

Rhetorical Visions and Cross-Cultural Themes in Thai Confucius Institute Promotional Videos: A Fantasy Theme Analysis

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Abstract The Confucius Institute, as a prominent vehicle of China's soft power, serves a significant function in fostering cross-cultural communication and addressing perceptions related to the "China threat theory." This study employs Fantasy Theme Analysis, grounded in Symbolic Convergence Theory, to examine the fantasy themes and rhetorical visions portrayed in the promotional videos of Confucius Institutes in Thailand. Findings reveal that these videos prioritize the Institute's authoritative stature, projecting a compelling image of cultural credibility. Furthermore, two key rhetorical visions emerge: one that highlights a "flesh and blood connection between Thailand and China," signifying a deep-rooted bilateral bond, and another that emphasizes how "political and economic power drive the growth of Confucius Institutes," suggesting a strategic alignment with broader diplomatic and developmental goals. However, this analysis also identifies critical limitations in these videos, notably a lack of interactivity and limited engagement with individual perspectives, rendering the narrative somewhat rigid and monolithic. To enhance their effectiveness, future promotional efforts should adopt a multi-layered approach to cross-cultural communication. This would involve integrating diverse media resources and leveraging both mass and interpersonal communication channels. Additionally, promotional content should focus on constructing culturally resonant symbols that Thai audiences can easily recognize and relate to, fostering mutual understanding through interactive and symbol-rich exchanges.

Keywords: Thailand, China, Confucius Institute, symbolic convergence theory, fantasy theme analysis

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China's economic and international influence has seen unprecedented growth. Over the past few decades, China's per capita disposable income has surged by approximately 33.5 times, reflecting the significant improvement in living standards across the nation. Today, China stands as the world's largest exporter and the second-largest importer, a status that has not only reshaped global trade dynamics but also drawn international attention to China's rapid ascent. However, alongside admiration for China's development, a discourse of apprehension known as the "China threat theory" has emerged. This theory suggests that China's expanding economic, political, and military capabilities may pose a significant threat to global stability and potentially challenge U.S. dominance on both regional and international fronts (Friedberg, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2014). Such narratives, fueled by scholarly debate and media portrayal, have cast a shadow over

China's international image, portraying its rise as a source of tension rather than a peaceful progression.

In response to these concerns, China has undertaken various diplomatic and communicative efforts to reshape its image and convey its intentions for "peaceful development" (Hartig, 2015). Building upon this foundation, China formally launched its "Soft Power Initiatives" in 2004, with a focus on cultural diplomacy and international engagement (Wilson, 2015). A core component of these initiatives has been the global promotion of Chinese language and culture, primarily through the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide. These institutes serve as centers for Chinese language education and cultural exchange, aimed at fostering mutual understanding and dismantling misconceptions about China. Scholars have highlighted the Confucius Institute as a unique model of educational and cultural diplomacy, emblematic of China's broader efforts to export its cultural heritage and enhance its soft power footprint (Liu, 2017).

In Thailand, a nation with historically friendly ties to China, the impact of these efforts is particularly noteworthy. China and Thailand have maintained close relations across political, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, with China consistently ranking as Thailand's largest trading partner over the past nine years. By 2024, Thailand had established 16 Confucius Institutes, each serving as an essential platform for fostering dialogue and collaboration in political, economic, and cultural fields between the two nations.

Grounded in Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) as proposed by Bormann (1996), this research examines the fantasy themes represented in the promotional videos of Confucius Institutes in Thailand. Through Fantasy Theme Analysis, this study seeks to uncover the types of collective fantasies and rhetorical visions embedded in these videos and to explore the imaginative constructs and symbolic messages that they aim to propagate. This study explores the symbolic and rhetorical strategies used in Confucius Institute promotional videos to foster a positive perception of China in Thailand. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the predominant fantasy themes and fantasy types depicted in the promotional videos of the Confucius Institute in Thailand?
2. What rhetorical visions emerge from these fantasy themes, and how do they collectively contribute to the overall portrayal of the Confucius Institute?
3. How do these promotional videos address—or fail to address—the cultural expectations and communication preferences of Thai audiences, and what are the implications for cross-cultural understanding?

