

The Role of Confucius Institutes in China-France Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges

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Abstract

It is of great significance to carry out cultural exchanges with France, which is a major and powerful cultural country. Confucius Institutes in France have played a huge role in spreading Chinese culture and promoting people-to-people exchanges between China and France, which can be reflected in the following three aspects: helping to promote the Chinese language and expand the influence of the Chinese language; Promote educational cooperation and exchanges between China and France, and cultivate talents for cultural exchanges between China and France; To enhance understanding and achieve mutually beneficial exchanges between China and France. In the future, it is necessary to continue to reflect on the concept of cultural exchange, and Confucius Institutes should change from “going out” in form to “going in” in connotation, so as to achieve the role of communicating with people through language and culture.

Keywords

Confucius Institute, China-France People-to-People Exchange, Reciprocal Exchange

1. Introduction

The cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and France can be traced back to the period of Louis XIV in France in the 17th century and the period of Kangxi in China. On February 6, 1688, Louis XIV sent five jesuit (Hon-gruhan, Mr. Zhang, Baijin, Li Ming, Liu Ying, they are also mathematicians) after leaving the French port of nearly three years finally arrived in Beijing on March 21, under emperor Kangxi summoned, and presented the letter of “The

sun king”, Louis XIV, the Chinese civilization and civilization has been are interlinked, Since then, “a formal history of cultural exchanges between China and France” (Brisay, 2014) has been created. In centuries of cultural dialogue, China and France have a special love for each other. It goes without saying that the Chinese people love and worship French culture. The French have always admired the long and splendid Chinese culture.

Since the beginning of the new century, China-France cultural and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation have been developing and deepening. In recent years, the two governments have signed many agreements to promote and deepen people-to-people and cultural exchanges. For example, the China-France Year of Culture, which started in October 2003, is a groundbreaking event for cultural exchanges between China and France. According to the agreement signed by the Chinese and French governments on the establishment of cultural centers in each other, the China Cultural Center was established in Paris on November 29, 2002, which was the first cultural center set up by China in a western country. The French Cultural Center, which opened in Beijing in October 2004, was the first foreign cultural center in China. It is the first time for Western countries to hold cultural year and set up cultural centers in each other, which has a good demonstration effect.

In September 2014, the China-France High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Mechanism was officially established in Paris. It is the highest-level dialogue mechanism jointly established by the two governments in the field of people-to-people and cultural exchanges. The establishment of this mechanism shows that China and France have reached important consensus to institutionalize and normalize people-to-people and cultural exchanges. At the same time, it also marks the upgrading of China’s external work from political diplomacy and economic and trade cooperation to political diplomacy, economic and trade cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. Since the founding of New China in 1949, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and France in 1964, and the mutual holding of cultural years and the establishment of cultural centers between China and France in 2002-2003, the cultural exchanges between the two countries have become increasingly frequent and gradually heated up. In 2017, the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Work of People-to-people and Cultural Exchanges with other Countries in order to better leverage the important role of People-to-people and Cultural Exchanges in China’s external work. This is the first time for Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges to establish a special document, defines the new era of Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges to speed up the goal and policy, and raises the importance of foreign cultural exchanges to an unprecedented level. Under the overall planning and promotion of the annual high-level dialogue meeting, the people-to-people and cultural exchanges between the two countries have been maintained at a high level and on a regular basis, and the scope of cooperation has gradually expanded to include 10 areas, including education, culture, science and technolo-

gy, health, sports, tourism, youth, women, media and sub-national cooperation. Education is a key area of the exchange mechanism (Wang & Zhang, 2021).

The goal of people-to-people exchanges is to bring the people closer to each other. The Constitution of the Confucius Institute clearly states that its purpose is to “enhance the understanding of the Chinese language and culture among the people of the world, develop the friendly relations between China and foreign countries, promote the development of diverse cultures in the world, and contribute to the construction of a harmonious world”. Since its inception, the Confucius Institute has taken Chinese language teaching as its main task and cultural communication as its fundamental task. Such long-term, smooth and silent language and cultural promotion has played a key role in promoting the French people’s understanding of Chinese culture and people-to-people exchanges between China and France.

2. Overview of Confucius Institutes in France

France is one of the first countries to establish Confucius Institutes. On July 31, 2005, the Confucius Institute of University of Poitiers was officially established by Nanchang University of China, University of Poitiers of France and ZTE Development Co., LTD., China. This is the first Confucius Institute established in France and the second Confucius Institute established by China in Europe after Germany. So far, France has 18 Confucius Institutes (see Table 1), the third largest number in Europe (after Britain and Germany).

Table 1. Overview of confucius institutes in France.

