Confucius Institutes in Argentina and China's Soft Power Strategy

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Since the early 2000s, the Chinese government has systematically expanded its cultural diplomacy as part of a broader effort to reshape international perceptions and reduce what it sees as a "China threat" narrative (d'Hooghe 2015). One of the most emblematic tools in this strategy has been the creation and dissemination of Confucius Institutes (CIs), which operate in cooperation with local universities and institutions worldwide. Administered by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC), formerly Hanban, these institutes aim to promote Chinese language and culture, support research on China, and foster mutual understanding. According to Nye (2004), soft power is the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce. It is based on the appeal of a country's culture, political values, and foreign policy. In this framework, Confucius Institutes function not merely as educational centers but also as instruments of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991), helping China to project a positive image and to cultivate long-term relationships with foreign academic and political elites.

Scholars have debated the degree to which Confucius Institutes can be considered autonomous educational platforms or extensions of Chinese state influence. Some view them as benign actors in global cultural exchange (Zhao and Huang 2010), while others raise concerns about issues of transparency, academic freedom, and alignment with the Chinese Communist Party's ideological priorities (Brady 2012; Peterson 2017). Nevertheless, the real impact of CIs cannot be fully assessed without considering the local institutional contexts in which they operate. As Rawnsley and Rawnsley (2016) argue, soft power is always mediated by the receiving society's structures, values, and historical narratives. It is within this relational and negotiated space that the Argentine case becomes particularly illustrative.

Argentina has a long-standing tradition of university autonomy, rooted in the 1918 Córdoba Reform, which established a model of self-governance that spread across Latin America. Public universities in Argentina are legally autonomous from the central government, and this principle is not only symbolic but institutionally protected. University senates, elected by professors, students, and staff, hold significant authority in defining educational, political, and even international cooperation policies (Buchbinder 2005). This culture of autonomy implies that any foreign initiative—especially one involving language and cultural promotion linked to a foreign government—is subject to scrutiny within academic institutions. While Argentina maintains a cooperative relationship with China, and has signed various agreements within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, university actors do not automatically translate state-level alignments into institutional policy (Giordano 2022).

This divergence between national foreign policy and academic governance means that Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Argentina are inserted into plural institutional environments, each with its own set of priorities, values, and stakeholders. The absence of a centralized education ministry dictating international partnerships allows each university to negotiate independently with foreign entities such as CLEC (formerly Hanban), and to set the parameters of their collaboration. Moreover, unlike in many other Latin American countries, public education in Argentina is free at all levels, including higher education. This structure fosters a critical and politicized academic environment, where foreign initiatives are often discussed in terms of their ideological, cultural, and epistemic implications (Pérez 2019).

As a result, while some institutions have hosted CIs with relative openness, others have either declined partnerships or structured them in ways that reduce the institute's visibility or influence. For instance, in some cases, CI activities are limited to language instruction, while access to broader cultural programming or academic collaborations remains under the control of the host university's own departments. Thus, in Argentina, the operational space of CIs is conditioned not only by national diplomacy or Chinese soft power strategies, but also by the internal logic of university governance, where autonomy serves as a filtering mechanism for foreign cultural presence.

As of 2024, there are five Confucius Institutes (CIs) operating in Argentina, each hosted by a different public university. These include the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), Universidad Nacional de La Plata (UNLP), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC), Universidad Nacional de Lanús (UNLa), and Universidad Nacional del Litoral (UNL). Although the presence of CIs is modest in comparison to their expansion in other Latin American countries, their geographical and institutional distribution reflects a cautious and selective strategy of academic cooperation (Percara 2025).

In contrast to more vertically integrated education systems, each Argentine university negotiates the establishment and scope of its CI through bilateral agreements directly with the Chinese counterpart, usually a partner university selected by CLEC. These agreements vary significantly in terms of governance, curricular integration, and institutional visibility. While some universities house the CI within existing language departments, others operate them as relatively independent cultural centers with limited integration into academic programs.

The case of the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) is illustrative. As one of the largest and most prestigious universities in Latin America, UBA hosts a Confucius Institute in partnership with Jinan University in China. However, the institute's presence is mostly confined to non-degree language courses and extracurricular cultural events. Decisions regarding curriculum, faculty hiring, and research collaboration remain entirely under the control of UBA's own academic units (UNESCO-IESALC 2021).

In other institutions, such as the Universidad Nacional de Lanús, the CI has played a more visible role, organizing lectures, exhibitions, and calligraphy workshops. Nevertheless, even in these cases, host universities retain control over administrative procedures and often appoint a local director to co-manage the institute alongside the Chinese counterpart (López and Rodríguez 2021). This dual-directorship model and the lack of centralized oversight reflect a deliberate strategy by Argentine universities to maintain academic sovereignty while engaging in international cooperation. Unlike in other regions where concerns about censorship or ideological pressure have led to the closure of CIs, in Argentina, the model has been adapted to local governance cultures, minimizing potential conflicts.

Still, the presence of CIs has not been without debate. Faculty unions and student organizations in several universities have raised concerns about transparency in funding and the potential for cultural bias in programming. These concerns, however, are typically addressed within institutional forums, rather than through national-level controversy. In this sense, the Argentine experience demonstrates how local academic institutions can domesticate global soft power initiatives, reshaping them through their own values and legal traditions.

The case of Confucius Institutes in Argentina illustrates how global soft power strategies are not implemented in a vacuum. Instead, they are shaped, filtered, and sometimes constrained by the legal frameworks, institutional cultures, and political histories of host societies. In Argentina, university autonomy functions as both a legal principle and a cultural value that strongly influences how international cooperation is structured.

Rather than outright rejection or unconditional embrace, Argentine universities have opted for a negotiated form of engagement with China's cultural diplomacy. Confucius Institutes have been welcomed in several institutions, but under conditions that preserve local governance and academic freedom. Their activities are often limited to non-degree language instruction and cultural events, and their integration into university structures is partial and highly regulated. This approach contrasts with both the enthusiastic adoption seen in some countries and the backlash observed in others. It highlights the importance of institutional agency in the global projection of soft power. Even when actors such as China develop sophisticated instruments of influence, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how host institutions interpret, adapt, or resist those efforts.

For scholars and policymakers interested in the role of foreign cultural institutions in education systems, the Argentine case offers a valuable lesson: soft power is not just something exercised—it is also something received, negotiated, and reshaped. Further research could explore how similar dynamics unfold in other regions where university autonomy is constitutionally protected, or compare cases where Confucius Institutes have been discontinued due to political pressure. Understanding these variations helps illuminate the broader question of how global powers engage with knowledge production in a multipolar world.

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