This research advances the academic understanding of cross-cultural communication and soft power by applying Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) to the analysis of promotional media. While SCT has typically focused on group identity and shared visions, its use in analyzing visual media, especially within soft power initiatives, is relatively underexplored. Through Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) of Confucius Institute promotional videos, this study not only extends SCT's scope in communication studies but also demonstrates its relevance for examining state-sponsored media in cultural diplomacy.

Additionally, this research enriches the scholarly discussion on soft power by examining how China shapes its international image and counters the "China threat theory" via cultural exchange initiatives. By analyzing narrative strategies and

symbolic constructs in Confucius Institute videos, this study provides a framework for understanding how nations promote a peaceful, cooperative identity. This analysis of mediated representations offers insights into how national image, cultural values, and diplomatic goals can be conveyed across cultural boundaries, contributing to literature on SCT and soft power and serving as a case study on symbolic communication in international relations.

Practically, this study offers recommendations for improving Confucius Institute promotional media. Findings highlight limitations in current strategies, such as limited interactivity and overly formal narratives, which may limit engagement with Thai audiences. By addressing these gaps, the study suggests that more diverse media formats and interactive elements aligned with local norms could enhance appeal. Incorporating stories of shared values or personal connections could make the Confucius Institute's mission more accessible and engaging for international audiences.

2. Literature review

2.1 Confucius Institute and Cross-cultural Communication

Established formally in 2004, the Confucius Institute is a non-profit educational initiative launched by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Modeled after cultural and language promotion organizations such as the British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe-Institute, and Instituto Cervantes, the Confucius Institute serves as a vehicle for promoting Chinese language and culture globally (Yuan et al., 2016). Since the inauguration of the first Confucius Institute in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004, the program has grown substantially. By 2024, China had founded 550 Confucius Institutes and 1,172 Confucius Classrooms in primary and secondary schools across 162 countries and regions, employing more than 46,000 teachers and educating over 9 million students worldwide. This extensive network positions the Confucius Institute as one of the most significant platforms for China's global educational and cultural outreach efforts (Luqiu & McCarthy, 2019).

Table 1: Language promotion agencies

Country	Name	Established in	Number
France	Alliance France	1883	850 institutes
Britain	British Council	1934	175 offices
Germany	Goethe Institute	1951	184 institutes
Spain	Institute Cervantes	1991	87 institutes
China	Confucius Institute	2004	548 institutes

Scholars have predominantly explored Confucius Institutes from three key perspectives. First, some researchers examine the Confucius Institute's role in language teaching and higher education. Studies in this domain emphasize the Institute's contribution to Chinese language instruction and its integration into foreign educational systems (Cui, 2022; Qiao et al., 2023). These works underscore the Institute's success in expanding access to Mandarin education, thereby fostering cultural literacy and bridging linguistic divides.

The second perspective interprets the Confucius Institute as an instrument for advancing China's economic interests. This viewpoint argues that the Institute facilitates China's global business activities by creating cultural familiarity that eases market entry and enhances business relations (Lien et al., 2012). Scholars from this

perspective highlight the Confucius Institute's strategic role in supporting China's economic diplomacy by fostering a positive cultural environment conducive to trade and investment (Jung et al., 2020).

The third approach conceptualizes the Confucius Institute as a conduit for China's cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy. Researchers here argue that the Institute serves as a proactive means to project a favorable image of China on the global stage. This function aligns with China's efforts to counteract narratives such as the "China threat theory" and to cultivate a perception of "peaceful development" (Wheeler, 2014). Scholars describe the Confucius Institute as "a fusion of Chinese culture and public diplomacy," aimed at presenting China as a culturally rich and amicable nation, thus countering political hostility and enhancing China's soft power.

Despite these efforts, constructing a positive national image through cross-cultural initiatives like the Confucius Institute is complex and fraught with challenges. Samovar and Porter (1991) identified eight key barriers to cross-cultural communication: a tendency to seek similarity, efforts to reduce uncertainty, differing communication objectives, misinterpretations of nonverbal cues, potential abuses of power, cultural shock, racial superiority, and fear. Overcoming these barriers requires not only cultural sensitivity but also the establishment of shared symbols and communicative strategies that resonate with diverse audiences (Kreps & Kunimoto, 1994; Ngo-Metzger et al., 2003).

