

SPECIAL REPORT

Inside Confucius

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WESTERN MEDIA

Reported by WESTERN iMEDIA

The Confucius Institute is the Chinese government's flagship cultural outreach program. It is putting thousands of volunteer teachers in local classrooms all over the world to teach Mandarin, to spread the country's rich culture and to influence China's image with the next generation of global decisionmakers.

wkujournalism.com/insideconfucius

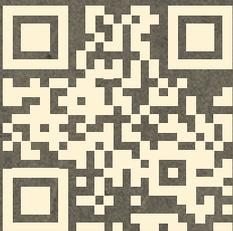
An adaptive mobile site lets anyone access this project over any device and contribute his or her own Confucius Institute story.



Augmented-reality video overlay

The news panels in this story contain digital content that you can view using your camera-equipped iOS or Android smartphone or tablet. Get the app at:

get.layar.com



Download the free Layar app for iPhone or Android



Open the Layar app, hold the device up to the panel and tap to scan it for digital content



Hold your device above the panel to view the interactive content

A NEWS STORY in the form of an experience

In fall 2012, Western iMedia's specially trained fusion journalists began gathering information for an in-depth look at one of the fastest growing and most influential soft-power initiatives in the world. The Confucius Institute promotes Chinese language and culture by sending Chinese government-funded teachers to work in local schools around the globe. It also provides millions in direct funding to universities for cooperative China-related programs. Over a period of 18 months, iMedia teams visited campuses and conducted interviews on four continents to document the Confucius Institute's mission, scope and activities.

iMedia's compiled news report was then turned into a series of interactive infographic banners called news panels, which are digitally overlaid with augmented-reality content. It is all designed to turn the story into an experience, to engage people in the news more successfully than traditional media.

The news panels are an attractive medium in themselves, almost works of art with their Chinese watercolor drawings and calligraphy. They are low tech, meaning people can easily absorb the basics of the story just through the illustrations, quotes and data as visually presented. The panels can be displayed anywhere, at any size, in print or on screen. Yet when a panel is viewed through any smartphone or tablet equipped with the free Layar app, pictures become video, graphics move, additional depth and context become available, interactivity is enabled and engagement increases.

The pages that follow here are called storyboards. They are designed to accompany and explain each of the seven main news panels. In a museum-like exhibition, they might be printed and mounted next to the individual pieces of news art like provenance placards. In a booklet like this, they serve as a guide to the story and a visitor take-away.

This booklet also provides directions for accessing the augmented-reality content and the project's mobile-responsive webapp at wkujournalism.com/insideconfucius.

The mobile site provides the ultimate in engagement and interactivity options – a portal for people to contribute their own personal Confucius Institute stories to iMedia's "Inside Confucius" project.

故事

CHINA

Confucius Institute called “the people of China’s commitment to the world”

Drawing its name from the ancient Chinese philosopher who emphasized government morality, sincerity, family loyalty and ancestor worship, the Confucius Institute is one of China’s primary efforts to strike a chord with the rest of the world. Its hundreds of language training and cultural exchange programs in more than 100 countries have little to do with the actual teachings of Confucius, but rather with his popularity abroad. He is one of the few universally well-known Chinese historical figures outside of Asia, and his teachings have broad appeal.

This section of “Inside Confucius” explains how China’s Confucius Institute is organized and how it works. It describes different forms the program can take, such as the Confucius Classroom foreign language classes in local schools using visiting Chinese teachers, and the research-based institutes that endow professors in cooperation with local universities. It is an essential foundation for the rest of the story.

While a lot of this information can be gathered from a variety of reference sources, journalists seek to make their reports more human, less sterile, by interviewing key people who can explain the nuances and answer questions. From the start of this project in the fall of 2012, that was Western iMedia’s approach. We particularly wanted the chance to interview a senior official of Hanban – the Confucius Institute headquarters in Beijing.

Then in mid-October 2012, the American ABC News network broadcast a story on the Confucius Institute in Macon, Ga., that publicized some teaching materials unflattering to the United States. It was a minor controversy but Hanban started declining interview requests from any media for a while after that.

Our chance came in January 2013 when one of our iMedia teams traveled to Beijing to profile the training program that prepares visiting teachers to work around the world. With Hanban’s offices just down the road, they also requested an interview but arrived in China without any confirmation. At the last moment, Wang Yongli, deputy director of Hanban and the Office of Chinese Language Council International, opened his door to us and hugely expanded the story. One of his quotes became the headline for this storyboard.