Name of Confucius Institute	Chinese partner universities/institutions	Date of establishment
Confucius Institute, University of Poitiers	Nanchang University	31.07.2005
Confucius Institute of Paris University	Wuhan University	06.12.2005
Confucius Institute, China Cultural Center, Paris	The ministry of culture	29.12.2005
Confucius Institute in La Rochelle	Beijing Language University	21.05.2006
Confucius Institute in Brittany	Shandong University	08.06.2006
Confucius Institute in Alsace	Jiangsu Provincial Government	23.01.2007
Confucius Institute of Clermont-Ferrand	Beijing International Studies University	12.11.2007
Confucius Institute of Aldova	Nanjing University	28.02.2008
Confucius Institute in Loire	Ludong University	13.04.2009
Confucius Institute in Toulouse	Tianjin Foreign Language University	02.12.2009
The Confucius Institute in Reunion	South China Normal University	05.05.2010
Confucius Institute at the University of Lorraine	Wuhan University of Technology	16.05.2011
Confucius Institute, University of French Polynesia	China Foreign Affairs University	15.01.2013
Confucius Institute in Montpellier	University of Electronic Science and Technology of China	16.04.2013
NEOMA Business School Confucius Institute for Business	Nankai University	17.10.2013
Confucius Institute of Cote d’Azur	Tianjin University	13.12.2013
Confucius Institute for Business in Europe	Beijing Foreign Studies University	13.05.2019
Confucius Institute in Pau	Xi’an International Studies University	01.09.2019

3. Overview of Chinese Language Teaching and Cultural Exchange in Confucius Institutes in France

3.1. Chinese Language Teaching in Confucius Institutes in France

Chinese teaching is the basis and priority of Confucius Institutes. Generally speaking, Confucius Institutes in France offer beginner, intermediate, advanced Chinese classes and Chinese proficiency test tutorial classes according to the different levels and requirements of students. The teachers of Confucius Institute are mainly Chinese teachers sent by the state, and also include Chinese teacher volunteers and local Chinese teachers. The teaching materials are independently selected according to the needs of each Confucius institute, with domestic teaching materials as the main materials and local teaching materials as the auxiliary materials. After more than ten years of development, Confucius Institutes in France have established a mature and complete system in terms of “teaching materials, teachers and teaching methods”, which can ensure the normal and orderly development of teaching work. All Confucius Institutes attach great importance to teaching quality and strictly select experienced Chinese teachers as a foreign language. The teaching process is standardized and orderly. Therefore, the Chinese language teaching in Confucius Institutes is more popular than the Chinese language training centers in ordinary Chinese associations, and the enrollment of Confucius institutes has increased every academic year. For example, the Confucius Institute of the University of Paris has developed from six basic Chinese classes at the beginning to about 30 classes including senior middle school classes, with nearly 500 registered students.

In addition to basic elementary, middle and advanced Chinese courses, the Confucius Institutes in France also offer special cultural courses for a long time. At present, most of the 18 Confucius Institutes offer traditional culture courses such as calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting, Chinese Musical Instruments and traditional Chinese medicine, which combine theory with practice and are as popular as language courses. Many students continue to study for years and achieve little success. Confucius Institute of Paris University held a special exhibition in 2019 for students of calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting.

3.2. Language and Cultural Exchange Activities of Confucius Institutes in France

For Confucius Institutes, cultural exchange activities not only shoulder the burden of cultural promotion, but also complement language and culture teaching. At the same time, through cultural activities, Confucius Institutes can further expand their influence and establish a more positive and positive image in the local community. The Confucius Institute Headquarters has some mature large-scale cultural exchange brand projects, such as the “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition for World College Students. The annual “Chinese Bridge” Competition attracts the continuous participation and attention of col-

lege students and high school students every year. The Confucius Institutes also hold spring camps or summer camps for students to go to Chinese universities for short-term study and travel in China. In this process, students can deeply experience and perceive Chinese culture. The Confucius Institutes in France have made full use of their advantages to carry out a variety of cultural activities, providing a perfect window for local people to learn about Chinese culture. The cultural activities organized by Confucius Institutes in France are rich in elements, involving all aspects of Chinese culture, including traditional Chinese medicine, tea ceremony, calligraphy, Tai Chi, martial arts, painting, dance, Spring Festival, film, Chinese characters, Chinese food, etc. Specific forms include academic lectures, performances, exhibitions, Chinese corner, cultural festival, Confucius Institute Open Day, evening party, etc. Among them, there are some large-scale cultural activities that have aroused great repercussions. For example, the Confucius Institute at the University of Poitiers, the first Confucius Institute in France, has held a series of lectures since its establishment. The lectures include: Words (from oracle to simplified Chinese), Chinese characters talk about folk (Chinese festivals and customs), history, Chinese history and places of interest), quality food, Chinese food culture and table manners and enjoy tea), (tea culture and tea Tea-horse Ancient Road), landscape ancient (China's geography and tourism), listening to music (violin, Peking Opera appreciation of China), introduction to tai chi, Chinese modern etiquette, Chinese fine arts and calligraphy, Confucius Thought and the Chinese spirit, the construction of China's new countryside, the globalization of education and Confucius Institute, the investment of French enterprises in China, the Application of Confucianism in the world, etc.

