



Students from the Confucius Institute at University College Dublin visit Xi'an to learn more about Chinese culture.

The Globalization Pace of Confucius Institutes

By LI JIE

ELIZABETH, from Ireland, is in her late 60s. She adores Chinese fiction, especially works by Yu Hua and Mo Yan. Thanks to the classes she has been taking at the Confucius Institute for almost a decade, she can read Chinese fluently. Wang Hong, the Chinese dean of the Confucius Institute at the University of Helsinki in Finland, teaches her current course. "Elizabeth never misses any classes and is passionate about learning Chinese," Wang Hong said of her student.

Elizabeth is no exception. "The students in my class include young women

whose style of dress reflects their fascination with China, a Finnish girl whose main pastime is Chinese calligraphy, which she executes beautifully, and seniors who have been studying for many years." Wang Hong is somewhat bemused at this phenomenon, but nonetheless gratified that, "These students are truly obsessed with learning Chinese."

Along with teaching Chinese language and calligraphy, and giving classes on traditional Chinese poetry and opera, the tens of thousands of personnel, like Wang, who work abroad at Confucius Institutes also answer specific questions about Chinese culture, and social issues. These include, "Why do some Chinese children wear open-crotch pants?", "Why

are the Chinese so keen on soup?" and "What is the Chinese government doing about the smog?"

The 511 Confucius Institutes, 1,073 Confucius classrooms and their 2.1 million attendees in 140 nations have made Confucius Institutes as a whole a bridge-builder and medium for East-West cultural exchanges. They tell the world about China and enhance friendship and cooperation between China and other countries.

Born of "Chinese Fever"

"Ms. Li, how do you distinguish among big-seal, small-seal, and clerical script styles of Chinese calligraphy?" was the question Li Yiqi, a volunteer in the



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Local students are keen to join the Chinese painting course in the Confucius Institute at the University of Helsinki.

Confucius Institute at University College Dublin (UCD), was asked during a Chinese language lesson. Li was astounded. The student who asked the question, a retired man in his 60s, was doing research for his book on the evolution of Chinese characters, and could not wait to share his opinions with Li.

Some students always carry with them the “300 Tang poems,” and engage Li in discussion whenever they have the chance. This enthusiasm for learning the Chinese language acquainted Li, who got her master’s degree in China, with the Chinese language learning boom in Ireland. Some young women in their teens even asked Li how they could buy TF Boys – a popular Chinese band – merchandise. Her class also celebrates any birthdays among them by singing “Happy Birthday” in Chinese. It would seem that China’s popular culture is permeating the daily life of Irish youth.

In Ireland, Confucius Institutes have achieved coverage of all age groups including students at kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, universities, and community colleges. More than 5,000 primary and secondary school students attend Chinese lessons every year. The Confucius Institute at UCD also provides materials for the weekly broadcast of the “Hello, China” radio show.

Courses at the Confucius Institute at the University of Helsinki where Wang works have expanded from basic language learning to multidimensional content, such as China media language and Chinese culture. Some of Wang’s students go on to become teachers of Chinese at local schools after graduating, so propagating the impact of the Confucius Institute.

More than a decade ago, when products made in China were seen in households throughout the West, Chinese language, as well as the culture and society behind these products, drew global attention. This led to the establishment of the first Confucius Institute. Benefiting from the U.K., France, Germany, and Spain’s experience of promoting their