Project Brief/Editorial Plan

Inside the Confucius Institute

Print/digital narrative in infographic banners with layered-video/interactives

Story

“Culture and Politics in Teaching Chinese” (working title)

This project will give its audience a multifaceted and detailed look inside the Confucius Institute.

CI is a program directly funded by the Chinese government that provides teachers and resources for teaching Chinese language and culture in local schools and colleges around the globe.

At a time of increased pressure on school budgets and instructional standards, supporters value the program’s encouragement and facilitation of cross-cultural education and international understanding. This is particularly the case as it involves China, a huge and important actor on the world stage, yet a society still largely inscrutable to most Western minds. However, CI’s direct links to the Chinese government have also generated everything from cautious concern to open suspicion to outright rejection of the program. Its critics are concerned that CI is a propaganda tool being given unprecedented access to young and impressionable minds, and a barely camouflaged financial enticement to academic self-censorship.

In the middle of this debate over politics, policy, academic freedom and educational opportunity are the young volunteer Chinese teachers, experiencing life outside their own country often for the first time, and their local students, the world’s next generation of decision-makers for whom an international perspective is increasingly vital.

More than 300 CIs operate worldwide, with nearly a quarter of those in the United States, and with the largest U.S. concentration of CI-funded native Chinese instructors living and teaching in Kentucky. KY’s status in this regard is particularly novel since it is ranked as one of the more conservative states in the country, therefore more likely than most to be skeptical of a communist government’s initiatives. Western Kentucky University, with the motto “A Leading American University with International Reach,” administers most CI activity in the state.

The narrative for this complicated and multifaceted story comprises two primary elements.

• The facts, numbers, maps, lists, statistics and examples combine to characterize the scale and nature of CI at various levels from international to national to state to individual community. The storytelling needs to engage audience members in visualizing and grasping the otherwise overwhelming data, for them to derive context and informed opinion.

• Then there are the experiences, emotions, viewpoints and interpretations of the people involved with and affected by CI activities. The storytelling here needs to engage audience members in connecting with these people as directly as possible, for them to assemble a familiarity and personal perspective most would otherwise not be in a position to achieve.

Audience

Interest in this story will be international in scope and particularly strong where there are the most CI programs — Europe (100), North America (88) and Asia (73) — plus anyone interested in China, Chinese and Chinese culture. That the story will be produced in English will also trend the audience predominantly among English-using locations.

The American audience is likely to be the most personally engaged because of the concentration of CI programs in American schools and universities, resulting in a concentration of project content from U.S. sources.
Beyond geographic focus, the wide span of issues touched on by the story will engage audiences interested in primary, secondary and higher education; foreign language instruction; education funding; teacher training and certification; student intercultural experiences; social internationalization; foreign policy and international relations; Chinese government policies; human rights; soft power; university initiatives and grant opportunities; academic freedom and integrity; local school board and community governance; school administration; parenting and child development.

The personal stories of the Chinese visiting teachers and of the communities in which they live and teach will engage audiences on many levels of human interest.

Some of the audience will come at the story with established mindsets about various issues. Points of entry to the project must anticipate the more polarizing of these mindsets to still encourage engagement and further exploration of the broader story.

In addition, the innovative format being used to tell this story will engage audiences interested in media technology, the future of journalism, the future of infographics and data visualization, the future of print media, and developments in augmented reality, video storytelling and mobile interactivity.

Media

In cooperation with world-class data-visualization design firm Column Five Media of Orange County in the United States and augmented-reality technology pioneer Layar of Amsterdam, Netherlands, Western iMedia will produce this project in a non-traditional multiplatform journalistic format conceived specifically to tell the story to greatest effect in light of its primary narrative elements.

The project will comprise a series of perhaps 12 to 20 visually enticing, intuitively explanatory infographic banners/posters digitally overlaid with mobile-accessed video articles providing increased depth of explanation and emotional context. The augmented-reality (AR) overlay technology is accessed through a camera-linked smartphone or tablet app that will also allow interactive features promoting dynamic audience engagement.

Each infographic will present one segment of the story, such as the organization and finances of CI worldwide; CI comparison to other national cultural outreach programs; the basics of teaching the Chinese language and popular elements of Chinese culture; encapsulated profiles of selected CI programs, their practitioners and their host communities in a variety of locations in Kentucky, the United States and internationally; the evolution of direct and indirect soft power and cultural influence; an overview of Chinese policies and people’s attitudes toward them; trends in foreign language skills in America and other societies; comparison data on academic achievement vs. language learning nationally and in the CI communities; the training process for CI visiting teachers at the program’s boot camp outside Beijing; etc.

The video articles keyed to sections of each infographic will document the stories and views of individuals related to the topic of that banner, such as a CI visiting teacher in the highlighted community, a student in one of the local school’s CI classes, the student’s parents, a host community leader or host university scholar with a representative viewpoint on the program, local officials charged with teacher licensing and curriculum development, CI officials at various levels, etc.

Engagement

All the content of this project will additionally be accessible through a specially developed online site that presents the story’s information and video material in a non-linear, explorable and searchable environment that is HTML5 compliant and adaptive to mobile and tablet devices as well as computer users.

However, beyond the essential journalistic objective of advancing the informed society, this project’s goal is to not just tell the story but to create an experience for its audience, to create a higher level of engagement than is typical in today’s news media. That requires more than just another website or mobile app, no matter how sophisticated.

It is toward that end that this story’s primary vehicle purposefully leverages the power of print and paged design in terms of impact, persistence, perceived veracity, organic navigation and a low tech-threshold for
initial audience participation. The infographic banners will be objects of art in their own right, piquing interest and communicating on a visceral level even before people get close enough to consume specific information content. The banners will achieve marvelous effect assembled in a designed gallery presentation for particularly interested audiences, but can also work journalistically simply arranged down the middle of a shopping mall promenade for serendipitous audiences. They can be reproduced on demand, from billboard size down to inkjet-printed notebook pages, in whole or in parts, and still function to trigger the augmented-reality overlays.

The overlay technology accessed through ubiquitous personal mobile devices takes these infographics to a whole new level they could not otherwise attain without limiting confinement to a digital screen. It makes them actively engaging beyond just being read. It allows them to be continually updated, overcoming print’s most inherent weakness as a news medium. And it lets this project augment the power of print with the power of video for its ability to time- and place-shift viewers, communicate emotion and occupy a full range of attention.

Social media will be employed, both in traditional means and through overlaid interactives on the infographics, to generate and engage audience for the story and build community around it. This will especially include integration of user-generated content into the project.

A Kickstarter.com campaign will be used not only to help fund the project but also as a component of audience generation.

Budget and funding

A $19,500 budget has been established for the project to cover basic editorial work, audience interactivity and production expenses. The Kickstarter.com crowdfunding platform is being use to seek underwriters for these costs. Beyond this, primary funding is from Western iMedia’s own resources through the Western Kentucky University School of Journalism & Broadcasting. In addition, both project partners, Column Five Media and Layar, are contributing in-kind services totaling around $12,000. The Confucius Institute is not involved in any way in funding this project.

Editorial standards

CI officials were approached in August 2012 for initial discussions concerning access, cooperation, editorial independence and journalistic ethics. Just as funding of this project is totally independent of the Confucius Institute, CI will have no authority over its content and will be afforded no prior review other than at the discretion of Western iMedia for fact-checks and quote verification. CI has agreed to issue the necessary documents to support Chinese visa applications.

Updated

2012.12.05