 times in media discussions, often accompanied by terms like "termination of cooperation" and "cease operation." These phrases emphasize the increasing push to shut down Confucius Institutes in the UK. Additionally, visa-related concerns are frequently mentioned, with eight instances discussing how the British Home Office is considering raising visa requirements for Chinese teachers at Confucius Institutes. This reflects broader anxieties over national security and academic independence.

Media descriptions of Confucius Institutes range from positive to negative and neutral perspectives. On the positive side, some reports highlight the undeniable effectiveness of Confucius Institutes in teaching Chinese culture, arguing that they help address the "Chinese knowledge deficit" in the UK. Advocates suggest that all sectors in the UK should engage in an open debate about the role of Confucius Institutes rather than resorting to outright rejection. However, the dominant negative framing positions the Confucius Institute controversy as a diplomatic dispute, emphasizing tensions between China and Western governments. Neutral perspectives in the media acknowledge concerns about the potential negative impact of Confucius Institutes on British universities while recognizing such institutions' legal and transparent operations. Some reports note that certain regions have canceled plans to establish new Confucius Institutes, reflecting a cautious approach to their expansion. Others suggest reversing the commitment to banning Confucius Institutes in the

UK could improve Sino-British relations. Additionally, some voices argue that, like other international institutions operating in the UK, Confucius Institutes should function transparently within legal frameworks and remain committed to fostering an open and free environment for academic exchange. The media's framing of Confucius Institutes reflects broader geopolitical tensions and debates over China's influence in global education. While some narratives acknowledge their educational contributions, others emphasize concerns over political interference, security risks, and diplomatic conflicts.

Table 2. Analysis matrix and word frequency statistics of the sample "interpretation package" framing device

The first-level thematic framework	The proportion of pages	Metaphor	Keywords
authoritarian government	86%	-Press type China -Extension of the Office of the Government of China	-Freedom (46 times) -National security (18 times) -Human rights (15 times)
The China Threat Theory	79%	China's Trojan Horse (5 times)	-Evil influence (20 times) -Soft power (17 times) -Advocacy tools (15 times)
the controversy over the Confucius Institute itself	51%	employed by China's overseas ideological police	-Closure of Confucius Institutes (48 times) -Visa issues (8 times)

The proportion and frequency statistics of the sample are shown in Table 2. On the whole, only 13 of the 63 samples have neutral or positive attitudes towards the Confucius Institutes, accounting for 21.3% of the samples, of which the macro issues include denying that the Confucius Institutes will affect the freedom of expression and academic freedom in the United Kingdom, advocating that the British government should seek cooperation with China on major international issues, the Confucius Institutes in the eyes of the Chinese, and China's international image; and the micro-narratives include reports on events and activities hosted by Confucius Institutes, such as cultural exchanges and celebrations in the United Kingdom and Chinese campuses, and so on. The micro-narratives include the events organized by the Confucius Institute, such as celebrating Sino-British cultural exchanges and introducing Chinese culture into British campuses. In addition to the three core frameworks of China threat, government control, and the controversy over the institution itself, the rest of the news coverage of the Confucius Institutes is positive, focusing on topics such as the economy, investment in education, and various cultural activities organized by Chinese and foreign organizations. The British media acknowledged the Chinese government's economic contribution to local culture and education but generally criticized the Chinese government's excessive economic involvement in the cultural education of local universities and expressed concern about the long-term negative consequences of such involvement.

2. Analysis of the Causes of Negative Public Opinion of Chinese Confucius Institutes in the UK

In 2015, China's state visit to the UK ushered in a "golden era" of China-UK relations. However, since Boris Johnson took office in 2019, the relationship between China and the UK has had significant ups and downs with Brexit and the rise of China. Regarding positioning relations with China, the Johnson government defined China as a "systemic competitor," the Truss government, which has only existed for 45 days, also simply defined China as a "threat." In October 2022, Rishi Sunak came to power. During the election campaign, Sunak also declared that China is the "number one threat" to British national security and claimed that the "golden era" of Sino-British relations has ended, and the UK's negative perception of China has risen. Changes in China-UK diplomatic relations have a direct impact on the image of Confucius Institutes in the UK, as well as on the attitude of the Western world towards China in the field of culture and education. Based on the framework of the three core themes reported by the Confucius Institutes in the UK, this study analyzes their causes in turn.

