



# Weekly Briefing

**Albania social briefing:**  
**Confucius Institute in Albania:**  
**sharing human experiences through education**  
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## China-CEE Institute

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# **Confucius Institute in Albania: sharing human experiences through education**

## **Summary**

*Albanians speaking Chinese is not a recent occurrence. More than half a century ago in the classrooms of the capital, in the headquarters of important institutions, production lines, factories, mines, and more, Albanians were learning and speaking the Chinese language with their peers from afar. It was a time of intense cooperation between the two countries, unfolding also into the cultural and linguistic spheres. Fast-forward five decades, this educational tradition is revived in Albania via the Confucius Institute (CI). This briefing is an account of the educational and cultural exchanges inputs of this Institute in Albania.*

## **Introduction**

The CI is part of the narratives of the whole of mankind. In concomitance with other narratives, the CI's main aspiration and purpose are to improve human life, by sharing human experiences and enhancing human creativity. While in the past learning about China and the Chinese language was somewhat an individual endeavor, since the creation of the CI the accessibility to a structured education in the Chinese linguistic process is available to anyone. Since its inception in Albania, the CI is providing Chinese language and culture classes, workshops, seminars, exchange programs, scholarships in China's best universities, and much more. For the purpose of this briefing, we interviewed Prof. Dr. Zhang Xiaoying, Chinese Director of Confucius Institute in Albania.

## **Some background on Confucius Institutes worldwide**

As China's economy and exchanges with the world have witnessed rapid growth, there has also been a sharp increase in the world's demands for Chinese language learning. In 2004, the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL) began establishing non-profit education organizations overseas, these institutes were given the name the Confucius Institute.<sup>1</sup> As of 2021, there is more than 1,500 CI and Confucius Classrooms have been

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<sup>1</sup> Cai, L. (2019). A comparative study of the Confucius Institute in the United Kingdom and the British Council in China. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 18(1), 44-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2047173419845531>

established in 159 countries. Moreover, over 180 countries have conducted Chinese-language teaching programs and 75 countries have incorporated the language into their national education system by issuing laws and regulations. More than 4,000 foreign universities have established Chinese-language departments, majors, and courses, and more than 75,000 primary and secondary schools and training institutions worldwide have opened Chinese language courses. Accumulatively almost 200 million foreigners have learned the language. <sup>2</sup>

### **Confucius Institute in Albania: an overview**

The CI at the University of Tirana (UT) was established on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013. For the occasion, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama formally launched the event and stated that Albania expects strengthened bilateral bonds and the institute adds a new dimension to the Albania-China relations.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, the CI was registered as the Main Unit at the UT established based on the UT's agreement with the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) and the Beijing University of Foreign Languages (BFSU). The CI in Albania offers the opportunity for the students to learn Chinese with local and Chinese teachers for all levels of Chinese language learning. Students can do so either by choosing this subject in the curricula offered by the faculty or by enrolling at the Institute. As of date (February 2022), it has 4 local lecturers and 4 Chinese lecturers, who work in teaching and promoting via their classes Chinese culture. Over the years, the CI in Albania can count for about 4,000 people who have registered to attend Chinese language and culture courses.

In the academic year 2015-2016, the CI counted 185 enrollments, of which 30 students chose Chinese as an elective subject at the Faculties of Economics and Foreign Languages.

In the 2016-2017 academic year, the CI numbered 735 enrollments. Of these, 59 students chose Chinese as an elective subject at the Faculty of Economics and Foreign Languages. During this year, 108 students took the Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì (HSK) Chinese language proficiency test and 7 of them received full government scholarships.

In the 2017-2018 academic year, the CI numbered 950 enrollments. Of these, 60 students chose Chinese as an elective subject at the Faculty of Economics and Foreign Languages.

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<sup>2</sup> Zou, Sh. (2021, November 10). Chinese language learning to get bigger boost globally. *China Daily*. Available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202111/10/WS618b03d1a310cdd39bc7456e.html#:~:text=More%20than%204%2C000%20foreign%20universities,language%20courses%2C%20the%20ministry%20said>

<sup>3</sup> China News Service CNS (2013, November 19). Albania launches Tirana Confucius Institute. Available at <http://www.ecns.cn/2013/11-19/89123.shtml>

During this year, 156 students took the HSK Chinese language test and 8 of them received full government scholarships.

In the 2018-2019 academic year, the CI numbered 609 enrollments. Of these, 90 students chose Chinese as an elective subject at the Faculty of Foreign Languages. During this year, 133 students took the HSK Chinese language test and 10 of them received full government scholarships.

In the academic year 2019-2020, the Confucius Institute accounted for a total of 537 enrollments. Of these, 121 people enrolled in the "Summer School" program. During this year the number of students who took the Chinese language test was declining due to the pandemic, only 68 students took the HSK Chinese language test.

For the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, in Chinese language and culture courses, the number of registrants was 229 and 33 people took the Chinese language test. Chinese language testing during this semester was held online by Chinese Testing International Co., Ltd, with which the CI also has the language proficiency agreement. For the second semester, of the academic year 2020-2021, 143 people were registered, and attended online learning, via the Zoom platform.

