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Teacher resilience and triple crises: Confucius Institute teachers' lived experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic

Abstract: This article aims to investigate Confucius Institute teachers' lived intercultural experiences during the triple crises, i.e., the pandemic, hostility towards Confucius Institutes (CIs) and rampant racism. Through the analytical lens of teacher resilience, the article looks beyond what has gone wrong and foregrounds resourcefulness, strength, and agency of CI teachers. It draws the data from interviews with nine CI teachers based in US, Europe and Australia where CI closure has been reported, over a period of three months in 2020 and 2021. In addition to technological and pedagogical challenges and well-being issues, CI teachers found themselves in the vulnerable position of 'being caught in the middle' exacerbated by the changing political dynamics, rising anti-Chinese racism, cross-cultural differences in health behaviours and broken partnership with the host universities. Our analysis shows that despite these challenges, CI teachers built resilience and remain committed to their professional values. They adopted a pragmatic approach to depoliticise language teaching through 'safe' cultural activities and engaged in perspective-taking and reflexivity. The findings further demonstrate the importance of mutual support and co-learning for developing resilience, thus offering new insights on factors contributing to teacher resilience. Our research raises questions about the CI operational/partnership model and urges policy makers and senior management teams to put teachers and students' needs first in their decisions.

Keywords: Confucius Institute; crisis; pandemic; racism; teacher resilience

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1 Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented rise in learning Chinese as a foreign language. There are an estimated 25 million overseas Chinese learners, and 4,000 universities across 70 countries and regions offering Chinese language courses (Centre for Language Education and Cooperation 2020). The spread of Chinese language learning in contrast to the overall decline of language learning in schools and universities in English-speaking countries is largely due to the growing status of China as a global economic and political power and the Chinese government's substantial investment in Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs), an educational institution named after the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551–479 BC). Since the opening of the first Confucius Institute in Seoul, South Korea in 2004, the number of CIs and CCs has reached 541 and 1,170 respectively, covering 162 countries or regions (Ministry of Education of China 2020). The early success in CIs' global expansion has earned it the reputation of "the most famous brand that embodies China's soft power" and "a symbol of contemporary China's entering the world strategy", the very phrases used by Xu Lin, the former Director-general of Confucius Institute Headquarters (CIHQ, also known as Hanban – the China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language).

While there is no question about its success in promoting the teaching and learning of Chinese worldwide, CIs have attracted a substantial amount of scrutiny and criticism from the media, politicians, higher education policy makers and researchers in the West. The title of a featured article in the Financial Times in 2017, *Confucius Institutes: Cultural asset or campus threat?*, succinctly summarised the polarising positions in perceived influence of CIs on campus (Pong and Feng 2017). With the first closure of the CI at McMaster University, Canada in 2013, CIs have experienced considerable setbacks in North America and Europe. In 2020, Sweden closed all its CIs and severed all the existing twin-cities partnerships between China and Sweden, reportedly out of its growing concerns over national and regional security (Myklebust 2020, see further in Section 3).

Amongst all the debates and criticism related to the CIs, however, very little attention has been paid to the experience of CI '*gongpai*' (公派, sent abroad for public duties by the state) teachers and managers who find them caught in the middle during the soft power struggle. The outbreak of Covid-19 and the rising racism towards the Chinese people following the outbreak have only exacerbated the tension and the crisis. Emerging reports suggest the decline in the studying of Chinese language is the result of the geopolitical tension coupled with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (The Economist 2020). We are interested in

understanding CI teachers' experience during the triple crises, i.e., the broken partnership, the pandemic and racism, through the notion of teacher resilience. The combination of a focus on lived experience and resilience allows us to go beyond what has gone wrong and to foreground flexibility, strength, and agency of those who find themselves in adverse conditions.

We will first provide a review of the notion of teacher resilience, followed by a brief account of the changing socio-political context of CIs and the changing dynamics in the CI partnership. We then examine the lived experience and resilience of CI teachers in the new conditions. The implications for policy and practice are discussed in the final section.

2 Teacher resilience

While resilience has been largely conceived as a coping mechanism in the literature in early days, its conceptualisation has evolved over time. Rather than regarded as a reactive human capacity to threat and adversity, resilience constitutes a dynamic process of positive adaptation whereby individuals mobilise internal and external resources (e.g., Masten 2001; Pan 2011; Ye 2016). Gu and Day (2013) summarise three key considerations in the way resilience is conceptualised: its presupposition of the presence of threat, its developmental nature (i.e., not something innate or stable) and its relationship with personal characteristics, competence and the environment where people work and live. This notion has been applied in a number of contexts where people face changes and adversity such as migration (e.g., Ehrensaft and Tousigant 2006) or intercultural adaptation (e.g., Komisarof and Zhu 2016; Pan 2011; Ye 2016).