Authoritarian Government': The Global Discursive Power of The Western Media

As a matter of fact, since 2020, the Ministry of Education has changed the name of the Confucius Institute Headquarters to the Center for Sino-Foreign Language Exchange and Cooperation. It is no longer in charge of the Confucius Institutes, but the British media claims that the Confucius Institutes are "being dictated by the government". However, the British media still claim that the Chinese Confucius Institutes are "dictated by the government". Scholars' critical discourse analysis based on the corpus of Western mainstream media found that Western news reports tend to construct China as passive and negatively labeled. The passivity is reflected in the fact that when China has outstanding performance in international affairs and gradually gains more discourse power, the Western media tend to describe China's superiority as a result of "being helped by the Western society" when it comes to China's negative issues, the Western media tend to elevate it to the level of the Chinese government, which is a reflection of the fact that the UK is based on a long history of "Western-centrism" and has been a "western-centered" country, but it is not the only one. This reflects the UK's long-standing power ideology based on "Western-centrism" (Tang, 2021).^[12] British media reports on the Confucius Institutes highlight the passive nature of China's image in the international discourse, including the criticism (the British community is responsible for the government funding of the Confucius Institutes) and the label (the Confucius Institutes are a Trojan Horse). The Guardian, for example, neutrally describes the positive effects of Chinese Confucius Institutes in educating British students to improve their Chinese language skills and "develop strict disciplinary habits". At the same time, The Times argues that foreign language education should not be dependent on other countries (authoritative countries in the world, including China), and denies and criticizes China's "confessionalism". On the other hand, the Times argues that foreign language education should not be dependent on others (the world's authoritative countries, including China), dismissing and criticizing China's "conformity" model of education and extending it to larger issues such as human rights. The passive acceptance of the construction of the international image and the derivation of educational issues based on the Western discourse by the Confucius Institutes are a symptom of the problem that China is subjected to the containment of the Western hegemonic discourse.

Although the Western media advocate the principle of objectivity in news practice guided by professionalism in journalism, behind the scenes, they are inevitably manipulated by domestic interest groups and political forces in the United Kingdom, and there are varying degrees of distortion in news reports on China in various fields.^[13] Foucault (Foucault M, 1982) defines "discourse" as the means and ends of people's struggles rather than a tool

limited to the symbols of thought; discourse refers to the power relations behind the discourse and the party that occupies the hegemony of the discourse can "lock its position through the relations of power and the strategies of struggle, and the results of these interactions". Through power relations and strategies of struggle, as well as the results of these interactions, to lock in its position".^[14]In the research sample, "the nature of Chinese government funding" is almost a necessary prefix for the British media to report on the Confucius Institutes. Their stance on a misinterpretation of the Chinese Confucius Institutes' demands for cultural exchanges as the Chinese government's "monitors" is a tactic of discursive struggle in an attempt to This is a tactic of discursive struggle, trying to suppress public opinion and cover up the unequal status quo of discursive power, and continue to "lock" its position of power.

