

THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE DISSEMINATION OF CHINESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – THE CASE OF THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: Under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dissemination of Chinese culture and language has met unprecedented difficulties and challenges. By expounding the new difficulties and problems faced by the Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the lack of teachers, students' dropping out, teaching resources shortage, and frustrated interest in learning, this paper analyzes the effective strategies which contribute to ensuring regular classroom teaching and promoting cultural exchange during the pandemic. The practical and effective adjustment includes utilizing existing resources, improving TCFL teachers' information literacy, strengthening localization construction of teachers and teaching materials, and enriching Chinese culture dissemination through the Internet, which not only leveled up Chinese language teaching outside of China, but also successfully popularized Chinese culture across national borders. Those practices actively promoted the cultural exchange between Bulgaria and China, and expanded the impact of Chinese culture in Bulgaria, giving a valuable reference in Chinese language teaching and culture dissemination in the post-pandemic era to other Central and Eastern European countries, and the countries along the Belt and Road as well.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; the Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria; Chinese language teaching; cultural dissemination

I. Introduction

Since China and Bulgaria established diplomatic relations in 1949, both countries have stuck together, worked together and helped each other. The cultural exchange is flourishing. With the expanded development of “16+1” cooperation and the “Belt and Road” initiative, China-Bulgaria cooperation in

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education and cultural exchanges is strengthened and deepened. The Confucius Institutes, working as bridges and ties between the two countries, play a vital role in improving understanding and promoting the exchanges and cooperation in education, culture and economy.

Under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept across the whole world since 2020, the international environment mutated, wherefore the Chinese language teaching and dissemination of Chinese culture in Bulgaria has met unprecedented difficulties and challenges. The Confucius Institutions in Bulgaria, making the best of existing resources and advantages, proactively expanded the influence of Chinese language teaching. They combined online and offline teaching mode to ensure the regular Chinese language teaching classes and organized Chinese cultural activities to push forward the cultural exchanges between China and Bulgaria. Researches on the strategies undertaken by the Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria provide a valuable reference to the countries along the Belt and Road in Chinese language teaching and foreign cultural exchanges under the new pandemic circumstances.

II. Current Situation and Problems of the Dissemination of Chinese Language and Culture in Bulgaria

In recent years, promoted by “the Belt and Road” initiative, the exchanges between China and Bulgaria have become increasingly close. The Bulgarian people’s interest in learning Chinese language and culture is growing. Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) and Chinese cultural dissemination, therefore, enter a rapid development stage in Bulgaria.

2.1. Current Situation of the Dissemination of Chinese Language and Culture in Bulgaria

Regarding Chinese language teaching in Bulgaria, there are two Confucius Institutes. By the end of 2021, the Confucius Institute at the University of Veliko Tarnovo, a very influential Confucius Institute established on October 10th, 2012, had held Chinese language and culture classes in more than 40 schools in 12 cities in Bulgaria, with over 2000 registered students. The Confucius Institute in Sofia, the first Confucius Institute in Bulgaria which was founded in 2006, had 7 Confucius classrooms, 14 teaching branches and 4 cooperative institutions, whose number of registered students was 1293 by the end of 2021.

Nowadays, many local elementary schools and secondary schools encourage their students to learn Chinese as their first or second foreign language. Chinese language is listed as a compulsory course in middle schools.

More and more students actively participate in HSK and HSKK exams. Besides, three local universities, namely Sofia University, the University of Veliko Tarnovo, and Plovdiv University, offer different specialties relating to Chinese language and literature, cultivating different levels of talents from undergraduates to PhDs.

In the aspect of cultural communication and dissemination, the Confucius Institutes is trying try hard to make Chinese culture deeply rooted in the hearts of the Bulgarian people. They hold various activities to introduce the Chinese culture to the local people and also merge Chinese culture with Bulgarian culture to make the former easily understood and accepted. They take various measures to spread Chinese culture by enriching the Chinese cultural courses, holding international conferences and cultural lectures, and organizing competitions and themed exhibitions. Furthermore, both Confucius Institutes take active part in local events and international communication activities to display the charm and fascination of Chinese tradition and culture. For instance, when the “Scenes of Struma” Festival was held in a southwestern Bulgarian city on September 3, 2022, the Confucius Institute in Sofia was invited to present Chinese language and culture activities. Their performances were warmly welcomed by the local people. Many of them expressed their willingness to know more about Chinese culture. The Confucius Institute at the University of Veliko Tarnovo participated the 16th Muse International Youth Arts Festival in 2022, in which they demonstrated wonderful traditional Chinese arts, bringing a grand audio-visual feast to the audience coming from other countries.