In the context of teacher education, Gu and Day (2013) normalise 'resilience' as part of teachers' everyday toolkits. They reconceptualise 'teacher resilience' as a capacity essential to teachers who need to manage uncertainty and unpredictability increasingly characterising their everyday professional lives. In their words, teacher resilience is about how "to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers teach" (p. 26). They further propose a contextual approach to understanding factors contributing to resilience. Different personal, relational and organisational conditions of teachers' work and lives and the socio-cultural and policy contexts of teaching all make a difference to resilience.

Our exploration of the experience of CI teachers during the triple crises in this article is informed by these conceptualisations and the growing literature on the importance of resilience in all aspects of lives ranging from healthcare to

organisation, as we learn from our experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Bryce et al. 2020). Seeing resilience as a dynamic process of positive adaptation relevant to everyday practices gives agency to the social actors concerned and moves away from a focus on what has gone wrong. We are also interested in understanding how increasing hostility towards CIs in the West impacts on CI teacher resilience, what can be learned from teacher resilience during the triple crises and what transformative effects the experience may have on teachers' professional competence. While the notion of resilience has been used in understanding CI teachers' process of intercultural adaptation in the host countries in Ye (2016), our exploration is the first attempt to investigate factors contributing to CI teachers' resilience in a crisis situation.

3 The changing socio-cultural context

To understand the changing socio-cultural and policy context of CIs, we need to start with its operational model. Most CIs are built on a joint venture/partnership model which brings together local partners/host universities, Chinese university partners and the CI Headquarters. Confucius Classrooms are junior versions of CIs, working with local schools and affiliated to CI networks. A standard CI agreement covers a five-year initial period with the Hanban providing start-up funding, teaching materials and one or two CI *gongpai* teachers, and the host university providing accommodation, infrastructure and administrative support. Apart from access to financial and teaching resources, for many host universities, the main attraction of CI is the opportunity to develop close links at the institutional level (including research collaboration). For Chinese partnership universities, it is a way of "improving academic performance and level of internationalisation" (Starr 2009: 69, citing the words of Chen Jingyu, the former Vice-Chair of the CIHQ/Hanban).

However, the apparent warm reception towards CIs in North America and Europe in the early days quickly gave way to concerns for academic interference and for security. In 2013, the first CI closure was announced at McMaster University, Canada, reportedly due to the host university's concerns about the screening process in China for the selection of Chinese *gongpai* teachers, which was claimed to be in consistent with the "University's values of equality and inclusivity" (McMaster University 2013). This was followed by further closure of eight CIs in the US and Europe from 2013 to 2014. After the Trump administration came into power in the US, China was labelled as a "long-term strategic competitor" and identified as a threat to America's foreign policy and security in the US government's strategy (Lippert and Perthes 2020: 5). Michael Pompeo, the former Secretary of State,

threatened to shut down all CIs in the US by the end of 2020 accusing them of spying at the American universities (Brunnstrom 2020).

In parallel, CIs in Europe have also experienced setbacks. Taking Sweden as an example. The Confucius Institute at Stockholm University was set up in 2005 and was the first CI in Europe. Ten years later, in June 2015, Stockholm University announced its closure. The reason given by the then Vice-President of the University, Astrid Söderbergh Widding, when interviewed by the Swedish media, was that "establishing institutes that are funded by another nation, within the framework of a university, is rather a questionable practice" (ScandAsia 2015). When later pressed by the Chinese media about what she meant by 'the questionable practice', the Vice-President referred to Swedish laws and regulations on higher education (Wang et al. 2015). The Chinese media was quick to point out that no regulations or laws prohibit the establishment of educational institution with foreign funding in Sweden. The closure was in fact a response to growing concerns for academic independence and the perceived interference of CIs in academic matters as reported in the Swedish media in the lead-up to the closure. These concerns about CIs, according to Cui Hongjian (the then Head of Europe Studies at the China Institute of International Studies) are due to "ideological bias against China" and the assumption that 'the government-led Confucius Institute is a tool for China to export its ideology" (Qu 2015).

The fall out with Stockholm University was only a precursor to what was to come as the relationship between Sweden and China began to deteriorate. In 2020, Sweden not only closed all the CIs, but also put an end to the existing 'twin-cities' partnerships between China and Sweden (Flittner 2020; Fu 2020). This time, the English media attributed the closure to "growing concern in Sweden over security, human rights and the jailing in China of a Chinese-born publisher with Swedish citizenship" (Myklebust 2020). In response, the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm urged the Swedish politicians to "abandon bias and prejudice [against] China, stop smearing and attacking China, refrain from building barriers between the two countries and peoples, and truly do something in the fundamental interest of Sweden and Swedish people" (Myklebust 2020).

