Administrative practices to promote Chinese language education and cultural exchange at Confucius Institutes around the world: a systematic review

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As an intercultural educational program to promote Chinese language education and cultural exchange worldwide, the Confucius Institute (CI) has operated through specific managerial models since its establishment in 2004. This contribution reports the results of a systematic review conducted on the contents relevant to CIs' administration in the post-2010 literature, aiming to map the status quo and the salient issues of CIs' administration and provide take-away messages for administrators and researchers. Following PRISMA guidelines, 94 publications in English with research cases from 38 countries/regions were selected for thematic analysis conducted in NVivo. The analysis has revealed that CIs' achievements of official administrative objectives are mainly situated in higher-order aspects (e.g., policies), whereas the practical sides (e.g., daily management) are prone to challenges. The lack of localization is also a recurring issue. To tackle the challenges, suggestions are provided for strengthening localization, improving educational leadership, and enhancing the cultivation of intercultural competence. The research outcomes emphasize significant theoretical advancements, including an improved theoretical framework for studying the administration of CIs and localization guidelines. These guidelines offer structured frameworks for administrators and researchers to systematically localize and conduct research on onsite operations at CIs.

KEYWORDS

educational leadership, Confucius Institute, Chinese language education, cultural exchange, administrative practices, managerial advice, systematic review

1 Introduction

In the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) gained recognition as an important foreign language around the globe (Han, 2017). Up till June 2022, more than 180 countries and regions have organized CFL education programs with more than 25 million overseas CFL learners across the world (MOE (Ministry of Education of P.R.C.), 2022). To meet the rising overseas demand for CFL education, Hanban (now named Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, or CLEC), a non-profit professional educational institution for CFL education affiliated with the Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China (MOE), set up a global program dedicated to promoting language and cultural exchanges as well as Sino-foreign cooperation (Wang, 2020). The first Confucius Institute (CI) was established in 2004. From then on, the program has developed vigorously with hundreds of CIs currently running in more than 100 countries and regions globally (MOE (Ministry of Education of P.R.C.), 2022).

In essence, the CI is a 'non-profit education program jointly founded by all of its partners in compliance with the principles of mutual respect, friendly consultation, equality, and mutual benefit' (Official Website of CI, n.d.a), and it shares some similarities with other intercultural educational institutions such as Alliance Française and the Goethe Institute (Wang, 2020). According to Official Website of CI (n.d.a), the CI 'aims to promote the spread of the Chinese language, deepen people's understanding of the Chinese language and culture worldwide, push forward educational cooperation and cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world, and enhance understanding between different groups of people across the world'. More specifically, the development goals of the CI in terms of administration can be categorized as higher-order tasks (e.g., establishing the global communication network for Chinese language and culture), daily operations (e.g., enhancing the institutional mechanisms), staff building (e.g., building teaching staff consisting of qualified teachers), and resource provision (e.g., providing CFL textbooks) (MOE (Ministry of Education of P.R.C.), 2013).

In order to achieve the administrative objectives, specific managerial models have been developed among three parties, namely, CI headquarters, Chinese and foreign partner institutions, and external partners (Official Website of CI, n.d.a). The CI headquarters 'is the regulatory body that provides guidelines to the Confucius Institutes worldwide', and is governed by the Council consisting of the Chair, the Vice Chairs, the Executive Council Members, and the Council Members (MOE (Ministry of Education of P.R.C.), 2006). The Chief Executive is the legal representative of the CI headquarters, whereas heads of the Board of Directors of CIs overseas and representatives of Chinese partner institutions appointed by the CI headquarters constitute the Council Members (ibid.). As for Chinese and foreign partner institutions, they are jointly responsible for daily operations and management at CIs, such as formulating specific development plans, establishing operational mechanisms, applying rules and regulations, providing teaching resources and faculty, and raising funds (Official Website of CI, n.d.a). External partners including Chinese and overseas enterprises and social organizations form a support system for the CI community by promoting the development of CIs (ibid.). It is worth noting that according to Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes (MOE (Ministry of Education of P.R.C.), 2006), CIs 'can be established in various ways, with the flexibility to respond to the specific circumstances and requirements found in different countries' and 'shall respect local cultural and educational traditions and social customs', displaying the space for local cultural adaptation.

