

## *Confucius Institute to the South Seas: A Case of Localization and Soft Power in Singapore\**

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### *Abstract*

Accompanying the rapid global expansion of China's Confucius Institutes (CIs) is a growing chorus of criticisms over its underlying intentions and influences. Meanwhile, some scholars argue that these criticisms and suspicions over CIs lack substantial evidence. In turn, the diversity of views on the intentions and outcomes of CIs leads to a new problematization of CIs: it directs more attention to the actual implementations and localization processes of these educational institutions. However, research on the topic is limited by a reliance on Western case studies. There is also a lack of analysis on the correlation between the localization of a CI and its soft power capabilities. As such, this article aims to address two research questions. First, what is the extent and

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degree of localization at CI-NTU? Second, how does localization affect CI-NTU's actual influence and capability to promote Chinese language and culture learning and soft power? To answer these questions, this article adopts qualitative research methods that include reviewing teaching materials and interviewing 15 participants of CI-NTU. Based on my research findings, I find that localization is significant at CI-NTU and has helped it optimize performance and stay credible. But it exerts little direct influence on the institute's soft power projection. I also point to the disaggregation of soft power projection and cultural identity reconstruction by overseas Chinese to highlight the agency and importance of local actors in the CI program.

As it climbs to global eminence in the 21st century, China has recognized the importance of international image and soft power. In 2004, culture was declared to be the third pillar of China's diplomacy after politics and economy.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the Chinese government has launched a concerted effort to expand China's cultural reach, public diplomacy, and soft power abroad, which marked the beginning of its "Going Global" (走出去 *zou chuqu*) strategy.<sup>2</sup> As China ramps up its cultural presence abroad, more politicians, scholars, and journalists are paying attention to China's soft power campaign.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of "soft power" is defined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye as the "ability to shape preferences of others" and "co-opts rather than coerces them" to achieve one's desired outcome.<sup>4</sup> One major manifestation of China's global soft power strategy is the growing prominence of the Confucius Institutes (hereafter CIs).<sup>5</sup> The CIs are nonprofit educational institutions tasked with promoting Chinese language and culture overseas.<sup>6</sup> Until recently, CIs were coordinated by the Confucius Institutes Headquarters, or Hanban (國家漢辦 *guojia hanban*), supported by the Chinese Ministry of Education.<sup>7</sup> Each CI represents a China-foreign partnership that involves the Hanban, a Chinese university, and a foreign university. By promoting cultural and people-to-people engagements with foreign communities, the Chinese government hopes to leverage these educational institutions to improve public opinion toward China and uplift its international image.<sup>8</sup> Since the CI project made its debut in 2004, the world has witnessed a global "Confucius Institute phenomenon" as CIs were established rapidly across the globe.<sup>9</sup> That the CIs are China's most ostentatious cultural presence overseas earned them the