

# A Comparative Analysis of the Image Construction of Confucius Institutes in Reports by Mainstream Chinese and British Media

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes 2022-2024 CI reports from PDOE and TDT with Critical Discourse Analysis. It finds PDOE's rising reports shape positive CI images via positive discourse, while TDT's declining ones create negative ones with negative expressions. It also points out TDT's factual deviations and PDOE's reporting flaws, and offers improvement suggestions for CI's international image building.

**Keywords:** Confucius Institutes, Mainstream Chinese and British Media, Image Construction Strategy

## 1. Introduction

Confucius Institutes (CIs) promote Chinese teaching and culture globally, with 34 in the UK (Europe's largest) by 2024<sup>[1]</sup>. Since 2015, CIs have faced shutdowns and debates, and the UK reversed its CI policies, showing their development challenges and the value of international public opinion. This paper selects PDOE and TDT to explore their CI reporting features, image construction differences, factual deviations and optimization paths.

## 2. Image Construction of Confucius Institutes in Headlines and Main Texts of People's Daily Overseas Edition (PDOE) and The Daily Telegraph (TDT)

The research corpus includes 17 CI reports from PDOE (CNKI) and 7 from TDT (official website) during 2022-2024, with quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted from three dimensions.

### 2.1 Report Volume

PDOE's CI reports increased year by year (1 in 2022, 4 in 2023, 12 in 2024), driven by China's cultural communication strategy, reflecting the emphasis on cultural soft power and the need to respond to international public opinion and shape a positive CI image.

TDT's reports showed a downward trend (3 in 2022, 3 in 2023, 1 in 2024). This is due to news timeliness—TDT shifted attention to hot topics such as political elections and international conflicts—and changes in the UK government's attitude and policies toward CIs, leading to the reallocation of reporting resources.

### 2.2 Headline Analysis

PDOE's headlines focus on Chinese language learning, cultural exchanges, national cooperation and employment, using positive emotional and evaluative words<sup>[2]</sup> (e.g., Building a Bridge for East-West Cooperation, Chinese Language Fever<sup>[3]</sup>, Reflects the Vitality of "Humanistic BRICS"<sup>[4]</sup>). They construct CIs as a bridge and window for cultural communication, emphasizing their role in enhancing people-to-people bonds between China and foreign countries.

TDT's headlines attach negative labels and political implications to CIs, such as "Trojan horse", "Party's propaganda system" and "spying concerns" (e.g., Funding cut for 'Trojan horse' Chinese institutes at UK universities). It

conceals CIs' core cultural communication function, attempting to build a stereotyped image of CIs as controversial and threatening, and even indirectly shapes a negative image of China.

### **2.3 Main Text Analysis**

PDOE centers on CIs in narratives, focusing on their overseas Chinese language teaching and cultural exchanges, and depicts the "Chinese language fever" in developing countries like Ethiopia and Kenya fueled by economic and trade cooperation. It expounds on Chinese learning's value for boosting individual employment and inter-state cooperation, holding a consistent positive attitude toward CIs. PDOE adopts ample positive words to highlight CIs' role in cultural and international cooperation, shapes their image as a platform for Sino-foreign friendly exchanges with logical, structured declarative discourse, and uses metaphors and personification to enhance report appeal, helping readers grasp CIs' value.

In contrast, TDT ignores CIs' cultural dissemination function, centering on the UK government and its policies to place CIs under scrutiny and questioning. Its reports cover the UK's controversial measures toward CIs, even linking them to espionage with obvious prejudice and negative evaluation. TDT uses extreme negative words to tie CIs to sensitive political concepts, affirms UK government policies to weaken CIs' positive image, and features loose, illogical discourse with rhetorical questions to mislead readers. It also employs negative metaphors and suggestive narratives to construct a threatening image of CIs, even smearing China's international image..

### **3. Analysis of Deviations Between UK Narratives on Confucius Institutes and Objective Facts**

TDT claims CIs run counter to the UK's academic freedom tradition, which is inconsistent with facts. UK CIs strictly abide by local educational laws and academic norms, carrying out open and inclusive teaching and academic activities. They also introduce Chinese academic resources to enrich the UK's academic ecosystem, and the allegation is a one-sided report driven by political purposes and cultural prejudice.

CI's cultural activities (Spring Festival celebrations, calligraphy exhibitions, etc.) aim to promote cultural understanding and Sino-British friendship, with no political agenda. However, TDT misinterprets them as "cultural infiltration", politicizing normal cultural exchanges, misleading British public's understanding of CIs and hindering the development of Sino-British friendly relations.

When reporting the UK government's funding halt for CIs, TDT only emphasizes policy adjustments and the so-called "negative impacts" of CIs, while ignoring their positive contributions: training a large number of Chinese language talents for the UK, promoting the development of Chinese language teaching and cultural diversity. The one-sided coverage easily causes public misunderstanding and damages CIs' image in the UK.

### **4. Deficiencies and Improvement Suggestions in Chinese Mainstream Media's Reports on Confucius Institutes**

PDOE's reports mostly focus on CIs' positive achievements, lacking in-depth discussions on the challenges and problems they face. Faced with international controversies about CIs, PDOE should actively respond, refute rumors and counter untrue reports to help build a positive CI image<sup>[5]</sup>.

PDOE mainly adopts a "we" perspective, focusing on CIs'role in spreading Chinese culture and promoting Chinese language, but rarely mentions their positive value for overseas people and countries. It should appropriately shift the perspective, transform the "we-other" power relationship, and improve communication effects to help overseas audiences form a positive perception of CIs.

As a major official newspaper for China's overseas communication, PDOE mainly disseminates information in text form. In the Internet era, it should promote the diversification of communication media (e.g., adding video content), expand the audience coverage and improve the effect of CI image construction.

### **Conclusion**

This paper applies Critical Discourse Analysis to 2022-2024 CI reports from PDOE and TDT, drawing key conclusions: PDOE's rising and TDT's falling report volumes stem from China's cultural communication focus and UK

policy/hotspot shifts. They construct opposing CI images—PDOE frames CIs as cultural exchange bridges, while TDT labels them controversial via politicization with fact-biased narratives on academic freedom, culture and funding, hindering China-UK exchanges. PDOE shapes positive CI images yet has single content, perspective and medium, limiting communication effects.

The study enriches relevant research, clarifies Sino-British media differences and offers targeted suggestions for CIs and Chinese media. It has limitations in sample size and research focus, and future research will expand samples and adopt empirical methods to explore the links between media discourse, audience perception and CI development.

### References

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