

Public Opinion of the King Sejong Institute in China —Based on the Analysis of Media Reports from WeChat Official Accounts

¹Wanting Jiang

¹*Graduate School of International Studies, Hanyang University, South Korea*
jwt2021@hanyang.ac.kr

Abstract

International public opinion on King Sejong Institute (KSI) is one of the most important factors influencing its overseas development as a worldwide non-profit educational service organization. China is one of the overseas strategic regions for KSI to spread the Korean Language. This paper intends to assess KSI's current public opinion environment in China. With content analysis of 87 news reports related to KSI in WeChat Official Accounts from 2014 to 2022, this paper attempts to assess the public opinion environment of KSI in China. In this paper, we show that the Chinese media's current attention to KSI is generally lacking. The current reports focus more on activity narrations, and the main report factors come from local media and universities' on-campus news, which have relatively weak dissemination power and limited influences. On one side, the reasons are related to the characteristics of Chinese media, while the KSI establishment method in China also accounts for a lot. Therefore, it is necessary for the KSI to timely adjust the cooperation mode and publicity strategies according to the Chinese political and cultural characteristics to promote the sustainable development of KSI in China by continuously improving the public opinion environment.

Keywords: King Sejong Institute, Public Opinion, Chinese Media, WeChat Official Accounts

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 KSI in China

KSI is a public education institution under the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of the Republic of Korea. Sejong Foundation independently operates as an overseas cultural institution to disseminate the Korean language and culture. It was established to spread Korean culture through Korean language education for people studying a foreign or second language abroad [1]. As of Oct. 2022, there are 244 KSIs in 84 countries. Among them, 17 KSIs and 3 Sejong Cultural Centers are in China (data from King Sejong Institute Foundation <https://www.ksif.or.kr/index.do>).

According to the Sejong Foundation, there are four main ways to establish a branch of KSI: 1) local overseas operating organizations that want to operate KSI receive direct support funds from the Sejong Foundation to operate and settle directly, 2) domestic Korean organizations or Korean diplomatic missions (embassies or cultural centers) apply for designation of KSI after signing business agreements with local overseas operating organizations, 3) overseas organizations co-operate with Korean organizations, 4) Local governments, embassies and consulates abroad, public institutions and corporations under the Public Institution Management Act, and public service corporations under the Act on the Establishment and Operation of Public Service

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Corresponding Author: jwt2021@hanyang.ac.kr

Tel: +82-01072549503

Doctoral Candidate, Graduate School of International Studies, Hanyang Univ., Korea

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Corporations operating without subsidies [2].

In China, KSI has developed mainly through the first and third ways mentioned above: 1) cooperation between Korean universities and Chinese universities and 2) direct cooperation between Sejong Foundation and Chinese universities. So far, KSI has become a critical link to promote the Korean language and cultural exchange and enhance the national image [3]. However, in its development in China, we can find some problems through review: 1) The number decrease. Although the total number of KSI is growing globally yearly, there has been a trend of decreasing numbers in China in recent years. In 2020, KSI had 27 institutes and two cultural centers in 20 provinces in China, and as of Oct. 2022, 18 institutes and two cultural centers were distributed in 17 provinces. 2) Decline in cooperating school hierarchy. At the beginning of the 21st century, Sejong Foundation benchmarked its cooperation with universities from Project 211 and 985 in China, but in recent years, the level of the partner institutions has continued to decrease, preferring to cooperate with smaller universities or colleges. There has yet to be a case of cooperation with the Sejong Foundation for KSI among the top Chinese universities. 3) Low nationwide visibility. When using KSI as the keyword to search on major Chinese news webs, such as people.cn, china.org.cn, ifeng.com, and so on, only 0-2 related reports can be found. When checking the information on KSI in Baidu Encyclopedia, the world's largest Chinese search engine, the information was incomplete, and the data needed to be updated. Thus, it can be said that the media publicity and visibility of KSI in China are generally insufficient.

Research related to KSI is quite rich, while on its international public, opinions remain almost empty. Take "King Sejong Institute" as the keyword to search in the Korean Citation Index, 133 related articles were obtained. Among them, topics related to KSI and public opinion were not found. This paper will use media reports from WeChat Official Accounts to figure out the public opinion environment of KSI in China and make relevant suggestions on appropriate policies based on public opinion. Since China is one of the primary target countries for KSI, it is a case with a denotative meaning. It is believed that exploring the public opinion of KSI in China will be beneficial to promote the further development of KSI overseas.

1.2 Research Question & Purpose

Based on the current status, this paper put out the central research question: How is the public opinion of KSI in China? As an official non-profit organization, overseas public opinion is crucial to the expansion of KSI. At the same time, more research must be conducted on KSI's overseas public opinion analysis. Through public opinion analysis, it is possible to gain insight into the development and problems of KSI in specific regions and to make practical suggestions for its future development.

1.3 Sample Source and Sampling Basis

1.3.1 Sample Source: WeChat Official Accounts

WeChat Official Accounts is an application account applied by individuals or organizations on the WeChat public platform, which can achieve all-around communication and interaction with specific groups with text, pictures, voice, and video, users can receive information pushed by the account and interact with the enterprise on a one-on-one basis via mobile devices [4].

The paper selects report articles from WeChat Official Accounts for three reasons: 1) By the end of September 2021, the platform had attracted about 1.26 billion active users monthly (MAU) in both China and abroad, for 4.1% year-on-year growth [5]. 2) Chinese mainstream traditional media have their own WeChat Official Accounts, such as People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV News, etc. The range of WeChat Official Accounts can cover mainstream media, agency news, and self-media. 3) The WeChat Official Accounts gather official and self-media content with a larger sample of report articles. Thus, the selection of the sample source platforms is representative and scientific in terms of the range of audiences, the diversity of information publishing sources, and the number of KSI-related contents.

1.3.2 Sampling Basis

Using the "King Sejong Institute" keyword to search in WeChat Official Accounts, 100 texts were grasped from September 26, 2014, to December 31, 2022. After screening for content relevance, topic relevance, and readability, 87 accurate reports were obtained. This paper will analyze the samples in three dimensions: 1)

Level of concern. Analyzing the attention change through the year-to-year change in report numbers in relevant media coverage. 2) The focus of Chinese public opinion was analyzed through keyword clustering of subject content. 3) The overall attitude of Chinese public opinion toward KSI. This indicator is reflected by the use of positive, neutral, or negative words related to KSI and its related activities.

2. DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

2.1 Level of Concern

In terms of the number of texts, Figure 1 shows that the Chinese media coverage of KSI has been on the rise roughly year by year. One point to note is that there are significant increases in 2021 and 2022. In terms of the timing, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on KSI's operations, mainly from 1) the widespread increase in online courses has expanded the scope of KSI's coverage of students, and online courses are not restricted by city or location, making it more convenient and more accessible for people to participate in. 2) the increase in online promotional tweets has increased KSI's visibility. 3) people's reliance on the Internet has increased significantly during COVID-19. According to a research report released by the National Information Center and the Institute of Internet Communication of Nanjing University in 2020, WeChat (62%) surpassed TV (52%), Weibo (40%), news websites (36%), and newspapers/magazines (12%) as the most crucial channel for the public to obtain information since the covid outbreak. Nearly 80% of WeChat users use WeChat more than before [6].

The increase in news from WeChat Official Accounts about KSI since 2021 was mainly due to the increasing trend of reliance on WeChat after the covid. Before the covid, although KSI's Korean language courses were free of charge, they required attendance at a specific classroom at a fixed time each week. Meanwhile, because the KSI does not currently cover all provinces in China, the number of people who can access registration information and participate in classes is minimal. That is one of the reasons for KSI has been relatively little known since it has existed in China for fifteen years. However, the popularity of online courses since covid has allowed for the sharing of promotional information among various platforms, allowing a more comprehensive range of people to access. Students could listen to classes across regions and compare class times and levels in different cities to choose the right course, thus significantly increasing the participation and visibility of KSI.

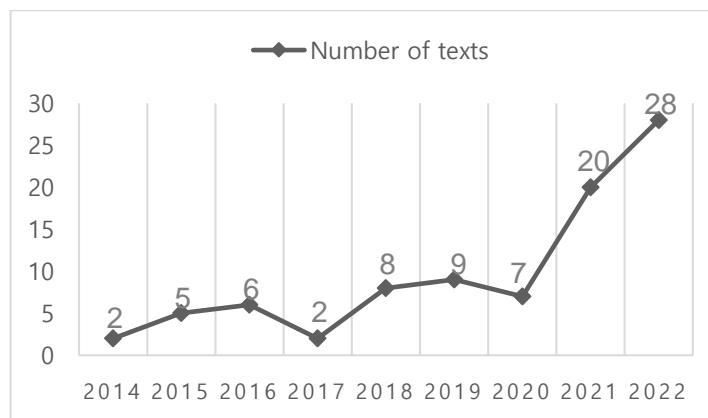


Figure 1. Number of texts from 2014-2022

The institutions that have issued more than one report are counted in terms of reporting subjects. The statistics include the name and the type of the institution, the affiliated unit, and the number of news reports issued. From Table 1, various university institutions are the primary source of information, specifically concentrated in universities' foreign language faculties. This is followed by information released by the regional branches of KSI, with little attention given to general media or government agencies. Thus, the focus

of attention on KSI is mainly on Korean-related primary students currently, which is closely related to the educational function of KSI itself and how KSI was established in China mainly through cooperation with universities. It is worth noting that there are no official websites for KSI's branches in various cities in China, and their WeChat Official Accounts are private education accounts without official corporate certification, which can negatively affect KSI's publicity and authority.

Table 1. Sample Report Source Institutional Statistics

<i>Institution Name</i>	<i>Institution Type</i>	<i>Affiliated Unit</i>	<i>Quantity</i>
Linyi KSI	Education Institute	Linyi University	15
Wuhan KSI	Public Institution	Central China Normal University	11
Learn Korean Online	Info News	Private	5
Yantai KSI	Education Institute	Ludong University	4
Chengdu KSI	Education Institute	Sichuan Normal University	4
Guangzhou KSI	Education Institute	Guangdong Lingnan Institute of Technology	4
Korean Cultural Center Shanghai	Government Departments	Cultural Office of the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai	3
Beijing Second KSI	Public Institution	Beijing Language and Culture University Training Institute	3
Qingdao West Coast New Area KSI	Education Institute	Qingdao Binhai University	3
Hohhot KSI	Public Institution	Inner Mongolia Normal University	2
Xihaian News	Government Departments	Qingdao West Coast New Area Work Committee Propaganda Department	2
kr.people.com.cn	Media Company	Organ newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party	2
Changzhou KSI	Public Institution	Jiangsu University of Technology	2

2.2 Media Focus

For the subject directions and media's main focus, according to Figure 2, the most significant proportion of available texts is devoted to course announcements and descriptions (37%), which shows that KSI's branches in China are mainly engaged in Korean language instruction, and the audience is most concerned about language education. Meanwhile, texts promoting or reporting on Korean-related activities (24%), mainly in the form of competitions, involve Korean speech, Korean songs, Korean writing, Korean calligraphy, etc. The activities are pretty traditional and center on the four aspects of the Korean language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The culture week/lecture events focus more on Korean culture, which includes traditional Korean painting, traditional Korean Wedding, Korean makeup, dance, movie, food, pickled kimchi, taekwondo, etc. Although their activities are more diverse, their attention is generally lower than that of language learning-related activities.

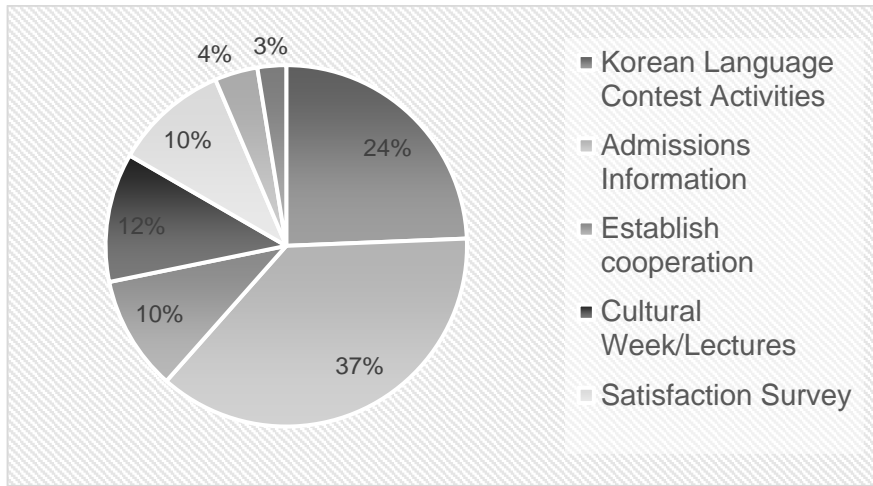


Figure 2. Theme Statistics

2.3 Media Attitudes

The wording of media reports can reflect public attitudes toward KSI to a certain extent, and the analysis of the selected sample revealed that all texts adopted a neutral bias toward positive attitudes. As shown in Figure 3, KSI's promotion of cultural exchange between China and Korea, its cultivation of bilingual talents, its role as a bridge for university cooperation, and its highly qualified teachers are widely evaluated and recognized. This paper argues that the reasons mainly come from three aspects: 1) The nature of Chinese media. Unlike Western journalism, which focuses on objectivity, Chinese news coverage reflects political and cultural stances [7] and thus rarely or hardly presents a solid personal viewpoint, usually focusing on accurate descriptions of events and processes. 2) The nature of KSI. KSI is an official governmental cooperation program, not a private educational institute. Thus, the media will not publish negative comments due to China's public opinion environment and policies. Meanwhile, KSI activities are usually held with the participation of Chinese municipal government/university/college leaders, and thus the media will pay more attention to standardized language. 3) Most of KSI's courses and activities are free of charge. Although some KSIs offer paid courses, they are inexpensive at about 50,000-220,000 KRW for 64-course hours. In terms of Korean language courses, the main long-term courses at KSI are from level 1-3, which is less difficult and more enjoyable to learn as the introductory level, and students can generally have a better teaching experience.

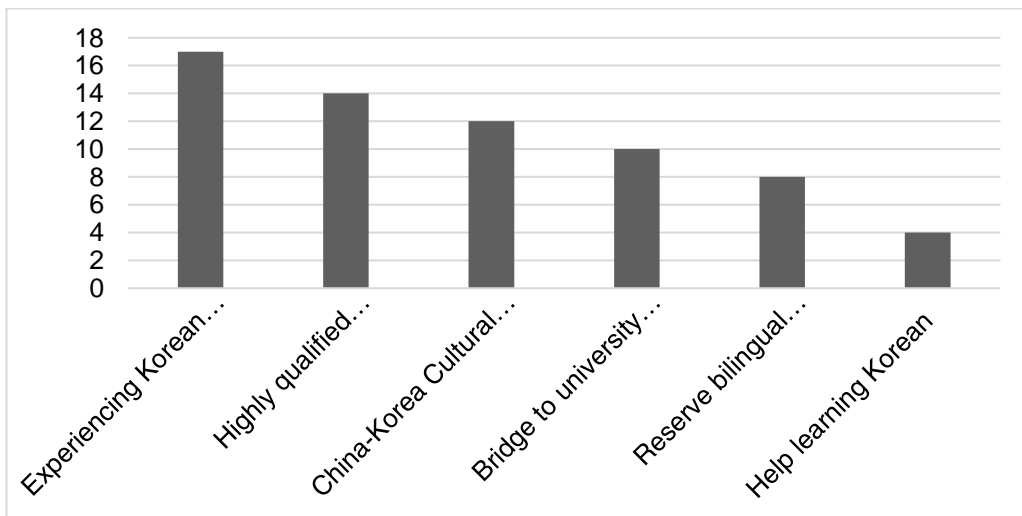


Figure 3. Main aspects of positive evaluation

Although the attention of the Chinese public to KSI has been on the rise in recent years, its total amount is still low. In the past two years, driven by the online class format, KSI Korean courses have expanded the coverage of the population, and after COVID-19, continuing the online class format or increasing the number of online public courses can expand its visibility and influence [8]. The current degree of KSI's use of the WeChat Official Account is far from enough; compared to other new media, the operation of the WeChat Official Account and the function of posting articles are more straightforward. KSI branches can devote more attention to operating accounts. Currently, the account is better operated by Yantai KSI, Sichuan Normal University KSI, and Linyi KSI, which are available for other branches to study. KSI's limited coverage in China mainly focuses on foreign language majors in universities, and the radiation to the social population is weak. KSI offers a variety of cultural activities, but they are less popular and less well attended than Korean language instruction. Asian countries are generally influenced by a pragmatic mindset, especially in Chinese society, which makes language instruction, especially courses leading to a certificate of completion, more desirable. Meanwhile, KSI's image among the Chinese public is quite favorable for its official and non-profit nature.