In Europe, in addition to the cases in Sweden documented above, CI closure was also reported in the University of Lyon, France (Gu 2015), the Free University of Brussels, Belgium (Galindo 2019), and the University of Basel, Switzerland (Sharma 2020), etc. Although these universities still offer Chinese language courses, they no longer 'outsource' it to CI. The irony is that while intended to promote mutual understanding, CIs are caught in the cross-fire of ideological warfare and have become the first casualties. It has to be said that compared to the trend in North America and Europe, CIs' expansion in Africa is a different story. In the past decade, the number of CIs in Africa has grown to 48 (Lijadu 2018). CIs are

seen to have contributed to capacity development of local teachers as well as the success of China's foreign policy towards Africa (Li 2021).

In July 2020, Hanban was rebranded as the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC), affiliated to the Ministry of Education of China, while the Confucius Institute Headquarters became a part of a newly established non-governmental organisation, the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF). The latter is set up by a group of universities, enterprises and community groups and aims to support Chinese international education projects worldwide. According to CLEC, this change is an effort to refine the focus of CI programmes, to develop a pragmatic and efficient new model, and to disperse misinterpretation and misleading rhetoric (CI U.S. Center 2021). This was speculated to be a response to the large-scale CI closure in the US and Europe and an attempt to depoliticise CIs (Peterson 2020).

Several studies have sought to probe the apparent hostility towards CIs in the West from a historical or comparative perspective. Hubbert (2014), for example, discusses how the cold war rhetoric, coupled with the fear of rising China as a threat to American economic and political power, has created a local perception of an authoritarian Chinese state, and conflicting expectations towards learning Chinese language in CIs. Liu (2019) argues that despite similarity in CI's missions to other language and culture organisations, cultural hegemony and the ensuing different power positions have converted these similarities into differences and turned CIs into an "imagined propaganda vehicle" (p. 271).

For CI teachers who are directly involved in the day-to-day running of CIs and CCs, the real challenge is how to navigate between the CI's mission of enhancing understanding of Chinese language and culture and the perception of CIs as a tool of the Chinese government's propaganda amongst growing hostility towards China. This is in addition to the challenges facing teachers in the CI partnership who tend to be on one or two year fixed-term contracts. They include, for example, lack of institutional, cultural or local knowledge; lack of professional development opportunities; lack of support, teaching facilities or suitable teaching materials, etc. (Ye and Edwards 2018; Zhu and Li 2014).

With the outbreak of Covid-19, the CI teachers found them facing the 'perfect storm' of growing hostility against CIs, wide-spread anti-China xenophobia and professional and personal life emergencies. Our investigation of CI teachers' experience during the pandemic is guided by the following research questions:

(1) What challenges and difficulties did CI teachers face in their professional and personal lives during the pandemic?
(2) How did they respond to these challenges and difficulties?
(3) What implications do the lived experience of CI teachers have for policy and practice?

4 Methodology

The project idea was developed in October, 2020, shortly after the first author arrived in the UK as a visiting scholar from China. At that time, many universities in North America and Europe were bracing themselves for a second wave of the coronavirus and adapting to online teaching and learning. This was also the time that further closure of CIs was announced in various parts of the world in addition to frequent reports of racist attacks against Chinese people.

To better understand the lived experience of CI teachers and to discern the meaning that they ascribe to their experiences, we collected the primary data through semi-structured interviews. We prepared a list of open questions based on our own lived experiences in the pandemic and observations along the themes of online teaching, impact of the pandemic on everyday life, impact of changing political dynamics and racism. The interviews were conducted one-to-one between the first author and the participants in Chinese, the first language of the authors and the participants between November 2020 and January 2021. The interviews were approached as conversations, drawing techniques from narrative inquiry which positions the interviewer as a listener and the interviewee as a narrator (Allen 2017). Participants were encouraged and given plenty of space to tell their stories and experiences. The interviews were conducted and recorded via the social media platform, Wechat. The audio recording was transcribed through the App Iflyrec V4.0.2529 (讯飞听见) and then checked by the first author. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo 12 for data coding and analysis.

Identification and analysis of themes took multiple rounds: they were first coded by the first author, and then talked through between the authors before the authors went back to the transcripts individually again and carried out several rounds of deep reading. Our initial aim was to investigate the challenges facing CI teachers in the pandemic. However, our sense-making of the data showed that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was a game-changer not only in the CI teachers' experience, but also in their way of coping and managing the crises, characterised by their resilience, resourcefulness and professional commitment. This process of sharpening our focus is similar to the process of a grounded theory study, in which researchers start with openness to new data and gradually move to a focused probing as the study progresses (Foley et al. 2021). In the following data analysis section, we will present the data alongside the three key considerations associated with the notion of resilience: threat (crises), its emergent and developmental nature and its influential factors.