Iftikhar and Hanif (2023) further emphasize that for Confucius Institutes to succeed in cross-cultural communication, they must prioritize empathy and inclusivity within the communication process. This involves actively negotiating meaning, understanding cultural differences, and approaching international relations with an open and accommodating attitude. To this end, a successful cross-cultural strategy should incorporate symbols and narratives that are meaningful within the local context, thereby fostering mutual understanding and respect (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011).

Building on these insights, this research seeks to identify the fantasy themes present in Confucius Institute promotional materials in Thailand and examine the rhetorical vision that emerges from these themes. By applying Fantasy Theme Analysis within the framework of Symbolic Convergence Theory, this study aims to uncover the underlying narratives that shape perceptions of China in a Thai cultural context. The study's findings could provide valuable recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of Confucius Institute's cross-cultural communication efforts, particularly in terms of aligning its symbolic representations with the cultural expectations of Thai audiences.

2.2 Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), developed by Ernest Bormann, has its origins in earlier research on group interactions by Harvard sociologist Robert F. Bales. In the 1970s, Bales observed that within small group interactions, members would often engage in group fantasizing or dramatizing, which facilitated a shared imaginative involvement. Through this process, certain communication symbols would "chain out" within the group, heightening the emotional connection among members and accelerating their engagement (Zanin et al., 2016). Building on these findings, Bormann formulated SCT and Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) as tools to

understand how shared symbols and narratives can shape group dynamics and foster collective meaning.

Bormann's SCT introduces three foundational concepts: fantasy theme, fantasy type, and rhetorical vision. Fantasy theme refers to a “creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills psychological or rhetorical needs.” This theme emerges when individuals articulate an interpretation—either verbally or through non-verbal means—that resonates with others. When a fantasy theme becomes widely accepted within a group, it chains out, creating a shared understanding or narrative framework. Fantasy type refers to recurring patterns or archetypes of scenes, characters, and actions that resonate across different contexts. These types act as symbolic templates, allowing group members to easily relate to new events by interpreting them through familiar symbolic frameworks. Rhetorical vision represents the culmination of SCT’s analysis. It is the overarching narrative or worldview that binds together various fantasy themes and types, allowing group members to derive shared emotions, values, and motivations from a collective vision (Parkinson, 2020).

In conducting Fantasy Theme Analysis, Bormann et al. (1996) identified four core elements that guide the analysis: *dramatis personae*, scene, plot lines, and sanctioning agent. These elements serve as lenses to dissect the symbolic narratives embedded within communicative acts:

1. *Dramatis Personae* pertains to the characters involved in the narrative and the roles assigned to them. It examines how characters are constructed within the fantasy theme, identifying, for example, who is cast as a hero, villain, or victim, and the motivations ascribed to each. Understanding the *dramatis personae* helps reveal the underlying value judgments and ideological leanings of the group.

2. *Scene* refers to the setting or backdrop against which the narrative unfolds. Beyond merely specifying the physical location, the scene also encapsulates the symbolic characteristics and deeper connotations associated with the setting. By analyzing the scene, researchers can uncover the contextual elements that contribute to the rhetorical vision and understand how the setting frames the group’s perception of events.

3. *Plot lines* detail the actions and events that drive the narrative. They explore questions such as who performs what actions, upon whom, and through what means. Analyzing plot lines sheds light on the causal relationships and dynamics within the fantasy theme, providing insight into how the group interprets social interactions and sequences of events.

4. *Sanctioning agent* serves to legitimize or justify the narrative. The sanctioning agent often represents an appeal to a higher authority, such as justice, tradition, or even divine will, lending credibility to the group’s interpretation of events. The presence of a sanctioning agent can elevate the narrative’s perceived moral or ideological weight, reinforcing group cohesion around the rhetorical vision (Hossain et al., 2022).

In applying SCT and FTA to cross-cultural communication, particularly within the context of promotional materials for the Confucius Institute in Thailand, this study seeks to dissect the rhetorical vision embedded within these videos. By analyzing the *dramatis personae*, scenes, plot lines, and sanctioning agents presented in the promotional content, this study aims to illuminate the symbolic messages communicated about China’s cultural diplomacy efforts and its projected image within Thai society. Symbolic Convergence Theory thus provides a framework to

explore how collective narratives are crafted, shared, and sustained within cross-cultural contexts. For the Confucius Institute, the narrative components highlighted through SCT and FTA reveal not only the thematic elements intended to resonate with Thai audiences but also the cultural and ideological symbols that underpin China's soft power strategy. This research will analyze how these fantasy themes and rhetorical visions work together to convey an image of China that is intended to be relatable and favorable to the Thai audience, bridging cultural divides and fostering greater understanding.

