

TO: Wang Yi, PRC Minister of Foreign  
FROM: Diancheng Xie, Chinese diplomat  
DATE: November 10, 2024

RE: Enhancing Cultural and Educational Exchanges with the United Kingdom

### **Summary**

This memo proposes a strategy to strengthening cultural and educational connections between China and the UK. By broadening student exchange programs, supporting Confucius Institutes, and encouraging joint research initiatives, China can foster a lasting mutual understanding and goodwill with the UK. Such initiatives go beyond short-term benefits; they counteract misconceptions and build strong foundations for diplomatic and economic cooperation in the long run.

For instance, increased scholarships and easier visa processes would make it easier for young leaders from both countries to form enduring relationships. Confucius Institutes could serve as key avenues for sharing Chinese culture in a transparent way that helps address misinterpretations. Furthermore, joint research efforts in areas like climate change could demonstrate China's commitment to global innovation and collaboration. Together, these efforts would not only bolster China's international influence but also promote a stable, sustainable relationship with the UK.

### **Background**

For decades, cultural and educational exchanges between China and the UK have played historically role in fostering mutual understanding and trust. Programs such as student exchanges, academic partnerships, promoting a shared sense of knowledge and appreciation. However, recent political tensions and rising skepticism on China's role in expanding influence, have cast a shadow over these programs, challenging the continuation and effectiveness of such exchanges (House of Lords Library, 2023). Many in the UK now grown cautious of the Confucius Institutes, concerned about their potential to align more with Chinese perspectives and China's interests (Chatham House, 2024).

Strengthening cultural diplomacy is more than fostering goodwill; it also is a strategic way to enhance China's image and counteract common misperceptions. Confucius Institutes and other educational exchanges provide channels for people-to-people connections and allowing room for appreciation. However, China's needs recalibration to fit the current changing political climate and emphasize openness as transparent and beneficial for all involved. To build long-term stability and partnership with the UK, China's cultural diplomacy must be adapted to be more collaborative and open, which will help mitigate tensions and foster mutual trust (RUSI, 2023; Wilson Center, 2024).

In the wider picture, a well-executed cultural exchange strategy can not only ease UK-China relations but also improving China's reputation in the international community. By prioritizing transparency and cooperation, China can reinforce its image as a responsible partner, essential for sustaining global respect and influence in an increasingly interconnected world.

## **Policy options**

### ***a. Expanding Student Exchange Programs***

Expanding student exchange programs can be a promising step in strengthening China-UK ties. It will allow young people to understand and experience each other's cultures with a global perspective. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (2015), initiatives like these can exposure students to diverse ideas and cultures, equips with invaluable skills, benefiting both their personal growth and China's future diplomatic relationships. This also provides the UK with firsthand insight into Chinese culture, creating a foundation for long-term cooperation. Furthermore, exchange programs can foster academic networks, establishing long-term collaborations and intellectual ties between China and the UK.

Nevertheless, despite these benefits, exchange programs carry the risk of a "brain drain," with Chinese students possibly choose to stay abroad, which could impact China's talent pool (British Council, 2024). Cultural and academic adjustment challenges are also common, with students often experiencing stress adapting to Western norms, which can impact their overall exchange experience. Additionally, the financial cost for both students and governments may pose constraints, limiting program expansion.

### ***b. Increasing Support for Confucius Institutes***

Confucius Institutes have become key cultural diplomacy tools, promoting Chinese language and cultural programs worldwide. These institutes provide valuable cultural experiences to host countries and offer platforms for educational and cultural exchange, helping to counter misconceptions about China and increase its soft power. Confucius Institutes can foster appreciation for Chinese traditions and perspectives, helping China create goodwill in the UK (Hartig, 2012). Furthermore, they can offer a structured framework for expanding language and cultural education, contributing to a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

However, there are valid concerns, particularly in Western countries, where some perceive them as instruments for political motives rather than purely educational centers (Brady, 2018). Concerns over academic freedom and transparency in institute operations have led to resistance in certain regions, complicating their expansion (Barr, 2019). Adopting a transparent and sensitive approach in Confucius Institutes

management could help alleviate concerns and strengthen their impact (The Diplomat, 2024).

### *c. Promoting Joint Research Initiatives*

Encouraging joint research initiatives are beneficial in fostering collaboration between Chinese and British academic institutions, allowing for shared resources and expertise, particularly in crucial fields like climate change, technology, and public health. According to China Daily (2024), such partnership enables us to establish ourselves as a leader in innovation and research, benefiting both nations while addressing pressing global issues. Collaborative research also enhances China's academic reputation internationally, signaling its commitment to tackling global challenges and fostering a collaborative image.

Intellectual property (IP) concerns present one of the most significant challenges to these initiatives. IP disputes due to variances in legal standards and governance structures, potentially hindering collaboration. Additionally, differing research ethics and methodologies can complicate these partnerships, requiring clear agreements on data sharing and project goals to maintain trust. Ensuring transparency in research collaboration is essential for the success of these initiatives and to avoid misunderstandings.

### **Policy Recommendation**

The most effective approach to strengthening China-UK relations would be an integrated strategy that combines above student exchanges, Confucius Institutes, and joint research initiatives—is the most effective way to strengthen China-UK relations and advance China's national interests. Expanding student exchanges with higher scholarships and simplifying visa processes will promote mutual understanding for the new generation. Simultaneously, Confucius Institutes should be supported but managed with enhanced transparency, focusing purely on cultural education and education, it will reduce concerns over political influence (Hartig, 2012). Lastly, joint research initiatives, with clear frameworks for intellectual property and ethics in research, will help both nations to tackle shared global challenges, showcasing China's reputation as a collaborative global power on the world stage.

Word count:1010

---

## **References**

Barr, M. (2019) '*Confucius Institutes and the Globalisation of China's Soft Power*', *Asian Studies Review*, 43(1), pp. 1-17.

Brady, A.-M. (2018) '*Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping*', *Journal of Democracy*, 29(2), pp. 65-70.

British Council (2024) 'The impact of UK China higher education partnerships'. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/programmes/education/higher/impact> (Accessed: 9 November 2024).

Chatham House (2024) The UK's next government must redefine its confused relationship with China. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/uks-next-government-must-redefine-its-confused-relationship-china> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

Chinese Ministry of Education. (2015) *Chinese, UK governments agree on initiatives to boost exchanges*. Available at: [http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top\\_News/201510/t20151021\\_214597.html](http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201510/t20151021_214597.html) (Accessed: 10 November 2024).

China Daily. (2024) *Joint research initiatives between China and the UK have potential to lead global innovation*. Available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202404/14/WS661be850a31082fc043c1ddc.html> (Accessed: 10 November 2024).

Hartig, F. (2012) '*Cultural Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics: The Case of Confucius Institutes in Germany*', *International Communication Gazette*, 74(4), pp. 291-306.

House of Commons Library (2023) UK-China relations: recent developments. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10029/> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

The Diplomat (2024) 'The Rise, Decline, and Possible Resurrection of China's Confucius Institutes'. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/the-rise-decline-and-possible-resurrection-of-chinas-confucius-institutes/> (Accessed: 9 November 2024)

RUSI (2023) Six Principles for a More Dynamic and Effective UK-China Strategy. Available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/policy-briefs/six-principles-more-dynamic-and-effective-uk-china-strategy> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

Wilson Center (2024). UK China Policy Post-Sunak. Available at:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/uk-china-policy-post-sunak>  
November 11, 2024).

(Accessed: