

Confucius Institutes promote UNESCO vision

Zhou Weisheng

By establishing 548 Confucius Institutes and 1193 Confucius Classrooms in 154 countries and regions, China has taken the initiative to spread the Chinese language and culture overseas in a peaceful and mutually beneficial way. And in so doing, China has used its limited resources to put the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity into practice.

The teaching of the Chinese language and culture promotes global diversity and is an important channel for advancing common development that benefits China as well as the host countries. It also provides other developing countries with an example of how to promote their own cultures and languages worldwide by using limited resources.

Understandably, different countries have different views on Confucius Institutes, and some have used the so-called cultural expansion, cultural invasion and cultural threat theory in an attempt to mislead global public opinion, although many have commended China's efforts. Perhaps a better understanding of China's efforts to promote its language and culture would help other countries see the Confucius Institutes in a better light.

First, unlike a zero-sum game, all parties can benefit from win-win cooperation through the Confucius Institutes. Second, the Confucius Institute programs are inclusive and every country is welcome to take part in them. And third, the programs are non-competitive in nature, albeit the most competitive performer can set an example for the others to follow.

The Confucius Institutes offer other countries a unique model to promote their languages and cultures through bilateral cooperation, which is distinct from the developed countries' general practice. Considering the relatively low investment and high benefits, it is a rather successful mutually beneficial model for promoting global cultural diversity, which both developing and developed countries can draw experience from. For instance, more Chinese will learn the Japanese language if Japan supports such a program by employing more funds, teachers and teaching materials and setting up a Japanese version of the Confucius Institute in China.

One tree doesn't make a forest. For human beings, cultural diversity forms the core of communications and the fountainhead of innovation. And it is essential to human beings' cultural prosperity just as biodiversity is to the ecological balance.

After 10 years of remarkable development, it is imperative for each of the 548 Confucius

Institutes to promote the localized teaching of Chinese based on the host country's cultural and social realities. And Hanban, or the Office of Chinese Language Council International, the executive body of the Confucius Institute, should avoid adopting a unilateral approach to funding, dispatching of talents and donating of books in the host countries.

The Confucius Institute, despite being more than a language-teaching program, cannot replace the Chinese-teaching methods adopted by other institutions across the world. Nor should the program compete with the current Chinese-teaching system. As a window, a bridge, and a flagship, it should promote cultural exchanges by advancing Chinese teaching methods. And a business model that combines the interests of the cause and the industry should be adopted to create a positive cycle and realize sustainable development.

Language teaching and cultural exchange are long-term processes. Apart from being constantly dedicated to the cause, Chinese teachers should also educate themselves about the world's advanced cultures while trying to spread the Chinese language and culture, because that would help make the Confucius Institutes truly respected and popular facilitators of cultural development in the modern world.

Confucius said, "the superior man on literary grounds meets with his friends, and by their friendship helps his virtue". As such, China should make friends and open a dialogue with the world by using the Confucius Institutes to teach the Chinese language and culture.

To continuously promote the development of the Confucius Institutes abroad, China should focus on the following aspects. First, it should adopt a differential approach to suit each host country's condition.

Second, it should view language teaching and cultural exchanges as the two wheels of a cart that should rotate simultaneously.

Third, China should strengthen academic research to generate effective theories, thus making the Confucius Institutes the host country's research center on China.

Fourth, it should conduct two-way cultural exchanges through the Confucius Institutes so they become a window on not only China, but also other countries' languages and cultures.

And fifth, China should follow the philosophy of developing a cause and adopting an industry-like operation model to realize sustainable development, while optimizing its limited resources by preventing overlapping of functions and unnecessary competitions.

The author is a professor at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan, and the first dean of Confucius Institute at the university.