Relying on the resources of domestic cooperative universities, Confucius institutes have also launched a series of academic activities. The Confucius institute of Paris university was founded in France in the second Confucius institute (the domestic cooperation university is Wuhan university), give full play to the Wuhan university has a group in the Chinese culture, economic, legal, social and other professional attainments, and able to fluently use French, English to communicate the advantage of experts and scholars, from the initial period held a series of high-profile lectures, it has opened up channels for academic exchanges and dialogue between Chinese and French universities.

3.3. Other Cultural Exchange Work of Confucius Institutes in France

Confucius Institute, a Chinese-French publication, was launched in July 2010. The magazine focuses on hot cultural issues between China and France, gives an overview of the essence of Chinese culture, and focuses on the development of Confucius Institutes in French-speaking regions. The magazine covers Confucius Institutes, colleges, primary and secondary schools, governments, educational and cultural institutions and enterprises in French-speaking countries and

regions in China and around the world (including France, Francophone Africa and the European Union). In addition to the paper edition, each issue has 6,000 copies, the Confucius Institute also includes multiple digital distribution channels such as multi-language official platforms and apps. The publication has had some influence in France. For example, Eric Lefebvre, the director of the French Asian Art Museum, the famous Sinologist Claude de Monde, the French painter Claude Marca, and Li Zhiqing, the Hong Kong imperial illustrator of Jin Yong's works, have written columns for Chinese and French journals many times [2019].

In the process of Chinese language promotion and cultural exchange in France, Chinese film and television works have always played an important role. In some cases, film and television works are teaching materials in Chinese classes, and in more cases, they are the best media for cultural exchange. France is a movie-loving country. The mainstream media has always paid attention to Chinese independent films, documentaries and literary films, so that many ordinary French people first got to know China from knowing Chinese films. *Le Monde*, one of France's most important mainstream newspapers, ran a series of reports on Jia in 2017. Organizing film viewing activities or film sharing sessions is an important part of the cultural exchange activities conducted by Confucius Institutes. Take the Confucius Institute at the University of Paris, where the author has worked twice, as an example. The Confucius Institute has been regularly screening Chinese films as its main daily cultural activity for more than a decade. It is particularly worth mentioning that the "Liu Zhenyun Literary Film Tour to Europe" activity planned by the Confucius Institute Headquarters is a useful attempt by the Confucius Institute headquarters to create a new mode of cultural program operation, and also an innovative mode to broaden the channels of cultural exchanges between China and Europe. In April 2017, 12 schools in the southeastern province of Reunion jointly held the 6th "Chinese Film Campus Week". The Confucius Institute in Reunion invited experts in Chinese film studies to give special lectures on films.

Confucius Institute in France has basically formed an operation model based on Chinese language and culture teaching and assisted by organizing cultural exchange activities. Language and culture teaching and language and cultural exchange activities have made Confucius Institutes a powerful platform for cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and France. Some Confucius Institutes in France have become influential educational and cultural institutions in France. The activities organized by Confucius Institutes have received wide attention and high praise. The Confucius Institute of La Rochelle, founded by Beijing Language and Culture University and the University of La Rochelle, has become somewhat famous in this beautiful coastal city founded in the 12th century. In order to facilitate the education of Confucius Institute teachers and students, the municipal government built a small station at the gate of Confucius Institute and named it "Confucius Institute Station of China", which was also marked on the new traffic map of La Rochelle [2014].

4. The Role of Confucius Institutes in China-France People-to-People Exchanges

Over the past ten years, Confucius Institute in France has gradually established a stable and mature model of Chinese language teaching and cultural promotion. It has played a huge role in spreading Chinese culture and promoting China-France cultural and people-to-people exchanges, which can be reflected in the following three aspects:

4.1. Help Promote Chinese Language and Expand the Influence of Chinese Language

The biggest characteristics of Chinese teaching in France are history and scale. In 1813, the first post of professor of Chinese in the West was established at Collège de France. In 1840, the first university course of Chinese education in the West was opened at the French National Institute of Oriental Languages (INALCO) (Liu, 2009).

The Confucius Institute is positioned to teach Chinese to adults without academic qualifications and within the system, providing more opportunities and possibilities for French people of all classes and ages to contact and learn Chinese. The extensive establishment of Confucius classrooms and Chinese teaching centers under the umbrella of Confucius Institutes in French cities has greatly facilitated the Chinese learning of local people, expanded new ways of Chinese teaching and learning, and transformed Chinese teaching and learning from an elitist model within the system to a popular and universal model based on social services. Ordinary French people, working or retired, school or university students, pay just a few hundred euros a year to start enrolling. According to statistics, the number of Chinese learners in France has quadrupled in the last ten years. At present, there are about 20,000 Chinese learners in higher education in France, and 30,000 Chinese learners in Confucius institutes and Chinese associations (Bellassen, 2018a). Compared with Chinese associations, Confucius Institutes have always had more advantages in terms of enrollment scale and Chinese language teaching quality.

Confucius Institutes have also promoted the development of Chinese language testing in France. According to the requirements of students, Confucius institutes in France have set up special HSK training classes. Some Confucius institutes themselves are test centers or participate in Chinese language testing. At present, France offers a variety of Chinese tests, including Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), Spoken Chinese Proficiency Test (HSKK), Chinese Test for Primary and Secondary School Students (YCT), Business Chinese Test (BCT), ACTFL Foreign Language test, Certified Overseas Chinese Test, International Chinese Teacher Certificate test, etc. The number of test sites in France totals 43, ranking first in Europe. The number of exam-takers, especially those taking the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), has been increasing year by year (Bellassen, 2018b).

France is one of the first European countries to include Chinese language

education in its national education system. “Confucius Institutes/Classrooms are an important force to help integrate Chinese language into the national education system of all countries.” (Li & Zhuang, 2020a) First of all, Confucius Institutes in France have qualified teachers, abundant teaching materials and other teaching resources, which can greatly alleviate the shortage of Chinese teaching resources in French universities and primary and secondary schools. Secondly, some Confucius Institutes in France also recruit young students. The platform power of Confucius institutes also promotes the development of Chinese basic education in France. “From the time dimension, the main ways for Chinese to be incorporated into the national education system are divided into three types: ‘high first and then low’, ‘low first and then high’ and ‘high and low’.” (Li & Zhuang, 2020b) Chinese education in France first enters the higher education stage and then radiates to the basic education stage, which is in line with the trend of “from low to high”. The introduction of Chinese into the French national education system means that Chinese has been recognized and accepted by the French government and the French people. For the future development of Chinese education, the integration of Chinese teaching into basic education plays a key role and determines the future trend of Chinese in France. In recent years, there has been a phenomenon of “silver generation” in many Confucius Institutes in France (a high proportion of retired elderly students in Confucius Institutes). In September 2011, the Confucius Institute of Poitiers University opened a “Chinese class for the Silver generation” in cooperation with local universities for the elderly. This is a testament to the success of Confucius Institutes in integrating with local communities, as well as the high proportion of older people who attend Confucius Institutes. However, it is believed that with the increase of Chinese learners in basic education, this situation may change in the future.

4.2. Promote Educational Cooperation and Exchanges between China and France, and Cultivate Talents for Cultural Exchanges between China and France

In terms of promoting education cooperation and exchange, the Confucius institute can use its own resources and advantages to help French students who are willing to come to China to learn Chinese or major. First of all, through the daily Chinese language teaching and cultural activities, Confucius Institutes have helped more and more students increase their understanding of Chinese culture, goodwill and recognition, narrowed the distance between students and China, and strengthened their willingness to study in China. Secondly, Confucius institute’s daily work include: to carry out the education tour, study abroad advisory services and scholarships for information consulting, etc., which provide convenience and assistance for the local students who want to study in China, and promote the local residents to get the deep understanding of the Chinese higher education, so as to break the students of barriers, such as language, channels of information and encourage students to potential into reality. Corresponding to

the prosperity of Confucius Institutes, China's education for studying in China has also been booming in recent years—according to the Ministry of Education, the number of international students in China has maintained a steady growth in the past 10 years, and China has become the third largest recipient of international students in the world. In order to better attract high-level research talent, the Confucius institute headquarters set up in 2012, “The new sinology plan”, “doctoral scholarship program” implementation, for the humanities and social sciences to apply for the PhD degree in China, sino-foreign cooperative training doctoral student special research funders and apply for a scholarship; In 2014, the program was renamed “Confucius New Sinology Program”, which includes 6 programs, such as “Sino-foreign Cooperative Training Program”, “Doctoral Program in China”, “Understanding China” “Visiting Scholar Program” and “Young Leaders Program”. The move is aimed at strengthening the cultural communication and academic research capabilities of Confucius Institutes.