3. Research methodology

This study selected a total of four promotional videos from Confucius Institutes located in prominent Thai universities: the Confucius Institute at Khon Kaen University, the Confucius Institute at Ban Somdejchaopraya Rajabhat University, the Confucius Institute at Prince of Songkla University, and the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University. These institutions were chosen based on two main criteria: firstly, these universities hold high rankings in Thailand and their Confucius Institutes are recognized for their strong influence and performance; secondly, the selection includes both comprehensive universities and normal (teacher training) colleges, thereby providing a more representative sample of Confucius Institutes in Thailand.

The total duration of the analyzed videos is approximately 64 minutes. Across these videos, five recurring fantasy types were identified, revealing a total of 20 distinct fantasy themes.

4. Results

4.1 First fantasy type: Highly valued by Thailand and China

A prominent fantasy type that appeared across the promotional videos is the notion that the Confucius Institute is highly valued by both Thai and Chinese leaders. This fantasy type is expressed through numerous scenes depicting high-profile visits and endorsements from leaders of both countries, conveying a sense of official approval and support for the Institute's mission.

For example, in one of the videos, President Xi Jinping is shown visiting the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University, emphasizing the significance of the Institute at the highest levels of government. Similarly, in another video, the Thai Minister of Science and Technology states that "the Confucius Institute can expand the scale of Chinese teaching and help establish Chinese training courses, which can benefit more people." These references underscore the Institute's importance in Thai society and highlight its perceived value as a tool for cultural and educational development.

Notably, the video from Chulalongkorn University places particular emphasis on Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who is portrayed as a strong advocate for the Institute. The narration highlights that the Princess personally oversaw the establishment of the Confucius Institute and has visited it on multiple occasions, signifying her endorsement and commitment to its success. Words and phrases such as "solicitude," "support," and "approval" are repeated, reinforcing the theme of mutual respect and recognition between Thailand and China.

Table 2: 1st fantasy type (in relation to Confucius Institute)

No.	Fantasy theme	Scene	Dramatis personae	Plot lines
1	Approval of	1. Press conference	1. Minister of Science and	1. Deliver speech

	leaders and universities	2. Interview	Technology 2. Principals of universities of Thailand and China	2. Introduce Confucius Institute 3. Accept interview
2	Highly valued by leaders	1. Opening ceremony of Chinese Summer Camp 2. Opening ceremony of Confucius Institute	1. Xi Jinping 2. Ambassador to Thailand	1. Attend opening ceremony
3	Participation of Thai leaders	1. Confucius Institute	1. Minister of Science and Technology	1. Do paper-cutting
4	Solicitude from royal family	1. Confucius Institute	1. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn	1. Visit Confucius Institute 2. Deliver speech 3. New year gifts 4. Give inscription

4.2 Second fantasy type: Link of friendship and culture

This fantasy type reflects the underlying message that the establishment of Confucius Institutes in Thailand is intended not only to foster language learning but also to serve as a cultural bridge that deepens the bond of friendship between Thailand and China. Through the promotion of Chinese language and culture, these institutes are portrayed as pivotal facilitators of mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation between the two nations.

The rhetorical vision within this fantasy type revolves around the idea that Confucius Institutes are a link of friendship and cultural exchange. This vision is conveyed through statements from key stakeholders, including educational leaders and government officials, who consistently emphasize the role of the Confucius Institute in promoting cultural harmony and bilateral understanding. For instance, the principal of Southwest University remarked that “Confucius Institutes can better promote international cooperation and exchanges, disseminate Chinese culture, and establish a cooperative and friendly relationship with foreign countries.” This statement encapsulates the essence of the fantasy theme, portraying the Institutes as gateways for deepening international collaboration and fostering goodwill.