WORLD

The reach of the Confucius Institute has increased dramatically in less than a decade

Since establishing its first international language instruction center in Seoul, South Korea, in November 2004, China's cultural outreach program has expanded at an astounding rate. On average, one new Confucius Institute has been opened every week of the past eight years. Such a pace signals both urgency and importance. While observers suggest that China's placement of institutes is strategic for political and fiscal reasons, it is clear that the country has become a prominent economic power and that its officials view the spread of their language and culture as critical to being understood by the rest of the world.

In profiling the global reach and expansion of the Confucius Institute, Western iMedia staff members found themselves challenged to keep up with the organization as it grew literally before our eyes and constantly made our information out of date. We had no appreciation at the start for how dynamic the program is.

For example, one of the first out-of-state reporting efforts our media teams made was to New Orleans in mid-October 2012 to cover the opening of the newest Confucius Institute in the United States, at Xavier University of Louisiana. Our intention was to eventually contrast the newest location with the oldest (see the United States news panel). But by the time "Inside Confucius" was launched in April 2013, Xavier was already a long way from being the newest anymore. Just in the week leading up to the project's initial news engagement exhibit, Xu Lin, chief executive of Confucius Institute Headquarters and director-general of Hanban, was in the United States to preside over four more openings. Such constant change makes it difficult to get accurate figures for the size of the organization at any point in time more recent than a year past.

As of the end of 2012, there were more than 400 locations in 108 countries, according to the state-owned China Daily newspaper. China's Xinhua news agency has quoted the head of the program saying there will be branches in nearly 500 large cities across the world and 1.5 million registered students by 2020.

世界

POLITICS

China did not invent the soft-power game but is a world-class player with the Confucius Institute

The Confucius Institute has its critics both abroad and at home. Overseas, they worry about political strings attached to the money and resources provided to cooperative universities. In China, they complain about how much is spent to export Chinese language and culture to create a positive world image, a category of influence called soft power. None of it has slowed the program's growth. The 10-year-old initiative now ranks in size, scope and budget alongside the educational and cultural exchange initiatives of other world powers, though still smaller than the acknowledged gold standard – the U.S. Fulbright Program.

Soft power is described as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion. The term was coined a quarter century ago by a Harvard political science professor and it is considered a desirable political strategy, especially compared to the use or threat of force. The language and cultural programs of many world powers including France's Alliance Française, Germany's Goethe-Institut, the United Kingdom's British Council and the U.S. Fulbright Program, are often openly referred to as soft power initiatives.

Western iMedia's journalists went into this project very aware of the controversial aspects of the Confucius Institute. We were determined not to ignore it but also not to overplay it depending on what we found in our interviews with people in four countries and at dozens of institute locations. Despite repeated probing, very few people had any opinion on the issue. Those who did – including the mayor of New Orleans, some Confucius Institute students at the London School of Economics, and a school administrator in Franklin County, Ky. – said the language learning aspects of the program far outweighed any concerns. The Hanban headquarters deputy director was more open than anyone else in addressing allegations of spying and interfering with universities' academic freedom. His comments are include in articles on the project's mobile site.

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UNITED STATES

China makes U.S. the primary focus of its Confucius Institute cultural outreach efforts

According to the latest numbers, nearly a quarter of all of China's 420 Confucius Institutes are located in the United States. It is the largest single concentration in any of the 111 countries hosting the language and cultural exchange program. Beijing wants them there to seed good U.S.-China relations going forward. American officials might share that motivation, but it is American educators who have embraced the program and made Chinese the fastest growing foreign language offering in the nation's schools.

"Complex" is the word most experts use to describe the relationship between the United States and China. Based on Western iMedia's reporting, it is also a good word to characterize America's reception of the Confucius Institute – complex, yet mostly positive.

At a time of increased pressure on school budgets and instructional standards, supporters value the program's encouragement and facilitation of cross-cultural education and international understanding. This is particularly the case as it involves China, a huge and important actor on the world stage, yet a society still largely inscrutable to most Western minds. The institute's direct financial and administrative links to the Chinese government do generate occasional concern. But almost none of the people interviewed for this report would do more than acknowledge the issues. The controversy certainly hasn't stopped local schools and universities across the country from welcoming the program into their classrooms in droves. There's even a waiting list.

Western iMedia's home state of Kentucky is a case in point. It currently hosts the second largest U.S. concentration of Confucius Institute visiting teachers. Only Georgia has more, and that lead might not last past the end of 2013. This is despite the fact that Kentucky's rank as one of the more conservative states in the country makes its people more likely than most to be skeptical of a communist government's initiatives. Western Kentucky University, where Western iMedia is based, administers most Confucius Institute activity in the state.