Participants were recruited through the first author's personal contacts at first and then via the combined techniques of snowball and typical case sampling targeting the geographical areas where there were reported CI closures. A total of

Table 1: Interviewees' information.

Participant	Age range	Gender	Chinese teaching experience (in years)	Country	Role in CI	Starting date in CI
P1	20–30	Female	0–5	Spain	Teacher	Sept 2019
P2	30–40	Female	0–5	Spain	Co-director	Sept 2018
P3	40–50	Female	10–15	UK	Teacher	Jan 2020
P4	30–40	Female	10–15	Germany	Teacher	Jan 2018
P5*	30–40	Female	5–10	Germany	Teacher	Oct 2018
P6	30–40	Male	0–5	Germany	Co-director	Sept 2019
P7*	40–50	Female	5–10	Australia	Teacher	Aug 2018
P8[+]	40–50	Female	10–15	USA	Teacher	Jul 2018
P9[+]	30–40	Female	10–15	USA	Teacher	Jul 2018

*Participants took part in a follow-up interview. [+]Participants are CC teachers.

nine participants from Spain, Germany, UK, Australia and USA agreed to take part. Two of the participants took part in follow-up interviews four months later when news about the increasing scrutiny and control over their CIs were announced. The profiles and professional experience of the interviewees are largely consistent with the overall profile of the CI *gongpai* teachers reported in Ye (2014, cited in Ye 2017). A majority of the participants are between 30 and 50 and have over five years' Chinese teaching experience. All of the participants apart from one are female. Among the participants, two are the CI Co-directors and two are CC teachers working in US. Most of them were in their overseas post for one or two years at the time of their interviews. The short residency is in line with the practices of the CIs: the CI *gongpai* teachers are on a fixed term basis, usually one or two years. Detailed information is presented in Table 1.

In addition to the interviews, we also collected the available documents and the teachers' notes and observed closely the media reports and the social media posting regarding CIs and racism. These help us to contextualise the interview conversations and subsequent data interpretation.

5 Triple crises and teacher resilience

5.1 Professional emergency

Unprecedented professional emergencies in the pandemic brought many challenges, and, at the same time, led to development of resilience and mobilisation of new or different kinds of resources among our participants. Our interviewees

talked about technological and pedagogical challenges and well-being issues during the pandemic, similar to many teaching professionals (e.g., Carrillo and Flores 2020; König et al. 2020). They commented on the need to adjust their own teaching methodologies and curriculum design (e.g., group learning activities involving physical movements, P7), to adapt teaching materials for online classes (P5 and P3), to learn new platform (P5 and P3), and to seek and select appropriate resources (P3). They were concerned about lack of engagement on the students' part, reduced teaching contents, and increased workload in general.

There are also some challenges specific to teaching Chinese online. For example, P1 reflected on the lack of an online alternative to teaching stroke writing and P7 on the difficulties in learning pronunciation. These are consistent with the Chinese traditional focus on accuracy in perception and production of Chinese tones (Xu et al. 2019) and on the order of strokes in Chinese characters writing (Gao 2020).

While recognising these challenges, some interviewees also shared their pedagogical innovations and tactics in building resilience and mobilising all the resources at their disposal. In the following comment, P4 emphasised the importance of 'thinking' and 'adjustment' in solving problems which may occur in every lesson. She was philosophical about the juxtaposition between challenges and new skills developed in meeting challenges. For her, these key elements of teacher resilience are part and parcel of professional practices.

> 挑战的话，可能具体到每次课都会有一些意想不到的情况。这种不断冒出来的问题，可能就是让你会自己去思考我怎么去调整，我怎么样可能把不顺利的地方就变得顺利。所以从 3 月到现在这半年的时间，我自己也是不停地在调整。以前只是听说网课的概念，到底是怎么回事却并不知道。这种东西你自己经历过一遍，你就完全明白了，而且你切身地一直在实践，你就知道怎么去上网课，怎么样把网课上好，我觉得从这个来讲，也是疫情带给我们正面积极的东西。(P4)

> (Talking about challenges, for each lesson, there may be unexpected situations. Those problems keep popping up and make you reflect on how you can make adjustments and how you can make things go well. So I think during these six months since March, I've been adjusting myself, because I only heard about the concept of online classes before, but I didn't really know how to do it. After you have experienced this kind of things once, you understand it completely, and also because you have been practising it yourself, you know how to teach online classes and how to do it well. I think that from this perspective, it is also a positive thing that the pandemic has brought us.)

