

UK Confucius Institutes' National Conference

14 September 2011

On Wednesday 14th September the All Party Parliamentary China Group (APPCG) in conjunction with the Confucius Institute for Traditional Chinese Medicine (CITCM) at London South Bank University (LSBU) hosted the UK Confucius Institutes' National Conference in Parliament.

The purpose of the conference was to facilitate discussion and an exchange of ideas and best practice about the teaching of Chinese language and culture in the UK, and the long term sustainability of this work. The conference also provided an opportunity to inform and update Parliamentarians' understanding of Chinese culture and the work that Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms do in the UK. The conference was opened by APPCG Chairman Mark Hendrick MP, Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons Lindsay Hoyle MP, Ambassador Liu Xiaoming and Deputy Director General of Hanban Wang Yongli.



H.E. Ambassador Liu Xiaoming

"Today China is regaining its historical role as global power and it is vital for the UK to develop knowledge and understanding of Chinese language and culture if we are to adjust successfully to the changing geo-political landscape."

Mark Hendrick MP

The programme for the conference featured three panel sessions which respectively examined the teaching of Chinese language, the teaching of Chinese culture, and the sustainability of the work undertaken by Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms. A brief summary of each of these sessions now follows.

Panel Session: Chinese Language Teaching

Speakers

Elizabeth Reid

Chief Executive of Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) (Chair)

Prof. Kay Livingston

Director of Learning and Teaching Scotland

Qinghua Xu

Head of Chinese Business Services, Ernst & Young

Summary

The discussion in this session underlined the growing importance of Chinese language skills in the UK; British businesses are increasingly valuing Chinese speakers and Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms are witnessing increasing popularity in Chinese language courses. Ms Qinghua Xu, Head of Chinese Business Services at Ernst and Young, spoke about how Ernst and Young's China business has grown by 40-50% and how there is a real need by all consultancy firms for employees with Mandarin language skills.

Many voiced the opinion that more emphasis should be placed on raising the quality of Chinese language teaching in British secondary schools and universities, especially when considering that Chinese students form the largest proportion of foreign students studying at UK universities. Professor Kay Livingston, Director of the Learning and Teaching Scotland, explained how Scotland was preparing their children to become global citizens and how Chinese language and culture were embedded within the whole curriculum and not solely in language learning.

Additionally, it was recognised that the UK should not rely on teachers from China coming to the UK to teach Chinese language. This was particularly prescient given the new visa regime and the impact that this has already had on Chinese teachers intending to travel to the UK and teach. Elizabeth Reid, Chief Executive of Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, spoke about how the organisation was addressing the challenge of a shortfall in Mandarin teachers by committing to train 1000 Mandarin teachers over the next five years.

"Mandarin is part of the very 'DNA' of Chinese civilisation, the core building block of Chinese culture. China is the longest continuous civilisation in the world. Mandarin has been an integral part of the development of China for the past five millennia. Mandarin is the most effective key to understanding today's China."

H.E. Ambassador Liu Xiaoming

Panel Session: Promotion of Chinese Culture

Speakers

Carma Elliot CMG OBE

Executive Director of Half the Sky Foundation (Chair)

Sir Timothy O'Shea

Vice Chancellor University of Edinburgh

Wang Yongli

Deputy Director-General, Hanban

Summary

The discussion in this session highlighted the difficulty in defining what Chinese culture is and underlined possibilities for further cooperation amongst Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in the UK. Carma Elliott told the audience of her early passion for China and how she was fortunate to learn Mandarin, which helped her in her diplomatic career. Carma expressed the need to offer British children the opportunity to learn Mandarin; this will enable them to understand the culture of China and to be competitive in the global market place.

Sir Timothy O'Shea talked about the Confucius Institute for Scotland at the University of Edinburgh which has successfully promoted educational, economic, and cultural ties between Scotland and China. The Institute has been named 'Confucius Institute of the Year' several times and is a testimony to the achievements that Confucius Institutes in the UK can strive for. However, it was noted that not all Confucius Institutes or Classrooms enjoy access to large resources, and that perhaps this could be overcome by; creating mutually supportive networks amongst Confucius Institutes and Classrooms where resources can be shared, reaching out to local Chinese communities and local education institutions, building links with NGOs in China to facilitate British people volunteering in China, and utilising web-based technologies.



Wang Yongli, Deputy Director General of Hanban (pictured left) explained how Hanban can provide support to the teaching of Chinese language and culture, and praised the excellent work undertaken by Confucius Institutes in the UK, and spoke about the challenges of long term sustainability of this work.

Panel Session: Sustainability of Confucius Institutes

Speakers

Prof. Martin Earwicker

Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University (Chair)

Ivan Lewis MP

Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

Tian Xiaogang

Minister Counsellor for Education, Embassy of the People's Republic of China

Summary

The discussion in this session underlined the continuing importance of funding for Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the UK and the need for more qualified Mandarin teachers. There was great appreciation for the support provided by Hanban, however, the audience agreed that the UK could not continue to rely on the generosity of Hanban for the long term future. It was also recognised that the British Government cannot be relied upon to provide funding in the current economic climate. A remedy for this could be to create national or regional network(s) amongst Confucius Institutes and Classrooms so that resources can be shared.

There was agreement on the need for the UK as a whole to engage in supporting the teaching of Chinese language and culture, including support from all levels from Government, employers, universities and schools. Ivan Lewis MP, (then) Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, reiterated the need for both the UK and China to work together through arts, culture, and trade and to share expertise. Tian Xiaogang, Minister Counsellor for Education at the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, continued in this vein and invited the delegates to suggest ideas of how to work together in the future. He cited the imminent arrival of the giant pandas to Edinburgh Zoo and the 2012 Olympic Games as examples of such cooperation.

Other issues that arose included the need for the visa regime to be streamlined and understood by all involved in recruiting volunteer teachers from China to teach in schools and universities in the Confucius Institute network. There were also requests for a review of both GCSE and A-Level Mandarin; the levels of both examinations are perceived by pupils and parents to be difficult and off-putting. Wang Yongli also noted the need for Confucius Institutes to provide a wide range of courses; citing the lack of vocational education offered.

"Whilst the sustainability of Confucius Institutes for the future is a challenge, it is a challenge that we can rise to if we are creative and work together across education and business. The future for Confucius Institutes UK is exciting and I am confident of its long term future in the UK."

Prof. Martin Earwicker, Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive of London South Bank University

Conclusion of Conference

After all three panel sessions had taken place the Conference concluded with closing comments by Beverly Jullien, Pro Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University, followed by a Champagne Reception.

The All Party Parliamentary China Group and Confucius Institute for Traditional China Medicine would like to extend their warmest thanks to all guest speakers for taking part in the conference, and to all those who attended this successful event.

Contact Details

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