For the academic year 2021-2022, where it counted over 460 enrolled students, from level HSK 1 to level HSK 6. In addition, throughout the year more than 120 students from the Institute participated in the 2-week summer camp organized by the partner BFSU. It is worth mentioning the fact that currently the Institute also offers courses for children (YCT level) and several children regularly attend Chinese language classes.<sup>4</sup> To put figures into perspective it should be taken into consideration that Albania has a population of 2.8 million and in the academic year 2020-2021, in the higher education system in the whole country 123.797 enrolled, in all levels and all universities.<sup>5</sup>

### **So Similar, So Different, So Chinese**

This was the title of a research paper by Xin Liu (2019) where the author makes thorough

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<sup>4</sup> The figures of enrollment, educational process, number of students and classes were provided by the staff of the Confucius Institute in the University of Tirana via email correspondence to the author dated February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> INSTAT (2021, April 22). Press release. Enrollment statistics for academic year 2020-2021. Available at <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8187/press-release-enrollments-statistics-2020-21eng.pdf>

analytical comparisons of the CI with its Western counterparts.<sup>6</sup> It explains why the CI has similar goals to its Western counterparts and what vests the Institute with some unique Chinese features. He argues that the hidden barriers are revealed by applying the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, cultural hegemony, and the knowledge-power nexus. The author compares the CI operational model to UK's British Council, France's Alliance Française, Germany's Goethe Institute, and Spain's Cervantes Institute. He concludes that these institutes are very similar but they turn out to be perceived as being very different. When seen in different historical, cultural, and ideological contexts, a largely hidden and vital difference is revealed: the uneven condition in this terrain dominated by Western cultural hegemony, and the ensuing different power positions and relations between the CI and its Western counterparts.

**CI's determinants and perception in Albania:** The above analysis by Xin can be applied to the Albanian reality as well, the terrain of operation is uneven; however, it is not an impossible one. Perhaps the most peculiar feature of the CI is the intrinsic willingness to cooperate with their foreign counterparts. Furthermore, the CI's availability to people from other nations, its proactive attitude, and zealous ways of collaboration with foreign institutions showcase clearly its core values.

Besides the four western counterparts that the author mentions, for Albanian reality there should be added the Italian Istituto Italiano di Cultura. In the same path as their Western counterparts, the CI in Albania is operating as the others did, but was established two decades years later. For example, the Italian Istituto Italiano di Cultura has been active in Albania since 1981 as a separate office in the Italian embassy, and officially a separate institute since 1999<sup>7</sup>; the French Alliance Française was established in 1992 from a group of professors in the University of Tirana<sup>8</sup>; the UK's British Council since 1994.<sup>9</sup>

Most of these institutes present in the country were established after the political system changed in 1991. The eagerness of Albanians to learn foreign languages and about other nations' cultures was met with the opening of these centers in the first decade of opening up. Regarding the Chinese language, it came to be present in Albania when the situation in China

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<sup>6</sup> Liu, X. (2019). So similar, so different, so Chinese: Analytical comparisons of the Confucius Institute with its Western Counterparts. *Asian Studies Review*, 43(2), 256-275. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1584602>

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Italy (2022). Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. Istituto Italiano di Cultura. Available at [https://iictirana.esteri.it/iic\\_tirana/it](https://iictirana.esteri.it/iic_tirana/it)

<sup>8</sup> Alliance Française in Albania (2022). AF Tirana – Historiku. Available at <https://aleancafranceze.al/sq/af-tirana/>

<sup>9</sup> The United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, British Council in Albania (2022). Available at <https://www.britishcouncil.al/en/about>

was ready to set up educational institutions by trying to enhance mutual understanding between China and other countries. Indeed, for a country in constant development as China, enhancing educational bilateral exchange is the key to mutual understanding. In a recent speech, the Chinese Ambassador to Albania would note that a foreign language is a bridge to another world. *“With the Chinese language - through which students can get to know the ancient but also modern eastern country - they can perceive Eastern culture that is diverse, inclusive and full of vitality, and thus can better understand the diversity of world civilizations.”*<sup>10</sup> The CI in Albania is encapsulating the opportunities for Albanian students (and anyone willing to) by opening a window through which locals can learn in-depth traditional Chinese culture and language.

### **Conclusion**

By the end of January 2022, in the capital of Albania, there was hosted a celebratory event for the upcoming Chinese New Year. In that event, there were Albanians in their 70s years of age speaking Chinese and there were many others in their 20s speaking Chinese. The first group is a product of a long history of traditional friendship between the two countries; the second group (the young ones) is an outcome of the work of the Confucius Institute and the opportunities given to Albanian students by Chinese scholarships. Both of these groups have unique advantages in their personal and professional skillsets. Language learning needs come with the exigencies of the time, and in our times, speaking the Chinese language comes as an advantage to everyone. Moreover, in the path of rekindling bilateral exchanges via education, the CI in Albania is bringing back a tradition of decades, bolstered with modern pedagogical practices.

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<sup>10</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Albania (2021, April 8). Ambadori Zhou Ding u jep studentëve të shkëlqyer shqiptarë Bursën e Ambasadorit. Available at [http://al.china-embassy.org/eng/zagx/zajw/202104/t20210428\\_9046516.htm](http://al.china-embassy.org/eng/zagx/zajw/202104/t20210428_9046516.htm)