"China Threat Theory": The Crisis of Power Status in Western Societies

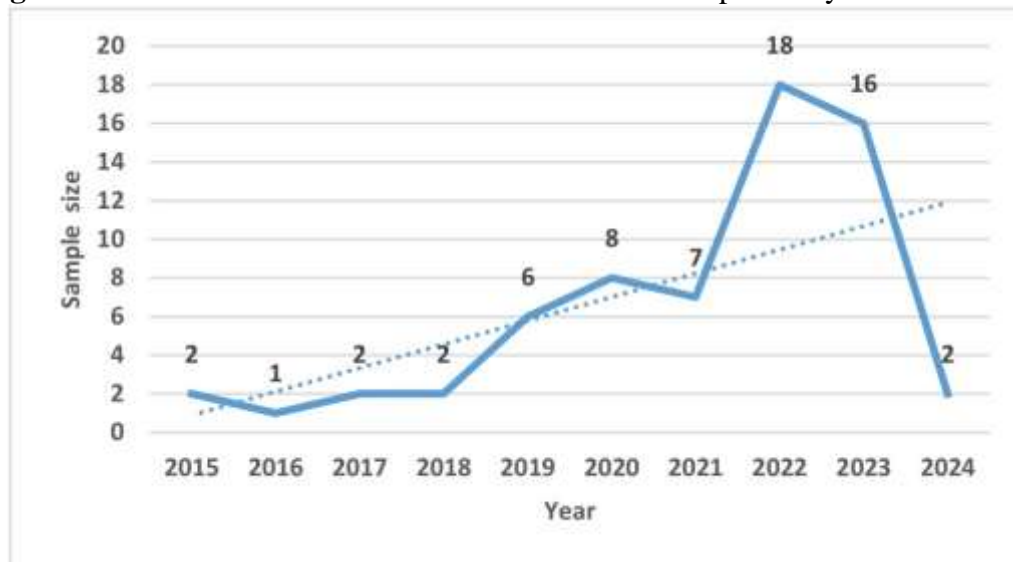
The tendency of the British media to misinterpret or misinterpret the philosophy of China's Confucius Institutes and to turn the issue of China's Confucius Institutes into a political issue reflects the game between the dominant powers of the Chinese and Western international systems. According to Joseph Nye (Nye, 2020), a neoliberal scholar of American international relations theory, China's cultural diplomacy is aimed at realizing the dialogue between cultural competitors, neither denying cultural hegemony nor seeking a new cultural hegemony to replace it; its appeal for cultural pluralism and harmony means that it does not regard this struggle as a zero-sum game, but many Western scholars tend to think that China's rise is at the expense of the interests of Western societies. Within the framework of the theme of "China Threat Theory" involving the Confucius Institute in the British media, the British media have distinctly called for paying attention to the influence of the Confucius Institute on the British academia, business, politics, military, and other fields, and breaking away from the trap of the long-standing Western-centered ideology. The 2024 *Daily Telegraph* reported that Ken McCallum, director general of MI5, and the National Cyber Security Centre issued a warning; the intervention comes amid growing concerns about efforts by foreign states, including China, Iran, and Russia, to infiltrate UK universities in order to advance their own authoritarian, military and commercial powers...Which poses a security threat to UK universities." At the same time, some reports also emphasized that there is no need to worry too much about the negative impact of the Chinese Confucius Institute on Britain's freedom of expression, cultural soft power, and intellectual property protection and that the scale of the institution is not large enough to have a substantial impact on Britain's academic freedom and cultural soft power. To some extent, the British media's denial that China is a "threatening" force is an attempt to alleviate the generalized anxiety of Western societies about the "rise of China" and their inability to accept the loss of their international power and status.^[15]

Scholars summarize the motives of the Western world's international agenda of "China threat theory" into four scenarios: transferring the crisis of domestic social contradictions, consolidating the hegemonic position of those with vested interests, balancing the psychological gap of the rise of the East, and undermining China.^[15]Under the wave of global informatization development, the international discourse power of the Western world has shown a tendency to decline, and the crisis psychology of historical vested interests transfer has been highlighted again, so China's rise is regarded as a significant "threat" to its interests. The British media's assertion that China's Confucius Institutes have an "evil influence" is essentially a search for evidence of China's "threat" to the international community at all levels, and the international cultural exchanges of China's Confucius Institutes are forcibly given irrationality to balance the inherent crisis mentality.