Since 2004, the development of CIs has experienced multiple phases of growth, with the period of 2004–2005 as the pioneering phase and the period of 2006–2008 as the peak phase (Liu X., 2015). Soon after 2008 when CI headquarters established the Special Committee for CIs, a series of stipulations regarding educational standards, funding management, directors' work and requirements for teachers were formulated and revised, leading to the stable phase of development starting from 2009 (ibid.). From then on, literature regarding the achievement of CIs' administrative objectives has included both acknowledgement of success (Usmanova et al., 2019; Yi, 2021) and criticisms (Moloney, 2013; Gil, 2015; Theo and Leung, 2018; Mhunpiew and Liu, 2020). It is thus worthwhile to formulate a systematic review of research literature on CIs after 2010 when CIs entered the stable phase of development with a decent foundation of organization and regulations, to explore the practical situation of administration at CIs and to provide insights in future improvement of the organization and sustainable development of the stakeholders.

In this research, a systematic review is conducted on the contents relevant to administration at CIs. Both qualitative and quantitative findings are presented, with primary emphasis on the qualitative synthesis. Selected quantitative data (e.g., frequency counts) are included to complement the analysis and provide a more comprehensive understanding of CI's administration. The scope of this research is confined to the administrative practices at CIs around the world. While Dimmock (1999) differentiates the concepts of 'administration', 'management', and 'leadership' in terms of higher-order tasks (leadership), routine maintenance of present operations (management), and lower-order duties (administration), 'administration' is an overarching term embracing 'leadership' and 'management' as elaborated by Bush (2006). The latter differentiation is applied in this article, which means that information regarding both higher-order tasks and routine operations at CIs is covered under the term of 'administration'. Considering that CIs' official administrative objectives include aspects of higher-order tasks, daily operations, staff building, and resource provision, the administrative practices related to these key components are the main concerns of this research. The main stakeholders or actors of interest in this research are administrators at CIs. Issues regarding other stakeholders such as teachers and students at CIs are considered out of the scope of this research.

Hence, the objectives of this systematic review are:

(1) to formulate a descriptive synthesis based on the qualitative analysis of the literature pertaining to administrative practices at CIs around the world from 2010 to 2024;
(2) to pinpoint the salient issues of administrative practices at CIs with take-away messages for administrators and researchers.

Developed from the objectives, the research questions are that according to the research literature on administration at CIs around the world,

(1) what is the status quo and what are the salient issues of administrative practices at CIs?
(2) what are the take-away messages for CIs' administrators and researchers?

This article reports the systematic review in three sections. In Methodology, the workflow of data selection and data analysis is presented. Then, the overview of selected publications, the overview of perceptions, resistance and experience in the publications and a thematic table are briefly introduced in Findings, followed by the general description of the status quo, salient issues of CIs' administration and the development of the theoretical framework. Further analysis of the salient issues is addressed in the Discussion section in relation to the achievement of CIs' administrative objectives, the systematic localization guidelines and the educational leadership of CIs' administrators.

2 Methodology

To carry out the systematic review and synthesize findings, a four-step process was applied based on Scott et al. (2018): (a) literature search, (b) multi-step screening process according to preset inclusion and exclusion criteria, (c) quality assessment of the selected publications, and (d) qualitative synthesis of the selected publications.

This research generally followed PRISMA guidelines, a constructive instrument to facilitate the transparent and comprehensive reporting of systematic reviews (Liberati et al., 2009). The PRISMA Statement includes a checklist of essential items in reporting and a diagram describing the workflow of data selection. In this way, the identification and the screening of the literature could be specified by multiple inclusion and exclusion criteria (Page et al., 2021), and the validity and reliability of the whole systematic review could be guaranteed by fulfilling the checklist and following each step of the workflow. Adapted from PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only (ibid.) (see also The PRISMA website, n.d.), the data selection of this research involved four main steps: trial search, identification, screening, and inclusion (see Figure 1).

2.1 Literature search

The trial search was conducted in Google Scholar using 'Confucius Institute(s)' and 'administration' as the search terms. Substitutes for 'administration' such as 'management', 'operation', 'leadership' were

also considered. The publications should be peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters or PhD dissertations written in English issued from January 2010 to January 2023. They were first identified by scanning the titles and keywords. If both 'Confucius Institute(s)' and 'administration' (or its substitutes) were included in the titles or the keywords, the publications were collected and then screened by skimming the abstracts to decide the relevance to the research. Only publications focusing on CIs' administration were selected in the trial search. The output of the trial search was 35 publications. The reason for this limited quantity might be that the articles in the field often discussed CIs' administration only in certain sections, and those writing about CIs' administration as the main content were relatively fewer. Thus, a decision was made to expand the collection in order to include more relevant contents on CIs' administration, and the identification protocol was refined accordingly.