2.2. Problems in the Dissemination of Chinese Language and Culture in Bulgaria

Although language teaching and cultural exchanges are developing fast, the TCFL and Chinese cultural dissemination in Bulgaria are facing a few difficulties and unprecedented challenges, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2.1. Shortage of Teaching Staff

Chinese teachers are not only the main cultural force, but also messengers of Chinese and foreign cultural exchange. Comparing the increasing numbers of Chinese classrooms and students, the recruitment of academic staff is lagging behind. On the one hand, the teachersst – students ratio is not satisfactory. In the

case of the Confucius Institute in Sofia, there were 1293 students registered in the year of 2021, while there were only 10 teachers and 2 volunteers dispatched from China working with 14 local teachers and 4 local volunteers. This unbalanced teacher-student ratio put a huge pressure on Chinese language teaching. On the other hand, the teaching group is not stable. The two Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria undertake teaching tasks in the Institutes, the Confucius classrooms, the teaching branches and cooperative institutions which are located in schools in major cities around the country. The teachers and volunteers dispatched from China usually have short-term contracts serving only one to three years, which means high staff turnover. In the meantime, the number of local teachers and volunteers is insufficient. Moreover, their levels of Chinese language are quite uneven, which makes the situation worse. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of teachers was serious and it was even more difficult to dispatch new teachers and volunteers from China. This directly led to the result that some teaching branches had to be closed temporarily.

2.2.2. Insufficient Teaching Resources

Teaching resources, including teaching materials and teaching facilities, are insufficient in Chinese language teaching in Bulgaria. Firstly, there is no set Chinese language textbook written for local Bulgarian learners. Most teachers suggest HSK or HSKK textbooks in classroom teaching, especially for beginners and intermediate learners. Those materials are suitable for HSK preparation, but cannot satisfy all kinds of learners, because there is not enough teaching content which is in line with the local culture and customs to help beginners fit into the Chinese language learning as soon as possible, so as to reach a desirable teaching effect. Secondly, the teaching facilities in the language classrooms are not advanced enough. Most Bulgarian classrooms are in an old and traditional style, with no modern facilities to ensure more effective teaching. Teachers have to write on the blackboard or distribute copies if they want to offer supplementary teaching materials. There is no multimedia teaching equipment to help teachers display colorful pictures and massive files, play teaching videos and utilize the situational teaching method.

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria in the year of 2020 disrupted the normal pace of life and the regular Chinese language teaching. Although many TCFL teachers had certain knowledge of online teaching before, they were inexperienced in teaching online at the beginning. Many of them had problems such as unfamiliarity with the network platform. They were not sufficiently unskillful in operating the teaching software, or

couldn't grasp the online teaching resource database. Since they were not accustomed to the functions and application of the network platform, the online teaching could be passive and tedious. Besides, electronic teaching material construction of TCFL in Bulgaria is not sufficient. Many teachers have to prepare their own teaching materials with the help of the Internet, which means the online TCFL teaching was monotonous, lacking in interactions, and fraught with technical difficulties.

2.2.3. Students' Frustrated Learning Interest

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the routine teaching work of Confucius Institutes was transferred to online teaching. But most Bulgarians preferred traditional classroom learning to online learning. They did not readily accept online teaching and learning.

First, students' network literacy is limited by hardware equipment and software application. Among the Chinese language learners registered at the Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria, beginners and school-aged children, especially elementary school students and secondary school students account for a large proportion. They are not skilled in utilizing network functions and resources and have difficulties cooperating effectively with teachers' instructional design. Many parents doubted the effect of online language teaching and worried about the negative effects of the Internet, which might be the main reason why a lot of younger students dropped out. In the case of the Confucius Institute in Sofia, there were 874 elementary school students and 1098 secondary school students registered in 2020, while in 2021, the figure dropped into 566 and 511 respectively.