Several interviewees talked about their experience of 'becoming' resourceful in online teaching, in line with the view of resilience as a developmental process. For example, P4 suggested moving away from relying on spoken words as a means of communication towards multi-modal communication which involves written texts

in 'chats' and embodiment. Another interviewee (P9) narrated his positive experience of making use of apps. The apps, she believed, not only offered equal access to everyone, but also enabled them to compare their own writing with that of other students, something that he could not do in face-to-face teaching.

> 在这样的一个情况下， 我们公立学校强调要保持教育的公平性。我们会一般借助一些平台和工具，比如说我们需要练习汉字，那么当时在面授的时候，我们每人都有写汉字小白板和马克笔。那么当面授只有2个学生，剩下 28 个学生都在线的时候，小白板又不能送到别人家里，也开不了摄像头让大家同时给我看，这个时候我就用 Chrome 插件的白板模式，然后他们就可以在这个上面写，然后再把大家的答案全部投出来，每个人都可以看到别人的写成什么样，自己写成什么样，哪里还差了哪一些，其实在这个时候我会觉得比面授还方便一些。(P9)

> (In such a context, our state-funded schools emphasise the need to maintain equity of education. We usually use some platforms and tools, for example, to practise Chinese characters writing. When we were teaching face-to-face, each of the students had a small whiteboard and a marker pen for writing. When there were only two students in face-to-face teaching and the other 28 students were online, the small whiteboards could not be sent to their homes and some of them could not turn on their cameras to show me how they wrote the characters. So I use the whiteboard function of a Chrome plug-in, and then they can all write on it. And then I project everyone's writing onto the whiteboard. Thus, they can see how others write, how they write, and where the gaps are. In fact, at this moment, I find it (the on-line whiteboard) more convenient than face-to-face teaching.)

What is interesting is that three participants based in Spain, Germany and Australia respectively (P2, P6 and P7) reported the increase of the number of students during the pandemic, against the general trend reported in the media. Moving CI classes online makes the course accessible to those students based far away. In fact, P1 believed that the online delivery has brought some benefits to her CI. The activities they ran all went smoothly and were well-received.

When we probed the training and support they received for their online teaching, a few interviewees reported the importance of sharing and learning together with their colleagues. One participant (P2) told us that the training was not the right word, as no one knew how to use Zoom at the beginning. The best word to describe the process, for her, was co-learning or learning together (see her comments below). They set up a meeting and people tested the Zoom functions together.

> 在一开始在用 Zoom 的时候，其实老师们都不会用，疫情因为是很突然的事情，所以在转网课的时候，我们是进行过一次应该叫共同学习，也不能叫培训，因为当时谁都不知道怎么用，所以我们就开了一次这样的会，然后大家全部都连进来，然后大家就在那里摸索。(P2)

> (When we first started with Zoom, in fact, teachers didn't know how to use it, as the pandemic broke out suddenly. So when we switched to online class, we had a meeting that should be

called co-learning, not training, because no one knew how to use it at that time, so we held such a meeting, and everyone joined us. Then we learnt how to use it by trial and error.)

The participants also mentioned their participation in various workshops organised by the Hanban and other organisations and networks of Chinese teaching as a foreign language such as The World Chinese Alliance. One participant (P9) talked about the role the CIHQ played in connecting and supporting CI teachers in the early days of the lockdown when people were working from home and feeling isolated. The get-togethers set up by the CIHQ created opportunities to socialise with others.

> 我们就很难受, 当时大家都在家, 又加上缺乏人际交流, 大家都觉得很孤独, 然后孔院就很快把我们聚在一起, 然后每周大家视频上见面聊一聊, 其实更多的就跟工作无关, 因为是暑假也没有课, 更多是聊聊生活。(P9)

> (We were suffering. At that time, everyone was at home, and there was lack of interpersonal communication, so everyone felt very lonely. Then the Confucius Institute quickly gathered us together, and then we met and chatted online every week. In fact, it had nothing to do with work, because there were no classes in the summer vacation, and we talked more about everyday life.)

The experience of our participants in managing professional emergencies as discussed above demonstrate the importance of mutual support from peers and learning together in building resilience during the crises as well as the potential role of institutions in supporting their employees. What is interesting here, however, is that little was mentioned of the support provided by host universities, if any. Neither did the participants seem to expect any support from their host universities. We will further explore this apparent lack of support and low expectation from the perspective of partnership in the next section.