The inclusive search was carried out following the refined identification protocol (see Table 1). In order to have a wider coverage of publications, broader search terms and four major databases for social science publications were chosen for the search. The publications should be written in English issued from

FIGURE 1
Data selection workflow.
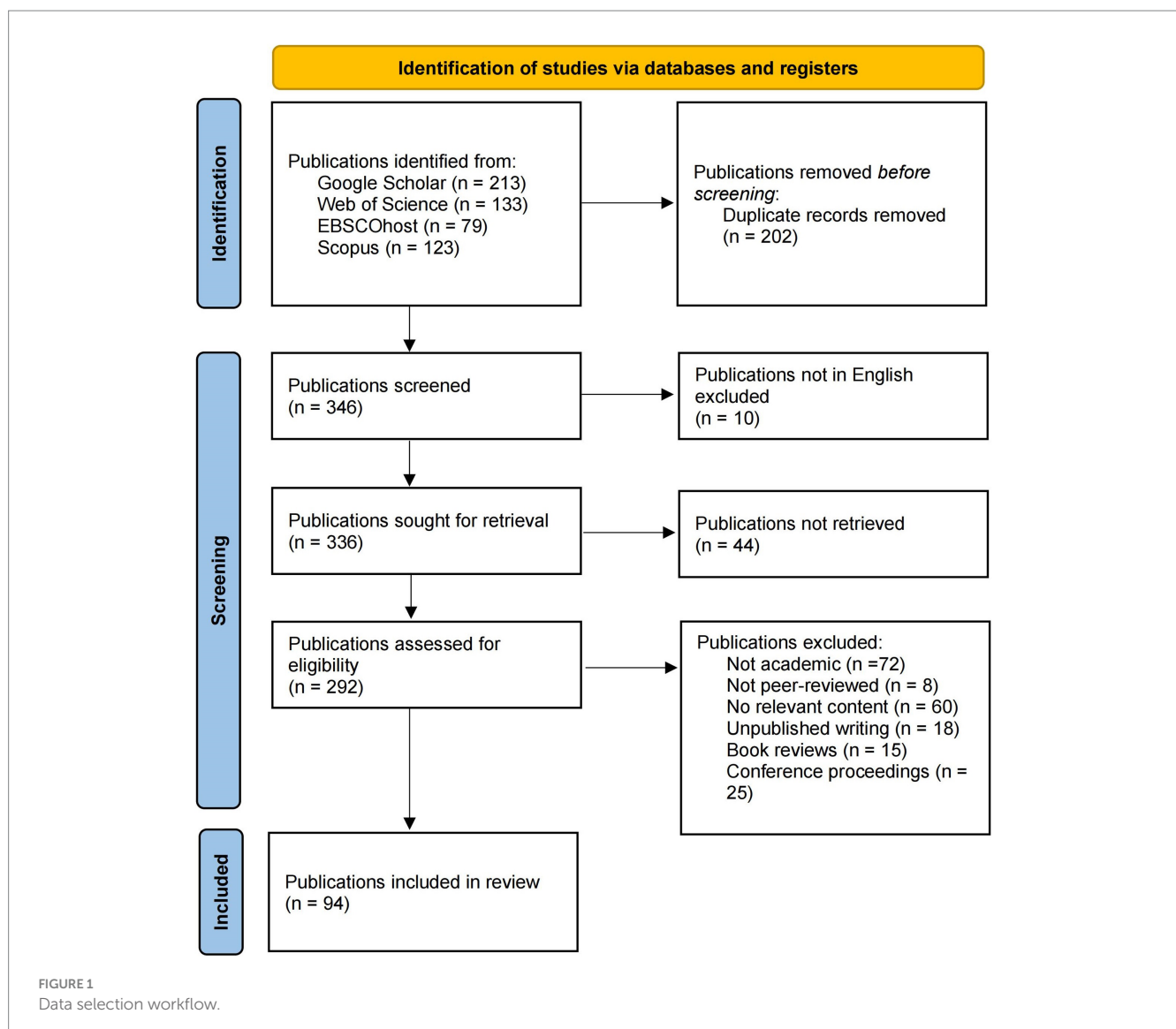
January 2010 to December 2024. They were first identified by scanning the titles. Publications were searched in Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO and Scopus with the search term 'Confucius Institute' [Title] OR 'Confucius Institutes' [Title].

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Since the initially identified literature included mainly qualitative research, and this is generally a qualitative systematic review to provide a descriptive synthesis of the relevant contents, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were set based on a qualitative adaptation of the PICOS format, which is PICo (Population, Phenomena of Interest and Context) (Hosseini et al., 2024).