3. DEMAND FOR KOREAN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN CHINA

When searching in the Baidu index, the world's largest Chinese-language search engine, with "Korean language learning" as the keyword, it can obtain the changes in the attention and demand for Korean language learning among Chinese society from 2011 to 2022 and the results are shown in Figure 4. With the spread of Hallyu 2.0 in Asian countries, the demand for Korean language learning in Chinese society has been gradually rising since 2012, with small spikes in growth influenced by specific popular Korean film or music productions. While the 2016 THAAD disputes and China's ensuing sanctions against South Korea have forced the bilateral relationship into an unprecedented standoff [9]. The decrease in job opportunities and the blockage of cultural exchange between South Korea and China are also clearly reflected in the enthusiasm for Korean language learning and the demand for the Korean language. Since 2016, the Chinese public has maintained a pretty low level of interest in Korean language learning.

As for the geographical statistics of demand, as in Figure 5, it is concentrated in the southeastern coastal region of China, mainly in Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, and Jiangxi provinces. Among them, Liaoning and Jilin provinces, which directly border the Korean Peninsula and export a large amount of labor to Korea, are unexpectedly not prominent in terms of Korean language demand.



Figure 4. Search frequency trends for Korean language learning



Figure 5. Geographical distribution of Korean language learning demand

Thus, it can be found that the overall level of attention to Korean language learning/Korean language education in Chinese society since 2016 has been relatively low, and the continued development of the Hallyu in recent years has had a minimal effect on promoting Korean language learning in China. This can also partially explain the recent decreasing number of KSI branches in China. There are geographical, historical, and economic reasons for the high demand and interest in the Korean language in China's southeastern coastal cities, located across the sea from the Korean Peninsula, and have a high volume of trade with Korean ports. Among the 20 KSIs and Korean cultural centers currently established in China, seven are located in the southeastern coastal provinces, indicating that the Sejong Foundation has adopted a niche strategy in response to local conditions, and the statistics of Figure 2 on the subject of issuance also reveal that KSI organizations are most active and effective in the southeastern coastal provinces, especially in Shandong Province (Represented by Linyi KSI, Yantai KSI, and Qingdao KSI).

4. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed 87 reports on KSI's status and recognition in China from 2014 to 2022, yielding these key findings:

1) Despite 20 years in China and 20 branches, KSI's popularity doesn't match its scale. It mainly appeals to Korean-related individuals due to limited mass media exposure, no official Chinese website, incomplete encyclopedia entries, and a fragmented publicity strategy. Even endorsements from Korean actors have minimal impact. Collaborations with Chinese universities help with settlement but restrict KSI to campus settings, isolating it from broader society. Most participants are current university students and branding as "XX University KSI" hinders a unified identity. KSI's recent preference for smaller, lesser-known Chinese schools further dilutes its brand.

2) KSI garners favorable media reviews in China due to its policy-driven advocacy and official status. This reflects its alignment with Chinese bureaucracy but limits its autonomy. In China, KSI is viewed as a governmental cultural institution promoting friendship and cooperation, facilitating government-to-government, university-to-university, and institution-to-institution connections, with a secondary role in language and culture promotion. In summary, KSI's recognition in China remains niche, primarily among Korean-related individuals, and is shaped by its official status promoting cooperation and cultural exchange.

5. DISCUSSION

Given the above problems in the development of KSI, for the sustainable development of KSI in China in the future, this paper gives the following policy recommendations:

1) Make full use of the trend of increasing the stickiness of China's WeChat users after COVID-19, attach importance to the article push on WeChat Official Account, and use the WeChat Video platform to make short videos or carry out live public benefit classes for publicity.

2) In a country with a vast land mass like China, efforts should be focused on promoting online education. The goal is not to cover the entire territory of China but to be more strategic and focus its efforts on the southeastern coastal region.

3) Strive to break through the cooperation with key universities. If cooperation can be reached with Peking University/Tsinghua University and other first-class universities in China, its publicity effect is far better than that of cooperation with many local small schools.

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