5.2 Broken partnership?

Almost all the participants mentioned their vulnerabilities amongst the intensifying political polarisation, even though their current jobs may not be at immediate risk. P6 from Germany reflected on the situation in Europe below. He was aware that CIs had very negative media coverage. He believed that some universities took an ambivalent stance towards China because they wanted to be seen on the American side. He felt that CIs were misunderstood. They were superimposed to the image of China imagined in the West as a superpower 'invading the world' with values totally different from that of the West.

孔院现在在欧洲受的媒体打击比较多, 舆论上的基本上都是负面的, 以攻击性的信息为主, 所以我们现在很难 … 比如说 (XX 外方) 大学, 就有人认为它是因为要更靠近美国的, 所以就会采取一个对中国的消极立场 … 他们把中国先设定为一个正在以侵略的姿态出现的一个强国的姿态, 而且是一个完全跟他们的价值观背离的这样一个强权国家, 这是他们首先树立的个形象, 然后再把孔院放到这个形象上面去。(P6)

(CIs are frequently attacked in the media in Europe. News report and public opinions are mainly negative and aggressive. It is really difficult for us … Speaking of our host university, people said that it wants to be closer with the US, so it has adopted a negative stance towards China … In their imagination, they think that China is invading the world as a superpower and completely deviates from 'their values', and consequently they see CI as a symbol of this image.)

Our participants felt frustrated with the Western media which did not seem to be interested in what CIs actually did. P6 pointed out that when they invited journalists to attend the cultural exchange activities well-received by the public, none of the journalists turned up.

Against the increasingly hostile socio-political context, focusing on individual professional 'selves' and duties was reported by a number of participants as part of the process of building resilience. They talked about CI teachers as an individual teacher (教师个人) and had a realistic and pragmatic understanding about what they could do to ease the situation. In May 2021, it was reported that all CIs in Australia had come under scrutiny from the federal government, which intended to terminate their cooperation agreement (Lee 2021).[1] P7, based in Australia, discussed her response in a follow-up interview (below). She focused on her individual professional identities and duties whereby she hoped to win over her students and to disseminate a positive image about CIs. She emphasised that they were not over-anxious about the scrutiny, which could be seen as the routine task.

其实关于孔院的负面报道在去年前年也一直有, 我们作为汉语教学个体, 更多地关注是做好自己的本职工作, 在工作中通过我们的工作态度和工作作风, 来给学生一个正面的回答。希望通过我们的学生能够把孔院的正确形象传递出去。作为教师, 我们对澳洲政府的审查行为没有过度担忧, 作为在国外合作院校的一个教学单位, 配合合作大学的各项检查, 也是常规工作之一。(P7)

(In fact, there have been negative reports about the CI last year and the year before. As individual Chinese teacher, we pay more attention to how to do our own job well, and to give students a positive response through our attitude and work ethics. I hope that our students could disseminate the positive image of the CI. As teachers, we have no undue concerns about the scrutiny of the Australian government. As an educational institution in a foreign university, cooperating with various audits of the partner university is one of the routine tasks.)

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1 From the available information on the various CI websites, most of the CIs in Australia are in operation as of April, 2022.

There were some deliberate attempts among the CI teachers to depoliticise Chinese language teaching in the classroom. P8 talked about how she focused on language teaching. She would not talk about politics nor share her views about the American or Chinese societal issues. There was also similar self-censorship when CI teachers interacted with others outside classrooms.

> 你在教学的时候, 你就专注自己的 (教学)。你就教汉语, 你也不谈政治, 也不能谈啥, 注意自己的言语, 不要轻易表露你对美国社会怎么样 (态度), 或者说你说一些中国怎么样, 还是要稍微注意一下。然后在外面的话, 我觉得老师们可能会特别小心。比如说社区里面 (教书), 周围有邻居, 或者说有社区里的人认识的, 我估计大家都会戒备心会强一些。 (P8)

> (When you are teaching, you focus on your own work. You only teach Chinese language, and do not talk about politics or anything else. Be careful with your own words. Don't show your attitude towards American society, or make comments on China. We should be a bit more cautious. When being outside (of the school), I think we teachers may be more careful, for example, when we teach in the community, or when there are neighbours or acquaintances around, I expect that we are more on alert.)

Staying clear of ideologies is also a key to managing working relationships with other CI teachers. P6's CI employed the teachers of Chinese heritage from different regions of China or non-Chinese origin. While they have mutual respect for each other's freedom of speech, they also share the understanding that language teaching needs to be free from political ideology and one's political views. While it is questionable whether learning a language could be entirely rid of ideologies, her desired language lessons are those that exclusively focus on language.