In the promotional videos, multiple stakeholders echo similar sentiments. The director of one Confucius Institute and other related officials highlight how the Institutes offer more than just language training; they organize diverse activities, such as academic exchanges, student programs, and cultural events. These initiatives are framed as vital components of the Institute’s mission to strengthen the “friendship and exchange between Thailand and China” and help Thai students “understand China better.” By engaging in these cultural exchanges, participants are able to experience China firsthand, enabling a richer, more personal understanding of Chinese society and culture. This repeated emphasis on fostering friendship and exchange constructs a powerful narrative that positions the Confucius Institute as a cultural liaison between the two nations.

One significant element of this fantasy type is the opportunity for Thai students to receive scholarships to study in China. For example, the video mentions initiatives where outstanding Thai high school students are selected to study at prestigious institutions like Peking University through scholarships facilitated by Hanban, the governing body of Confucius Institutes. These scholarships are presented not only as educational opportunities but as symbols of goodwill, reinforcing the narrative that

the Confucius Institute actively supports young people in achieving their dreams and building cross-cultural connections. The theme of “studying/visiting/training in China” emerges as a recurrent motif, linking personal educational advancement with broader cultural diplomacy goals.

Throughout this fantasy type, several key phrases are frequently chained out, or repeated, across the narratives in the promotional videos, such as “promoting international cooperation and exchange,” “cultural dissemination,” and “studying/visiting/training in China.” These repeated phrases serve to solidify the rhetorical vision of Confucius Institutes as bridges of friendship and cultural exchange, creating a shared understanding among the audience that these Institutes are not only educational institutions but also vital channels for fostering a long-term, amicable relationship between Thailand and China.

Table 3: 2nd fantasy type (in relation to Confucius Institute)

No.	Fantasy theme	Scene	Dramatis personae	Plot lines
5	Cooperation in running Confucius Institute	1. Confucius Institute	1. Ambassador to Thailand 2. Director of the Confucius Institute 3. Volunteer teachers	1. Introduce the awards of the Confucius Institute 2. Exchange gifts
6	Promotion of Chinese culture	1. Confucius Institute	1. Thai journalists 2. Thai students 3. Thai officials 4. Thai people from different industries	1. Sing 2. Dance 3. Do calligraphy 4. Make dumplings 5. Practice Taiji
7	Cultural exchange	1. Confucius Institute	1. Director of the Confucius Institute 2. Member of Parliament of Thailand	1. Accept interview
8	Encouragement of learning Chinese	1. Confucius Institute 2. Airport 3. Chinese Bridge contest	1. Thai journalists 2. Thai students 3. Thai officials 4. Thai people from different industries	1. Grant scholarship 2. Participate the contest in China 3. Visit China 4. Learn Chinese culture

4.3 Third fantasy type: Brilliant achievements

This fantasy type conveys the message that the Confucius Institutes in Thailand are not only dedicated to providing high-quality Chinese language education but have also established themselves as authoritative and credible institutions recognized for their educational standards and management excellence. The promotional videos underscore the achievements of these Institutes, depicting them as institutions with substantial teaching and management experience, capable of meeting the diverse needs of Thai society across various sectors.

One prominent theme in this fantasy type is the professionalism and credibility of the Confucius Institutes, highlighted by the numerous awards and accolades they have received. For instance, each promotional video showcases awards such as “Global Outstanding Confucius Institute,” “Outstanding Teacher of the Confucius Institute,” and “Excellent Test Center for Overseas Chinese Examinations.” These distinctions serve as endorsements of the Institutes’ rigorous teaching standards, well-organized management structures, and the quality of instruction offered. The portrayal of these awards is not merely an acknowledgment of past achievements but a strategic move to reinforce the image of the Confucius Institute as an authoritative and respected entity within the realm of international language education.

The structured management and systematic teaching methods employed by the Confucius Institutes are highlighted as core strengths. For instance, the Thai Minister of Science and Technology praises China’s “mature and systematic Chinese teaching methods” and describes the educators as “professional Chinese teachers.” This perspective is further echoed by principals from both Thailand and China, who jointly emphasize that “the Confucius Institute has established a sound management system under the leadership of the council, which has contributed to its healthy development. A proper management system and teaching process guarantee efficient and orderly operation of the Confucius Institute.” Such statements emphasize that the Institutes are not only sites of cultural exchange but are also managed with a high degree of professionalism, which ensures their sustainable development and positive impact on Thai society.