- P–Population: stakeholders of CIs' administration around the world (CIs' administrators, teachers, policymakers, researchers, etc.) were all relevant, but the focus was on administrators.
- I–Phenomena of Interest: contents in the existing literature related to CIs' administration, including both higher-order information (e.g., policies, official objectives) and onsite operational activities (e.g., daily management, staff training).
- Co–Context: the literature addressing the phenomena of interest should consider CIs as the primary research subject. However, the research focus does not necessarily need to be the phenomena of interest itself. Instead, the literature should concentrate on specific aspects of CIs, which may or may not include their administration, while also incorporating content related to CIs' administration. In this way, the inclusion and exclusion criteria facilitated the selection of roughly relevant academic literature with highly relevant contents and avoided the issue of the limited quantity of literature focusing on CIs' administration that emerged in the trial search. To be more inclusive, the criteria allowed various study designs, as long as they were conducted in an acceptable manner.

Other criteria included:

- Academic publications: the formats and sources of the publications were checked to ensure the academic style of the publications. Publications written in non-academic styles (e.g., newspaper articles, reports, commentaries) or issued in non-academic sources (e.g., non-academic journals) were excluded.

- Peer-reviewed: peer-review statuses of the publications were checked by examining the peer-review processes on the official websites of the publishers. Literature issued by publishers without mentioning the peer-review processes was considered ineligible for inclusion.
- Journal articles, books or chapters, PhD dissertations: in this research, academic publications other than journal articles, books or chapters, and PhD dissertations, such as book reviews and conference proceedings, were excluded from the selection.
- Published writings: the literature should be officially published. MA theses, unpublished PhD dissertations and discussion papers were not considered published, while publicly available PhD dissertations uploaded to academic repositories (e.g., ProQuest) were included in the selection.
- Accessible: the texts of the publications should be retrievable. Publications that the authors could not access were excluded from the selection.
- English publications: only publications written in English were included. Publications in other languages were removed.

2.3 Data extraction and assessment of quality

The quality of the initially identified publications was evaluated throughout the data selection process, by implementing the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final selection was extracted after the steps of identification and screening. Data extraction and quality assessment of the publications were conducted with the collaboration of the two authors. One author worked on the primary identification and screening, while the other author was in charge of data verification. During the process, the two authors discussed data selection regularly to ensure its reliability.

- Identification: after the initial inclusive search (see 2.1 above), the identified publications were evaluated by skimming the abstracts and keywords to decide the relevance to the research according to PICo. If the abstracts and keywords showed that the publications focused on aspects of CIs and potentially contained content on CIs' administration, the publications would be included temporarily. 548 publications were selected in the identification process in total. Then 202 repeated publications were removed, leaving 346 publications for further screening.
- Screening: after the step of identification, a screening process was conducted among the identified publications by complying with

TABLE 1 Identification protocol.

Database	Search term	Specific search strategy	General search strategy
Google Scholar	'Confucius Institute' [Title] OR 'Confucius Institutes' [Title]	In [Advanced Search], [Find articles with the exact phrase] using 'Search terms', [where my words occur in the title of the article]	1. Search for publications from January 2010 to December 2024
Web of Science	'Confucius Institute' [Title] OR 'Confucius Institutes' [Title]	Search in Web of Science Core Collection	2. Scanning the titles of the articles
EBSCO	'Confucius Institute' [Title] OR 'Confucius Institutes' [Title]	Select all EBSCOhost databases before searching	3. Identifying publications with the search terms in the titles
Scopus	'Confucius Institute' [Title] OR 'Confucius Institutes' [Title]	Search within [Article title] using 'Search terms'	

the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Initially, 10 publications in languages other than English and 44 inaccessible publications were excluded. Then the 292 publications were assessed for eligibility in terms of quality. The formats and sources of the publications were checked to ensure that the selected publications were peer-reviewed academic journal articles, books or chapters, or PhD dissertations published by reliable and relevant sources, with 138 publications removed during this process. The final full text screening was to ensure the relevance of the contents through skimming the main bodies of the publications, and only those with at least one section discussing CIs' administration were included in the final selection. 60 publications with no relevant content were excluded.

The final selection included 94 publications, which were later entered in the NVivo software for data analysis.

2.4 Risk of bias

Risk of bias was evaluated employing JBI critical appraisal tool, which is an analytical tool to decide how well a study has addressed the potential for bias in its design, conduct and analysis. Since the majority of the selected publications involved qualitative methodology (see 3.1 below), most of the literature was evaluated using the critical appraisal checklist for qualitative research (Lockwood et al., 2015). The checklist includes 10 questions regarding the congruity between research methodology and philosophical perspective, research questions or objectives, data collection methods, and interpretation of results, as well as the position and influence of the researcher, voices of participants, ethical considerations, and conclusions. The publications were evaluated by answering the questions on a scale of Yes/No/Unclear/Not applicable.