Secondly, because the online language learning limits the interactions between the TCFL teachers and language learners, students tend to have many changes in their learning motivations, cognitive thinking models, learning strategies, learning approaches, learning opportunities and attitudes to learning. Those factors have vital impact on the learning effect. The language classroom emphasizes practical exercises, but online teaching restricts the students' involvement. It is difficult for teachers to arrange classroom activities, such as role-play, group discussion, playing games and so on. Students must change their learning styles to adapt to new situations, which largely frustrated students' learning interests.

Thirdly, the classroom management in online teaching is relatively loose. It is difficult for teachers to monitor all the students through the computer screen. Learning at home is not serious enough and lacks a sense of ritual. Some

students are not proactive and lack self-control. They are easily distracted. However, teachers online cannot detect the problems immediately, which will decrease learning efficiency.

The online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic redefined the term “teaching & learning”, put both the teachers and the students on a new platform, and forced them to reconsider. The sense of distance in online teaching and learning places higher demands on the TCFL teachers. They need to ensure that the students study as diligently as they did when they were in a traditional classroom. If they continued the teaching methods they used offline, it would be harder for students to increase their learning interests, improve their learning efficiency and continue their Chinese language learning.

III. Strategies for TCLT and Chinese Culture Dissemination in Bulgaria during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic posed many difficulties for the TCLT teachers; it also brought new challenges and opportunities to them. The Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria could adopt appropriate measures to take full advantage of favorable resources to improve teachers’ teaching skills, the teaching environment and the teaching quality.

3.1. Utilizing Existing Resources

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many network platforms developed language teaching applications and improved their applications’ functions to cope with the emergency. There are many good applications for language teachers to choose from, such as Zoom, VooV Meeting, and Skype. Among them, “The Online Chinese Language Classroom” launched by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) is developed especially for educational institutions around the world, which provide standardized, high-quality online Chinese education services. TCFL teachers could download teaching resources and carry out remote online Chinese teaching on it.

Utilizing Internet resources could increase effective classroom knowledge capacity and create favorable teaching atmosphere. The massive Internet resources maximize the expansion and extension of classroom teaching. They provide supplementary teaching materials which cannot be presented by words, which make teaching and learning more authentic, vivid and interesting. Such video and audio materials could effectively motivate learners’ learning initiative and enthusiasm. For instance, when giving lectures about traditional Chinese

festivals, TCFL teachers could play videos to introduce how Chinese people celebrate the Spring Festival. It would help foreign learners understand Chinese customs better. The immersion teaching helps students understand the relevant knowledge and memorize the information.

Nowadays in China, with the rapid development of network technology, TCFL teachers can overcome spatial obstacles to find abundant educational and research resources. It effectively increases the opportunities for language teachers and learners to have free access filter information and store resources. Those Open educational resources have a positive influence on TCFL teaching and learning. It prompts teachers to learn new teaching techniques and helps language learners get involved in devising learning materials, which makes language teaching and learning more effective.

3.2. Improving TCFL teachers' Information Literacy

During the COVID-19 pandemic, TCFL teachers need to overcome the inert way of teaching and try out new teaching methods. They should learn new teaching techniques, change outdated teaching ideas, and update their teaching approach.

To exploit the particular advantages of online teaching, TCFL teachers are required to improve their information literacy. There are many tasks for them to do, such as learning the characteristics and rules of online teaching, developing teaching materials suitable for online teaching, integrating massive online teaching resources to fit their own courses, and creating balanced online educational ecology. They need to construct online teaching modes and methods which satisfy the need of the local Chinese learners based on practical teaching experience. Facing different students of different ages and with different ability to learn, TCFL teachers ought to conduct requirement analysis and educational ecology analysis to provide targeted measures to improve their teaching efficiency.