Another significant element of this fantasy type is the broad and inclusive reach of the Confucius Institute within Thai society. The videos highlight that the Institutes cater to a wide spectrum of students, encompassing members from various sectors and professional backgrounds. For example, the Confucius Institute offers specialized Chinese language training programs for the Thai Royal Secretary’s Office, the Thai National Immigration Service, the Thai Lawyer’s Office, and the Bangkok Post. This widespread engagement demonstrates the Institute’s ability to adapt its educational services to meet the specific needs of different professional fields, thereby strengthening its relevance and importance within Thailand.

Throughout this fantasy type, certain terms are frequently chained out, including “take exam,” “help students,” and “win award.” These recurring phrases create a cohesive rhetorical vision, where the Confucius Institute is portrayed not only as a place for language learning but as a highly regarded educational institution with a formal structure, dedicated to helping students achieve academic and professional goals. The emphasis on examinations and awards further reinforces the perception of the Institute as a benchmark for excellence, where Thai students can receive high-quality language instruction and validation of their skills through formal testing and certification.

Table 4: 3rd fantasy type (in relation to Confucius Institute)

No.	Fantasy theme	Scene	Dramatis personae	Plot lines
9	Numerous types of students	1. Confucius Institute 2. Website	1. Thai students 2. Thai people from different industries	1. Attend class 2. Award a degree 3. Take HSK exam
10	Abundant courses	1. Confucius Institute 2. Website	1. Thai students	1. Take HSK exam
11	Easy employment	1. Shopping mall 2. School	1. Graduates of Confucius Institute	1. Accept interview 2. Take HSK exam
12	Efficient and	1. Confucius Institute	1. Thai students	1. Accept interview

	orderly operation		2. University leaders	2. Deliver speech
13	Convenient facilities	1. Confucius Institute	1. Thai students 2. University leaders	1. Accept interview 2. Deliver speech
14	Various awards	1. Confucius Institute	1. Thai students 2. University leaders	1. Accept interview 2. Deliver speech

4.4 Forth fantasy type: Close relationship with China

This fantasy type centers around the deep-rooted and enduring relationship between Thailand and China, highlighting a sense of shared heritage, cultural affinity, and interpersonal connections that span generations. The promotional videos frequently underscore this relationship, using references to historical, cultural, and geographical proximity to strengthen the perceived bond between the two nations. This fantasy type serves to evoke a sense of familiarity and intimacy, portraying the Confucius Institutes as facilitators of a shared cultural heritage that transcends national borders and connects the people of Thailand and China on both societal and individual levels.

A significant theme within this fantasy type is the geographical and cultural closeness that binds Thailand and China. For example, in one promotional video, the city of Khon Kaen is described as a “topographical and educational center in the northeast of Thailand” where “the Thai and Chinese Thai grow up with common blood.” This framing suggests that physical proximity fosters cultural exchange and interconnection, creating a symbolic and tangible link between the two countries. Another example references Phuket, a popular tourist destination for Chinese visitors, where “Chinese culture has gradually infiltrated into the lives of local people... the cultural activities of the Confucius Institute enable Phuket people to have a better understanding of the humanities in various regions of China.” By associating the physical landscape of Thailand with historical and cultural connections to China, these statements aim to deepen the viewers' sense of shared heritage and mutual familiarity.

Another critical aspect of this fantasy type is the emphasis on familial connections and ancestry. For instance, the dean of the School of Pharmacy at Khon Kaen University mentions, “the reason why I like to learn Chinese is because my ancestors were Chinese. If I am familiar with Chinese, it will help me better understand China's outstanding cultural heritage.” This sentiment reflects the broader narrative of the Confucius Institute as a vehicle for reconnecting individuals with their ancestral roots, allowing Thai citizens of Chinese descent to engage with Chinese culture and heritage on a personal level. Such depictions suggest that the Confucius Institute plays a role in facilitating identity formation and cultural exploration, especially among individuals with Chinese heritage in Thailand.