The Institutional Closure Crisis: Western-Led International Agenda-Setting

Chart 3 shows the trend of sample size from 2015 to 2024, which shows that the overall interest in Confucius Institutes in the UK has been increasing yearly. The chart shows that the number of reports involving Confucius Institutes in the UK peaked in 2022 and 2023, and the number of discussions on topics such as "the intensification of controversy over the development of Confucius Institutes" and "the closure of Confucius Institutes" has increased significantly, and will slow down in 2024. The change in the degree of controversy of Confucius Institutes in the UK largely reflects the changes in diplomatic attitudes and policies between China and the UK. At the beginning of his tenure in 2022, Sunak took a tough stance on China, emphasizing the need for a "tough pragmatist" policy against China and Russia. He not only declared that the "golden age" of China and Britain was over but also declared that China was "Competing with" the West for global influence, posing a systemic challenge to the values and interests of Britain and the entire Western world. However, at the end of 2022, during the 17th G20 Summit, Sunak's perception of China began to shift from a "systemic threat" to a "systemic challenge," and his attitude towards China softened. In 2023, the British "Guardian" and "The Independent" both reported on Confucius Institutes, showing that Sunak believes that the UK should respect China's history and culture and attach importance to China's important role in the international system. Given China's importance in the world economy, the UK must engage in dialogue with China, manage its differences with China, and work with China to address global challenges. Despite this, since 2023, the British media's softening of its attitude on China has been limited to international political, economic, and other grand diplomatic issues, and it has remained tough on the closure of the Confucius Institute itself.

Figure 1. Trends in the number of Confucius Institutes reported by the UK media



The Chinese Confucius Institutes are said to be the largest and fastest language promotion program the world has ever seen. China has established more than 500 Chinese Confucius Institutes worldwide in just over a decade. However, since 2010, due to the Western world's concern and skepticism towards China, the Chinese Confucius Institutes have experienced a wave of closures, with more than 100 in the United States alone. The wave of Confucius Institute closures and the trend of public opinion in Europe reflect China's long-standing constraints on the international agenda dominated by the Western world and overshadowed by the discursive power of Western media. According to Gramsci A (1971),

although hegemony is formed through "consent", it will be constantly readjusted and renegotiated, and the rise and resistance of power is a long-term two-way process; when the counter-hegemonic party will participate in the "war of positions" of the resistance of discursive power, the hegemonic party will participate in the "war of positions" of the resistance of discursive power. When the counter-hegemonic party engages in a "war of positions" of resistance to discursive power, the hegemonic party will resist any emerging force that may challenge its position.^[17] When China's Confucius Institutes emerge as an emerging force in the global cultural arena, the hegemonic side will see them as a potential threat to its international dominance and use its discursive power to set an international agenda, reinforcing the rationale for shutting down China's Confucius Institutes. The British media have on several occasions reported negative publicity about the Confucius Institutes themselves, using their media agenda to incite a social agenda for the closure of the Confucius Institutes and attempting to expand that agenda to the global arena.

3. The Path of Reshaping International Public Opinion of China's Confucius Institutes

Joseph Nye regards "power" as the ability to influence the behavior of others for one's benefit, and "attract and co-opt" is one of the basic forms of exercising power, as well as a manifestation of cultural soft power. The concepts of "benevolence," "harmony," and "propriety" in traditional Chinese Confucianism contain the power to attract of cultural values among different individuals. The concepts of "benevolence," "harmony," and "propriety" in traditional Chinese Confucianism contain the power to attract of cultural values among different individuals, which echoes the concept of Western cultural soft power. The Confucius Institutes are an important driving force to systematically promote the construction of China's cultural soft power and an effective mechanism to innovate the transnational flow of oriental culture and realize the two-way attraction of Eastern and Western cultural values. Under the theoretical perspective of cultural constructivism, the cultural soft power of countries with different historical backgrounds is not a relationship between one and the other. Under the condition of eliminating stereotypes, a common interaction mechanism exists between cultures of different backgrounds to build new cultural meanings and realize the synergistic development and shared prosperity of cultures of different countries. The public relations and international image reconstruction of the Confucius Institutes should have a global perspective and be carried out from the aspects of promoting global dialogues, seeking common interests, and reconstructing the identity of the institutions.

Improvement of the localization strategy to resolve the conflict of "authoritarian government."