TCFL teachers at the two Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria responded positively after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. They made full use of online teaching platforms to follow up the call to "Suspend classes but not stop teaching". All the teachers and volunteers overcame various difficulties to ensure the regular teaching tasks, such as merging teaching contents with online education, designing effective online teaching activities targeted for different types of courses, utilizing information technologies to design, formatting and presenting their teaching contents, making use of the functional modules of the online teaching platform to answer students' questions, sharing useful TCFL

material online and organizing conferences and seminars. For instance, the Confucius Institute at the University of Veliko Tarnovo held an online public lecture titled “Chinese Investments in Bulgaria”, receiving unanimous praise from the participants. Besides, from September 26th to 30th, 2022, the Confucius Institute in Sofia organized the “You and I Talk about China’s Culture” online lectures, which received more than 200 participants, who actively exchanged ideas about Bulgarian and Chinese cultures. These lectures successfully popularized the Chinese culture in Bulgaria.

3.3. Strengthening Localization Construction of Teachers and Teaching Materials

Strengthening the training of local teachers and the developing of local teaching material is a must for TCFL teaching in Bulgaria. Writing and designing teaching material for local people and special purposes is a good way to meet the needs of local language learners. When writing local teaching materials, writers should consider the conditions of the local country and the actual characteristics of the students, using simple and vivid language to present the abstract language. Notes and explanations could be added in the local language, when necessary, to help local TCFL learners understand. The localized teaching materials should also be practical, instructional and feasible, easy for local teachers to use, fully representing the grammatical characteristics of the Chinese language and at the same time taking into consideration local students’ Chinese language cognitive ability.

During the pandemic, local Chinese language teachers could not take training courses in China as before. The Confucius Institutes could undertake to implement the teacher training tasks, using the Internet to give them a chance to experience Chinese culture. In the year of 2021, The Confucius Institute in Sofia organized 2 local teacher trainings, and 24 participants took part in. The training courses not only helped the local participants improve their Chinese language skills, but also provided them theoretical basis for their long-term improvement.

3.4. Enriching Chinese Culture Dissemination through the Internet

In the post-pandemic era, the international Chinese language teaching and cultural dissemination needs to be reformed and innovated. The traditional methods are out of date, and the Augmented Reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technology could be used to present Chinese folk culture, traditional arts and historical documents as well. With the help of artificial intelligence, the

interests of local people in Chinese culture could be stimulated and it is more attractive for them to feel the charm of Chinese culture.

With the help of the Internet, the Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria strengthen their efforts not only to improve their teaching quality and efficiency and enhance their competitiveness, but also to focus on the constructions of TCFL teachers' group, promote the diversified development of Chinese education and disseminate Chinese culture. Furthermore, they take every chance to promote Chinese culture by holding online lectures and organizing activities online. The Confucius Institute in Sofia celebrated the 9th Global Confucius Institute Day online in September 2022. Teachers, students and parents, Chinese culture lovers participated in the event. The Institute also hosted an online "Rose Melodies" Chinese song contest to encourage people to sing Chinese songs and learn Chinese language and culture through them. In the publicity and promotion of Chinese language and culture, the Confucius Institutes in Bulgaria always chooses suitable content and form, in which the Bulgarian people are interested, to show the Chinese style and features to the local people.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the change of the educational ecology prompted international Chinese education industry to come up with a new teaching mode and business. The traditional classrooms are replaced by online teaching or blended online-offline teaching. However, no matter what the change is, the aim of TCLT will not be changed, which is to help TELT learns study Chinese language and culture, deepen their understanding of China and Chinese culture, and then become messengers of cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world.

IV. Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiatives are an important practice platform for promoting the vision of a global community of a shared future. The construction and co-building education strategies suitable for the Belt and Road Initiatives will push forward their development, and will make new and greater contributions to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

The international Chinese language teaching has become an essential part of public diplomacy. The Confucius Institute in Sofia and the Confucius Institute at the University of Veliko Tarnovo play a vital role in familiarizing the people with the Chinese cultural identity and popularizing Chinese national image in Bulgaria. They have been working on enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture and are doing their best to "tell China's story well".

Their explorations of Chinese language teaching and culture dissemination in the post-pandemic era in Bulgaria sets an excellent example for other Central and Eastern European countries, and the countries along the Belt and Road as well.

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