Moreover, the videos also portray individual experiences of cross-cultural engagement as a way to emphasize Thailand's close relationship with China. For example, the Minister of Education of Thailand recalls studying at Peking University, stating, “I have studied Chinese at Peking University for a period of time. Although not long, it has impressed me.” Such personal narratives from respected officials reinforce the idea that Thai society values and seeks connections with Chinese culture, language, and education. By sharing these personal experiences, the videos create an

image of the Confucius Institute as a bridge that fosters meaningful and lasting relationships between the two countries on both institutional and individual levels.

In this fantasy type, the terms “intimacy” and “connection” are frequently “chained out,” underscoring the cultural and familial closeness between Thailand and China. These terms function as rhetorical devices that evoke a sense of warmth and familiarity, framing the relationship between the two nations as one that is not merely diplomatic but also rooted in shared cultural experiences, mutual respect, and kinship. This rhetorical vision thus positions the Confucius Institute as an essential facilitator of these connections, serving as a cultural bridge that brings Thai and Chinese societies closer together through shared values and heritage.

Table 5: 4th fantasy type (in relation to Thailand-China relationship)

No.	Fantasy theme	Scene	Dramatis personae	Plot lines
15	Close relationship with Chinese universities	1. Peking University 2. Shanghai University 3. Southwest University	1. Principals	1. Accept interview
16	Important status of Confucius Institute	1. Khon Kaen 2. Phuket	1. Thai students 2. Chinese tourists	1. Play at beach 2. Ride yacht
17	Connections between Thailand and China	1. Khon Kaen University	1. Dean of the School of Pharmacy of Khon Kaen University 2. Ambassador to Thailand 3. Mayor of Phuket 4. Students 5. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn	1. Introduce the connection between them and China 2. Give lecture 3. Deliver speech
18	Supports for Hanban	1. Khon Kaen University	1. Principal	1. Accept interview

4.5 Fifth fantasy type: National power of China

This fantasy type centers on the portrayal of China as a rising global power whose influence is both desirable and essential in the contemporary international landscape. The Confucius Institute promotional videos emphasize China's growing role in world affairs, highlighting the country's increasing economic and cultural impact on a global scale. This fantasy type serves to position China as a model of prosperity and international standing, whose language and culture are becoming necessary tools for professional and personal advancement within Thailand and beyond.

One key aspect of this fantasy type is the perception of China as a stabilizing force in an evolving international order. For instance, in an interview included in one of the promotional videos, the dean of the School of Pharmacy at Khon Kaen University comments on China's global role, stating, “The international situation is undergoing profound changes. The United States is no longer the center of the world, and many nations are rising. I think China plays a role in promoting world peace and friendship.” This statement frames China as a crucial actor in maintaining global stability and fostering international cooperation, implicitly positioning the nation as a counterbalance to Western dominance. Such framing aligns with China's own

diplomatic narratives, which emphasize its commitment to peaceful development and global cooperation.

The growing necessity of the Chinese language is another focal point in this fantasy type. According to the promotional videos, learning Chinese has become a prerequisite for obtaining a local tour guide certification in Thailand. This requirement is attributed to the rapid growth of Chinese tourism and economic presence in Thailand, reflecting the tangible impact of China's rising international status. As the videos highlight, "With the development of China's economy and the improvement of its international status, the number of Chinese tourists has continued to increase, thus learning Chinese language is a must-do." By presenting language acquisition as essential for economic opportunities, the videos depict the Chinese language not only as a means of communication but as a key to economic success and professional advancement in an increasingly China-influenced world.

Additionally, this fantasy type underscores the demand for Chinese-speaking professionals as a strategic necessity for Thailand's economic and regional development. The Chinese Consul General in Khon Kaen notes, "In order to support economic development, ASEAN cooperation, and Thailand's trade investment in southwestern China, Chinese-speaking personnel are urgently needed." This statement reflects the intertwined economic interests of China and Thailand, portraying proficiency in the Chinese language as a pathway to enhanced cross-border collaboration and professional competitiveness within the ASEAN region. Through this lens, the Confucius Institute is depicted as fulfilling an essential role in preparing Thai professionals to participate in an economy increasingly influenced by Chinese growth and trade.

Throughout this fantasy type, terms such as "increasing influence" and "learn from China" are repeatedly "chained out," reinforcing the idea that China's ascent on the global stage has direct implications for Thai society and the broader ASEAN region. These terms imply that understanding and adapting to China's influence is not only advantageous but necessary for Thailand's economic and cultural integration within a rapidly shifting global landscape. The Confucius Institute is thus positioned as a facilitator of this adaptation process, offering Thai citizens a gateway to knowledge, skills, and connections that will be essential for navigating a world in which China plays an increasingly prominent role.