The Chinese Embassy in Germany has declared that the activities of Chinese Confucius Institutes "should serve the common interests and concerns of both sides and must be planned and implemented based on comprehensive communication between the partners." Ignoring the common interests of China and foreign countries and focusing on disseminating Chinese culture to the outside world is an obstacle to the localization of Chinese Confucius Institutes, and it is bound to attract the suspicion and concern of overseas operators of Chinese Confucius Institutes. Even as a non-profit organization, Chinese Confucius Institutes still have cultural and economic interests in other countries. At the level of cultural exchanges, the promotion of Chinese civilization and Chinese culture on a global scale will strengthen the connection and integration of cultures and promote the innovation and development of cultural industries in countries around the world; at the level of economic

benefits, the mastery of the Chinese language or knowledge of Chinese culture can expand the range of job choices in the global job market. The growth of Chinese-speaking talents in various countries will also vigorously promote global economic and trade cooperation. The focus on international common interests is the key to the Confucius Institute public opinion crisis and should be emphasized in the international discourse.

In addition, if we focus on regional and national differences, we can see that the layout of Confucius Institutes around the world is relatively messy, and different styles of courses are not designed according to the cultural differences of different countries and regions. Hanban should establish an effective monitoring system to effectively monitor and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of Confucius Institutes in different countries and implement differentiated teaching programs based on the cultural background of each country and the feedback from students. The quality of Confucius Institutes is related to the international reputation of Sinology education, and the supervision of the quality of their global education is complex. Fortunately, the advent of the era of big data is changing the traditional way of evaluation. The technological frontier of the "Internet" has also provided reliable technical support for the quality of Confucius Institutes, which provides a new path and thinking for the supervision of the quality of Confucius Institutes and also puts forward new hope for evaluating the quality of global Chinese education.

Downplaying "Threat" Stereotypes and Promoting Pluralistic Dialogue

To dilute the negative stereotypes of China and Confucius Institutes in the Western media, we should seek a "common meaning space" for exchanges between China and the Western world from the perspective of global civilization and peace. In the development of Confucius Institutes, the conflict between Chinese and Western thinking and values is one of the obstacles to the construction of Confucius Institutes. However, the core issue is the cultural understanding and game between countries. Nobel laureate Mo Yan once said: "Only by taking out the most basic things that are most in line with people's basic emotions and taking the lead in introducing them may we be more able to win the recognition of the people of other countries." "When actively dealing with the issue of cultural diplomacy, China should deeply understand the long-standing problem of "cultural discounting" of Chinese culture in the West, and effectively achieve "cultural icebreaking". On the one hand, through the in-depth exchanges between China and the Western world, more countries will be willing and interested to learn about China and understand Chinese culture through the intermediary media of Confucius Institutes. On the other hand, China also needs to listen to the voices of other countries actively, understand the construction needs of the partner countries of Confucius Institutes, dispel misunderstandings, cooperate in running schools, and use the power of Chinese culture to give the construction wisdom that the partner countries want. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the international community will not highly recognize China's cultural image because of its propaganda, and only the praise and support of other countries will establish a good reputation in international cooperation and dispel international doubts.

China should also make corresponding efforts on the issue of international public relations for Confucius Institutes. The long-term existence of the words "cultural invasion" and "evil forces" in the framework of the Western reports on China's Confucius Institutes reflects the lag of China's international public relations, which is associated with the monopoly of Western foreign propaganda media over the international discourse. In the theoretical field of crisis public relations, to solve the crisis of public opinion that China's Confucius Institutes are regarded as a "cultural threat" by the West, we should first seek the