> 我们老师的组成就是一半是华裔, 一半是非华裔, ..., 老师他们一般也就是上语言课, 没有太涉及政治内容, 而且基本上我们就是说跟所有其他的德国的老师是一样的, 就是说一方面尊重他们自己的言论自由, 但是另外一方面他们也都尊重说上课是上课, 不能把自己的政治立场带进来。到现在为止能够听到的是大家完全就是上语言课。 (P6)

> (Half of our teachers are ethnic Chinese and half non-Chinese … They generally teach language, and do not involve too many political contents. We are basically the same as all the other German teachers, that is, on the one hand we respect their freedom of expression, but on the other hand they also respect the fact that a lesson is a lesson and that we should not bring in our political positions. What we have heard so far is that people are just having language lessons.)

While there is a clear desire to stay clear of politics, CI teachers often turn to 'safe' folk cultural activities such as Chinese food, taichi, and fan dance. Despite their inherent reductionist approach to culture, these safe cultural activities afford CI teachers the opportunity to reach out to the community and to maintain their presence. P3 told the story of how she and her colleagues decided to produce a series of cultural promotional activities during the pandemic to do something

'useful', i.e., to make their presence visible and to help others understand them better. They made a video of *A Bite of Confucius Institute*, borrowing the name from the popular documentary series '*A Bite of China*'.

> (我们) 还是希望做点有用的事情。我们也要发声, 为自己发声, 让别人更了解我们。他 (志愿者) 就想做一系列的文化宣传活动, 然后我们大家合力想做什么呢。他善于拍短视频, 就让我们做一个舌尖上的孔院, 然后我们第一期已经拍出来了, 在家做饺子 … 对, (我们) 希望做一些事情, 让别人也看到在疫情下, 我们也是在努力用另外一种方式在宣传展示自己 (P3)

> (We still want to do something helpful. We also want to have a voice, a voice for ourselves, so that others know us better. He (the volunteer) then wanted to do a series of cultural events, and then we all joined together. He's good at making short videos, so he asked us to make a video of *A Bite of Confucius Institute*, and we've already made the first episode, making dumplings at home … Yes, (we) want to do something so that others can see that we are trying to promote the Chinese culture in a different way despite the pandemic.)

As shown in the above examples, facing deepening CI crisis and growing hostility, CI teachers built their resilience through an emphasis on their professional selves and duties and effort to depoliticise language learning. They were very aware of the need to maintain a relationship with their peers and the local community and to carefully tread the ideological division to the extent of self-censoring when going about interactions.

5.3 Discrimination and racism

According to Critical Race theorist, David Gillborn, racism refers to not only 'crude, obvious acts of race hatred', but also 'the more subtle and hidden operations of power that have the *effect* of disadvantaging one or more minority ethnic groups' (2006: 21). Discrimination against Chinese immigrants in the Anglophone world could be traced back to the late-19th century and has been a product of global politics that emerged in each location differently (Ngai 2021) then and now. Following the outbreak of the Covid-19, substantial increases in abuse and racist incidents against Asians have been reported worldwide (Chan and Montt 2021). For example, New York police reported a 1,900% jump in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2020 (Wu 2021). In Australia, nearly 20% of Chinese Australians had experienced physical racist assaults during the pandemic and two-thirds of them believed that the pandemic was a contributing factor (Hurst 2021). Our interviewees shared their experience of being discriminated against while going about everyday routines. P2 was called a 'virus' once and P3 was told to leave while she was visiting the city library.

With the reports of racism incidents spreading fast on the social media, there was heightened sensitivity among the Chinese community towards 'unfriendly' behaviours from others. A couple of the participants shared their reflection on their experience of such encounters. P4 (based in Germany) noticed that people in the supermarket tended to give her cold look and tried to keep a distance from her. She was not sure whether people were unfriendly to everyone or just to her as a Chinese. But on reflection, she realised that she might have stood too close to other customers and she should not be too sensitive, or using her own words, she should not have a heart made of glass (玻璃心), meaning a fragile heart/being too sensitive. Her story reminds us of the importance of perspective-taking and 'pulling back' from feeling of victimisation as well as complexities of intercultural encounters particularly when new social norms for health behaviours are being introduced.

Zhu et al. (2022) have argued that in the early days of the lockdown, health behaviours such as wearing face masks or not have become a symbolic instrument of inclusion and exclusion. Different health beliefs and protection measures and different national, local and institutional pandemic policies put the partnership between host universities/local schools and CI to test. In some schools, teachers did not wear face masks while delivering teaching and the management team was keen to implement a no mask policy, which contradicted CI teachers' practices. P3 discussed an incident in which her colleague was asked by the host Co-director (who was in turn asked by the local school) not to wear a face mask while teaching in the schools for the fear of losing the placement.