Table 6: 5th fantasy type (in relation to China's political and economic strength)

No.	Fantasy theme	Scene	Dramatis personae	Plot lines
19	Rise of China's international status	1. Confucius Institute	1. Minister of Science and Technology 2. Ambassador to Thailand	1. Accept interview
20	Need for Chinese speakers	1. Phuket	1. Thai students 2. Chinese tourists 3. Tourism practitioners in Thailand 4. Businessman	1. Converse in Chinese 2. Attend class 3. Accept interview

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As China's global influence continues to expand, the role of initiatives like the Confucius Institutes in fostering cross-cultural dialogue has become increasingly significant. These institutions not only facilitate Chinese language and cultural education but also serve as strategic tools to counter the "China threat theory" and

enhance China's international image. This study, by analyzing promotional videos from Confucius Institutes in Thailand, identifies key rhetorical and fantasy themes that illustrate how these institutions contribute to cross-cultural communication and international image-building.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This research advances the application of Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) by exploring its relevance in analyzing cross-cultural communication through the lens of promotional media. The use of Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) reveals how Confucius Institutes leverage shared symbols and rhetorical visions to shape perceptions of China's national image. By emphasizing recurring themes such as institutional authority, cultural connectivity, and economic opportunity, the study demonstrates how shared symbols are strategically utilized to construct narratives that resonate with Thai audiences.

Compared to prior studies, this research extends SCT by illustrating its utility beyond group identity formation, applying it to state-sponsored cultural diplomacy. It shows how fantasy themes can cultivate a shared rhetorical vision between nations, contributing to the broader discourse on international image-building and strategic communication.

5.2 Practical implications

The findings have practical implications for cultural institutions, policymakers, and communication strategists. For Confucius Institutes and similar entities, utilizing themes that emphasize mutual benefits and cultural connectivity can enhance cross-cultural engagement. Policymakers involved in cultural diplomacy can leverage these insights to develop strategies that build on pre-existing cultural ties between China and its international partners.

Furthermore, communication strategists can benefit from understanding how fantasy themes can create narratives that emotionally resonate with foreign audiences. By aligning communication strategies with local cultural contexts and incorporating symbols that foster a sense of shared identity, stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of their cross-cultural outreach efforts.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study focuses primarily on macro-level themes within promotional videos, which may overlook the nuanced, micro-level narratives that could further illuminate individual engagement with the content. Additionally, the study is confined to Confucius Institutes in Thailand, which may not fully represent diverse cultural responses to Chinese cultural initiatives in other regions. Future research could investigate personalized narratives within similar content or explore Confucius Institutes in various global contexts. Additionally, examining the impact of interactive content and user-generated media could provide a broader understanding of cross-cultural communication dynamics.

5.4 Conclusion

This study highlights the strategic role of Confucius Institutes in promoting cross-cultural communication and enhancing China's international image. By employing Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis, it identifies how promotional content emphasizes institutional authority, shared cultural values, and economic benefits. These strategies foster a rhetorical vision of unity and mutual benefit between China and Thailand. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how fantasy themes and shared symbols can strengthen cross-cultural resonance, supporting China's soft power strategy.

6. New knowledge Contribution

This research contributes novel insights into the field of cultural diplomacy by proposing a framework that integrates Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis. By analyzing how Confucius Institutes employ fantasy themes such as authority, cultural affinity, and economic opportunity, the study offers a methodological approach for assessing state-sponsored cultural communication efforts. This framework not only enriches theoretical discussions on cultural diplomacy but also provides practical strategies for constructing effective international narratives. The findings emphasize the importance of cultivating shared rhetorical visions to align national narratives with foreign cultural values, thus extending the academic discourse on strategic communication in international relations.

Authors Contribution

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Data Availability

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, and further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author: yaoqi@ctbu.edu.cn

Interest Declaration

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The research did not involve any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence (bias) our work. This submission is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported, without any material omissions. Any roles of funding bodies have been clearly delineated; these bodies had no influence over the content of the manuscript.

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During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to polish English. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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