common interests of all parties and build a dialogue paradigm of "two-way reciprocal communication" among stakeholders, instead of imposing a "control" on the negative public opinion, and then "control" the negative public opinion. The first step is to seek the common interests of all parties and to build a dialogue paradigm of "two-way reciprocal communication" among stakeholders rather than to "control" the negative public opinion. At the level of education and cross-cultural education, the Confucius Institutes should stand on the value position of other countries, break the one-way persuasive model of "me first," and uphold the basic educational concept of cultural pluralism and constructivism to realize two-way recognition and integration with the founding countries. At the macro level of the international environment, in response to the "China threat" and other opposing arguments derived from China's Confucius Institutes, the main body of China's international public relations should be expanded from diplomatic spokespersons of official backgrounds to the general public. Opinion leaders with discourse influence in global social media should be actively cultivated to promote the pluralistic integration of innovation and synergistic development of various types of heterogeneous civilizations. Synergistic development among various heterogeneous civilizations. At the micro level of considering the differences between countries, Chinese Confucius Institutes can divide the countries in the world into several levels according to the linguistic distance (the degree of difficulty of the target country's people in understanding Chinese), and then carry out hierarchical and orderly dissemination on this basis, thus perfecting the international layout of the dissemination of Chinese Confucius Institutes.^[18]

Bridging Public Opinion Disputes and Reconstructing The Image of Chinese Confucius Institutes

The transformation of the international pattern shows that the progress of science and technology can solve the problem of time, space, and distance. However, it cannot solve the problem of cultural consensus. It must be admitted that, to a certain extent, Confucius Institutes are a new thing for the Western world that is contrary to the previous cultural consensus, and the emergence of new things will inevitably be questioned by traditional ideas and rejected by extremism. However, at the same time, it is also a powerful opportunity for the Confucius Institute to prove the wisdom of Chinese culture to the world's people. As a business card for cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, Confucius Institutes should optimize their brand image dynamically in the new international communication pattern.

The Confucius Institutes carry the mission of the times, such as passing on the traditional Chinese culture of Confucianism and telling China's story in the new era. However, scholars have pointed out (Louie K, 2011) that shaping its brand value with a single national identity will exacerbate the West's skepticism and prejudice against China. At a time when the Confucius Institutes are operating globally on a market scale, the international branding of the institutes and the localization of the institutes in the West should have a systematic, comprehensive, and long-term practical strategy. Specifically, in terms of brand marketing, Confucius Institutes should break away from the marketing framework dominated by China's official discourse, expand the "common meaning space" of Sino-foreign exchanges based on fully recognizing and caring for Western cultural backgrounds, and do a good job of "balancing global vision and local care". In terms of institutional operation strategy, Confucius Institutes are supposed to deeply cultivate the cultural context and social development of each country, and through exchanges and cooperation with local university teachers, social Chinese education institutions, and Chinese language activities participants, grasp the cognitive tendency of each social subject towards the Confucius Institutes in a

dynamic manner and update the mode of Chinese language and culture education promptly in order to adapt to the ever-changing cultural landscapes of other countries. Furthermore, the social role of Chinese Confucius Institutes is not only limited to a single Chinese language and culture educator, but it can also actively expand its identity boundaries in the social fields that are needed and recognized by other countries and take on multiple social roles, such as a messenger for the dissemination of Chinese culture, a trainer of international communication talents, and a builder of cultural integration and innovation industrial parks, and so on.

D. Conclusion

From the perspective of discourse analysis and framing theory, the British media's reports on Confucius Institutes generally focus on the three core topics of "government autocracy," "China threat theory," and "Confucius Institute closure crisis," and more than eighty percent of the texts are negatively emotional. The negative public opinion of the Confucius Institute in the UK results from the crisis psychology of the "historical vested interests" of Western countries. The Chinese narrative is based on the power of the West's international discourse, which also reflects the practical problems of China's insufficient international communication power and the inappropriate brand operation concept of the Confucius Institute.

At a time when the international landscape is undergoing profound adjustments and the globalization of social media is developing, the reshaping of overseas public opinion of Confucius Institutes should be elevated to the national strategic level, and the Confucius Institutes should be promoted as an important carrier for international exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, innovating the narrative discourse of China's culture to the outside world, and facilitating exchanges and cooperation in various fields around the world, to improve the effectiveness of international communication of Chinese culture effectively. Given the global operation and development of Confucius Institutes, the managers and staff of the Confucius Institutes should pay close attention to the dynamic and changing international public opinion situation, optimize the school-running environment and localized development strategy of the Confucius Institute with the concept of brand operation and marketing, and strive to make the treasure house of Chinese cultural resources equally and diversely benefit the cultures of all countries in the world.