> 我身边有一个老师是这样，小学现在我们面授课，我们不得已戴口罩，他们的老师在学校是和小孩接触的时候是不戴口罩的 … 学校那边的老师每一次都告诉他你不要戴口罩 … 然后我们老师不听他的，就是坚持戴他的口罩，所以那边就写信给我们外方院长，让我们外方院长告诉这位老师不要戴口罩 … 外方院长说她这样 … 万一丢了这个 (教学点) 点怎么办。这个给了他一些压力 … 对，她是在顶着压力。(P3)

> (I know a colleague whose school teachers do not wear masks when they are in contact with children at school … Teachers at this school always tell my colleague not to wear a mask … My colleague refused to listen to them and insisted on wearing mask. Then the school wrote a letter to the host Co-director of our CI (referring to the director appointed by the host university) and let the C-director tell her not to wear a mask … The Co-director said what we were going to do if she insisted … and then we lost this (teaching) placement. They gave her lot of pressure … Yes, she is under pressure.)

Notwithstanding these conflicts in health beliefs and practices, there were also stories in which students sought to show solidarity to Wuhan and China. P7 reported that her students volunteered to make a video recording of their supportive message in Chinese in March 2020 and asked the teacher to forward the

recording to her contacts in Wuhan. These moments of solidarity across borders are just as important to reflect upon as those moments of othering and discrimination are, as they open up space for universal values and human kindness.

6 Discussion and implications for policy and practice

Our exploration is the first attempt to investigate factors contributing to CI teachers' resilience in a crisis situation. It is evident that the triple crises has brought unprecedented challenges to CI teachers in many aspects of their professional and personal life. They have become frontline workers in every sense. In addition to professional emergency facing university and school teachers, CI teachers had the additional challenges of navigating their vulnerable position of 'being caught in the middle' exacerbated by the changing political dynamics, rising anti-Chinese racism and cross-cultural differences in heath behaviours. In the West, CI teachers are perceived as part of the Chinese government's propaganda apparatus and part of the Chinese collective; and in China, they are tasked with the mission of disseminating language and culture and promoting mutual understanding.

Despite these challenges and tension, CI teachers develop and apply their resilience and remain committed to their professional values. Facing professional emergencies, they engaged in the process of pedagogical adaptation, learning by doing and learning together. In the context of changing socio-cultural and political dynamics, they focused on their professional selves and duties and developed a pragmatic approach to depoliticise language teaching. The 'safe' cultural activities organised by CI teachers, while appearing to operate under a narrow definition of culture served to sustain CI's presence and to connect with their students and the local. To some extent, they constituted grassroot resistance towards politicisation of CI. The same applies to depoliticising language teaching, a pragmatic attempt to tread the ideological fault line, which in itself raises the question of to what extent language learning and use can be free from ideologies. With regards to discrimination and racism, our participants showed reflexivity and skills of pulling back from the position of victimisation. Resourcefulness, pragmatism and pulling back demonstrated in CI teachers' response to the crises had a transformative effect on their professional competence, as confirmed by our participants in their reflections.

Our findings demonstrate how teacher resilience, as a multi-faceted and dynamic construct, offers an analytical stance of understanding how teachers

respond to uncertainty and unpredictability in their professional lives. Importantly, in understanding CI teachers' experience amongst the triple crises, our investigation shows that co-learning, mutual support and solidarity play a significant role in enabling teacher resilience. This complements the previous observation on the role of personal, relational and organisational conditions in teacher resilience (Gu and Day 2013).

Our research raises questions about the CI operational/partnership model. The success of joint ventures rests upon trust and commitment among the partners, a shared focus on what is best rather than individual objectives, and a clear division of responsibilities (Beamish and Lupton 2009). CI teachers' lived experiences during the pandemic exposed systemic problems in all these key requirements. CI has been put under increasing scrutiny and control from the authorities in the host countries through curriculum audit, rejection or cancellation of visa and termination of agreement as well as negative media coverage. Little effort has been made from the parties involved to ensure that CI teachers will not be undermined or discriminated against in their professional activities. CI teachers' multiple lines of responsibilities to the Chinese university, the UK host university and the local primary or secondary school do not mean a layered guarantee for their interests or support either. When differences occur in health practices between two sides, CI teachers were pressured to comply with the local stakeholders for fear of bringing damage to the collaboration, as seen in the case of the no face mask requirement reported by one of our participants. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of our participants stressed the need for a more fine-tuned, transparent management approach. A radical rethink about the nature and the extent of collaboration is imperative, not least because the organisation relationship conditions teacher resilience (Gu and Day 2013). Policy makers and senior managements need to put teachers' and students' needs first in making decisions regarding CIs. CI teachers are not a threat. They are professionals doing their jobs and they deserve respect and care.

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