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SCHOOL

Flexibility is a primary lesson for Chinese teachers put in front of another country's classrooms

The purpose of the Confucius Institute is to spread China's language and culture to other countries. Yet the program's visiting teachers say they're the ones who get the culture lesson when they first arrive at their host schools. Despite their required prior experience before being accepted into the program, and then the additional professional training they get in Beijing before being sent overseas, it is hard to realistically prepare someone for the vast differences they will face in student discipline and interactivity.

A typical Chinese classroom is a relatively calm, quiet, crowded place compared to most other countries. Instructors generally lecture from the front of the room. Students mostly sit quietly throughout the lesson and rarely ask questions. And the average class size is 37, half again larger than in the typical American or British public school.

As Western iMedia's fusion journalists interviewed dozens of Confucius Institute visiting teachers throughout the United States and in London, Cape Town and Beijing about their experience with the program, a clear trend emerged. Almost all cited flexibility and adaptability as key requirements for the job. They all said they are constantly experimenting with new techniques to leverage their students' active, sometimes boisterous, often surprising classroom demeanor. And instead of delivering strict lessons, they said, it is often more about forming a relationship with the students.

Sheng-Huei Betty Yu, assistant director of education outreach for the Western Kentucky University Confucius Institute, said she and her counterparts at other branches of the program have started developing additional orientation training for their newly arriving visiting teachers. She said it is intended to more thoroughly prepare new staff for their initial face to face with a phalanx of American teens and pre-teens.

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TEACHER

Visiting teachers leave home, family and comfort to share their language and culture

Different motivations drive the Chinese who wind up in foreign classrooms teaching for the Confucius Institute. Some do it because they simply love teaching. Some do it out of pride in their country and culture. Some say they are contributing to greater global understanding. And some just always wanted to visit another country. They undergo a rigorous application, interview and training process before moving to their assigned country to teach for at least one year. Once there, they have to adjust to unusual classroom disciplines in addition to the customs of a different people.

Western iMedia interviewed nearly 50 visiting teachers, as they are called by the Confucius Institute, in preparing this coverage. Storybuilders, as we call our writers, and media producers with video expertise traveled to New Orleans, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C., London, England, Cape Town, South Africa, and Beijing, China, as well as all over Kentucky to collect the teachers' personal stories. Amidst all the educational and political interests that surround the Confucius Institute, it would be easy to overlook the very human interests at the heart of the program. We felt it was essential.

But interviewing the teachers was not entirely easy. First there was trying to squeeze into their busy classroom schedules, not to mention squeezing into their busy classrooms with all our equipment. Then there was the language barrier: While they are certainly expert Chinese speakers, some are still mastering English enunciation, which can make getting clear audio recordings a challenge. Although the children didn't seem to have problems understanding, so perhaps it was just our equipment. And then some topics were harder for them to talk about, especially when it came to the young children, new spouses and aging parents left behind in China and not seen for a long time.

老师

STUDENT

Despite Chinese tonal complexity, students are signing up in record numbers to learn the language

Every statistic that profiles learners of Chinese, as well as Western iMedia's own survey of students in Confucius Classrooms on four continents, shows increasing and enthusiastic interest in studying the language. Research also finds the benefits to students may go beyond simply preparing the next generation to do business with the world's second-largest economy. They are being internationalized, coming to realize early that this is a multinational, multicultural planet. Spanish or French would get you there, also. Yet they are choosing Chinese, despite that it is often characterized as one of the most difficult languages to learn because it uses tonal inflections to differentiate words.

Chinese must be fun to learn because the students in every classroom that one of our media teams visited throughout 2012 and 2013 seemed to be having a great time. Frustration apparently was not in their new vocabulary.

To be sure, however, our journalists had every student they met complete a short survey about the Confucius Institute. Four out of five said they liked the program. Three-quarters said that they felt it would help them in the future and that it made them want to visit China some day. If the Chinese government's underlying reason for funding the program is to influence a favorable image with the world, it seems to be working. The complete survey results are on the Student news panel.

Some educators are turning to the Confucius Institute and its subsidized visiting teachers to replace some of the classes they have lost due to budget cuts during the current recession. In our interview with Hanban, however, indications were given that there may be changes in how teacher funding is provided in the future, with a greater emphasis on local Confucius Institutes becoming more financially self-supporting.

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The fusion journalists of Western iMedia combine the ethics, mission, production values and professionalism of quality editorial work with an atypical range of expertise in making that work more visual, more tangible and more accessible to a contemporary audience.

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谢
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While assisting Western iMedia with information and access to requested resources and staff, at no time in the production of this report did the Confucius Institute or Hanban have any editorial control or influence over any aspect of the project. Western iMedia is solely responsible for the contents of this report.