Due to the large scale of Chinese teaching in France, the shortage of teachers has been a troubling problem. In order to solve the problem of insufficient local Chinese teachers in France, Confucius Institutes in France have also organized training courses for local Chinese teachers. There are two main training methods: local training in France and Chinese scholarship training. In 2009, the Confucius Institute established the Confucius Institute Scholarship (now renamed the International Chinese Language Teacher Scholarship), which aims to support the training of local Chinese language teachers and promote the development of Chinese language education in other countries. The goal of the program is to get French teachers to study in China and teach Chinese when they return. Only in this way can the internationalization of Chinese be realized and Chinese can enter the mainstream teaching system (Wang, 2010).

4.3. To Enhance Understanding and Achieve Mutually Beneficial Exchanges between China and France

After the French Revolution in 1789, the French people regarded the motto of “liberty, equality and fraternity” as the universal values of all mankind. As the American scholar Philip Gordon has noted, “The French believed that their great spirit would inspire the whole world. The French have a strong tendency to see their national interests as universal values.” (Gordon, 1993) This ideological tendency permeates almost every aspect of people-to-people exchanges. When analyzing French think tanks' perception of China-France people-to-people exchanges, some scholars found that the tendency of “pan-politicization” and pragmatism directly led to the misunderstanding of people-to-people exchanges between China and France.

(Cheng, 2019) The idea of “cultural exchange” is put forward creatively in order to carry forward the charm of Chinese culture and learn from other countries. However, many French media and think tank experts are accustomed to talking from the perspective of world hegemony, national interests and institutional export, which is clearly political. This kind of situation is related to most

of our cultural exchange activities, which are led by official government or participation, which tend to lead to the politicized interpretation of our cultural exchange mechanism by French side. Take 2017-2018 as an example. There were 103 important cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and France in the year, more than 80 of which were led by officials (Zhang et al., 2020).

Compared with the official level of people-to-people exchanges, Confucius Institutes have more folk features. With language and culture as the carrier, we should give full play to the strengths of interpersonal communication, maximize individual communication among people, scholars and citizens, and truly exchange ideas and emotions. Some scholars have re-examined the unique value of the cultural communication mode of Confucius Institutes from the perspective of cultural “presence”. Based on the cultural “presence”, there is a real field space for emotional exchange and resonance between the students of Confucius Institutes, the audience of cultural communication activities of Confucius Institutes and the Confucius Institutes. Cultural “presence” ensures the authenticity of the subject of cultural transmission, promotes the two-way interaction of cultural exchange and dialogue, and also makes cultural understanding have vivid and rich emotional color. Therefore, the construction of Confucius Institutes provides a great possibility for people in different parts of the world to contact, feel, understand and learn Chinese culture, and eliminates the phenomenon of loss and emotional alienation in cultural transmission to the greatest extent. The two parties involved in this process return from the virtual space of “I” and “he” to the real field of “I” and “you”. They not only gain cognition in terms of cultural knowledge, but also achieve integration in terms of emotional identity. This is the most important value and significance of the cultural communication of Confucius Institutes (Deng, 2017). There is no doubt that Confucius Institutes play a positive role in people-to-people exchanges, and can promote more collision and integration between different cultures and civilizations. As a platform for communication, Confucius Institutes can bridge the differences between different cultures, enhance mutual understanding and achieve mutually beneficial exchanges. As the founder of American public diplomacy said that “the most important part of national communication is the last three feet. The distance is narrowed by human interaction, by human conversation.”

5. Conclusion

The French are a people who love culture. It is because of the sincere love of the French nation for culture that the extensive and profound Chinese culture in the distant east, as well as the language that carries this culture, came into their vision and aroused their great curiosity and attention. The Confucius Institute, which has been established in France for more than a decade, has become an educational and cultural exchange institution with brand effect in the people-to-people exchanges between China and France, and has played a huge role in promoting the cultural dialogue between China and France. How to develop the Confucius

Institutes in the future and whether they can break through some restrictions in the past and play a bigger role in the cultural exchanges between China and France need to further clarify the concept of cultural exchanges. “Culture constitutes itself through its relations with itself and with other cultures.” (Shan, 2010) This sentence reminds us that we should not only spread our culture, present our image and tell our stories, but also learn to “listen” to each other’s views, positions and perspectives. As a well-known French Sinologist once said, the key to China’s language and culture going global lies in importing, accepting, expanding our horizons, and intercultural dialogue (Bellassen, 2019).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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