This study integrates micro-discourse and macro-global perspectives. It proposes corresponding strategies according to the specific representation of overseas negative public opinion of Confucius Institutes, which has specific theoretical innovation and practical significance. On the other hand, the study only selected a representative single country, and the country selection and sample size did not consider the overall situation of global discourse, which affected the reliability and validity of the study. In the future, the research in this field can be further expanded, and the differences between the reports of Confucius Institutes at home and abroad can be compared from the perspective of public opinion so as to further improve, improve, and deepen the research system of China's international communication.

References

- Chen, X. (2023). Telling Chinese stories well: A study on the practice and effect of Confucius Institutes in the UK from the perspective of strategic narrative (2005-2022) [Doctoral dissertation, China Foreign Affairs University]. <https://doi.org/10.27373/d.cnki.gwjxc.2023.000290>
- China International Chinese Language Education Foundation. (2024). Official website. Retrieved from <https://ci.cn/qqwl>

- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 208-226). Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 1-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780405>
- Hall, S., Lumley, R., & McLennan, G. (2013). Politics and ideology: Gramsci. In *On ideology* (pp. 45-76). Routledge.
- Hu, C. (2024). Modeling the audience's perception of security in media discourse. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11, 663. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03079-1>
- Huang, M. (2023). Otherness and suspiciousness: A comparative study of public opinions between the Confucius Institute and Goethe-Institut in developing countries. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, 428. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01920-7>
- Jiang, F., & Yang, J. (2023). A critical discourse analysis of Confucius Institute reports in the mainstream media in the UK. *Journal of Liaoning Normal University (Social Sciences)*, 46(6), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.16216/j.cnki.lsxwbk.202306001>
- LexisNexis. (2024). Global news and information database. Retrieved from <https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/gateway.page>
- Liu, Z. (2022). Selective misreading of the triple dilemma of cross-cultural communication of Confucius Institutes. *Media Watch*, 2022(6), 36-43. <https://doi.org/10.19480/j.cnki.cmgc.2022.06.007>
- Official website of the Chinese Embassy in the UK. (2024). Retrieved from <https://england.lxgz.org.cn/england/hytg/kzxy/index.html>
- People's Daily Online. (2024). Retrieved from <http://edu.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0920/c1006-40324057.html>
- Qiao, C. (2021). Research on the construction of China's international discourse power from the perspective of soft power [Doctoral dissertation, Liaoning University]. <https://doi.org/10.27209/d.cnki.glniu.2021.000546>
- Tang, L. (2022). Transitive representations of China's image in the US mainstream newspapers: A corpus-based critical discourse analysis. *Journalism*, 22(3), 804-820. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918801116>
- Wang, X., & Zong, S. (2024). Characterization motivation and China's response to the new round of "China threat theory." *Teaching and Research*, 2024(4), 91-100.
- Xiang, Z., & Xiang, Z. (2022). Linguistic distance examination and stratification strategy of China's external communication practice: A case study of Confucius Institutes. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 44(4), 65-71. <https://doi.org/10.19997/j.cnki.xdcb.2022.04.008>
- Yang, X., & Gao, M. (2023). Media image analysis of Confucius Institutes from the perspective of others: A case study of EBSCO academic database in the United States. *Journal of Yunnan Normal University (Teaching and Research of Chinese as a Foreign Language)*, 21(5), 65-77. <https://doi.org/10.16802/j.cnki.ynsddw.2023.05.009>
- Yu, L. (2024). Bridging the problem gap in comparative education research in the era of globalization: Re-examining the relationship between local consciousness and international perspective. *Comparative Education Research*, 46(5), 55-63, 94. <https://doi.org/10.20013/j.cnki.ICE.2024.05.06>
- Zhang, W. (2022). The dilemma of public opinion of Confucius Institutes in the new situation: Characteristics, causes, and countermeasures. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 43(3), 20-26.