Regarding the evaluation, most of the publications demonstrated decent congruity between research methodology and various aspects of research design. The methodological alignments ensured clear foundations for the approaches, concentrated investigation of the issues of interest, appropriate approaches to gather data according to the research goals, and consistency in the interpretation of the findings. Therefore, it made sense that the conclusions of the publications were also well-matched with the data analysis and interpretation. Meanwhile, in categories of the position and influence of the researcher, voices of participants, or ethical considerations, the publications displayed moderate performance. In some of the publications, the descriptions of such categories were vague or failed to provide relevant information, especially in some studies based on content/hermeneutic analytic approach. In general, most of the publications could be categorized as low-risk studies, with some evaluated as moderate-risk studies due to the unclear descriptions of the position and influence of the researcher, voices of participants, and ethical considerations, which might cause certain biases in their analysis and conclusions.

2.5 Data analysis

In this research, an abductive approach was employed during data analysis, which means that the analysis was executed through moving back and forth between the selected data and the existing theory (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), which in this research refers to a theoretical framework provided via combining an existing theory and the research questions. To elicit more information grounded in the research data, the framework only served as a reference for the structuring of the thematic analysis. The codes and themes were mainly based on the selected data, and modifications of the presupposed theoretical framework could occur during the whole analytical process, allowing new theoretical output based on surprising research observations (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

2.5.1 Theoretical framework

Taking into consideration the research purpose and CIs' conditions, a cross-cultural school focused model for comparative educational leadership and management (Dimmock and Walker, 2000) made a suitable basis for building the theoretical framework, because:

(1) it applied a cross-cultural approach, taking into account elements such as national/societal culture, regional/local culture, and organizational culture, which matched the intercultural attribute of CIs;
(2) it encapsulated both higher-order tasks and daily operations of educational administration;
(3) it considered relationships between the institutions and external parties such as local communities and social services, which matched CIs' highlight of partnership and cooperation.

This model deconstructed four elements of schooling and school-based management (namely, Organizational Structures; Leadership, Management and Decision Process; Curriculum; Teaching and Learning) into multiple items. Considering the scope and purpose of this research to explore administrator-centered administrative practices at CIs including aspects of higher-order tasks, daily operations, staff building, and resource provision, the element 'Leadership, Management and Decision Process' was of particular importance and was the focus of this research, whereas items incompatible with CIs' attributes or outside the scope of this study were excluded. Thus, most of the items under 'Leadership, Management and Decision Process' were included; items under 'Organizational Structures' concerning CIs' administration were included while 'Time' (e.g., timetable of the curriculum), 'Students', and 'Guidance and counselling' (e.g., student counseling) were considered irrelevant, as they either delved into the specific educational issues or were not administrator-centered. The elements 'Curriculum' and 'Teaching and Learning' contained items describing the specific and practical issues in education rather than administration and were excluded from this research. Some of the included items were merged and rephrased to adapt to CIs' particular features that differ from other educational institutions.

Combining relevant items of this model and the research questions, the theoretical framework is proposed as in Table 2. The elements of interest fall into three categories, namely, 'Organization', 'Leadership', and 'Administrative practices'. The former two categories center on how the 'preset' higher-order official principles act in real life. 'Organization' refers to the allocating configurations of human, physical, and financial resources. In CIs' case, it might indicate the ways in which the official policies are negotiated at the institutional level ('Policy'), the daily

operations executed in mechanisms ('Managerial model'), or the higher-order decisions made among administrators ('Decision making'). 'Leadership' is a staff-centered notion regarding the higher-order qualities of the administrators reflected by their on-site performances, such as the power of administrators in different positions ('Role') and the styles in which the leaders influence the others ('Leadership style'). The third category 'Administrative practices' concentrates on a more practical side. It embraces elements describing how the cooperative relationship is maintained ('Collaboration and partnership'), how information is communicated among different administrative representatives ('Interpersonal communication'), etc. To investigate the administrative practices in relation to the official administrative objectives of CIs, 'Staff building' and 'Resource provision' are added under 'Administrative practices'.

2.5.2 Thematic analysis

During thematic analysis, two types of contents of the selected publications were coded. First, the selected publications were coded according to the three key dimensions for analyzing systematic reviews in educational research proposed by Scott et al. (2018), namely, perceptions, resistance and experience. In this research, perceptions referred to the beliefs and attitudes that stakeholders held about CIs and their administration around the world; resistance referred to the challenges and barriers that CIs and their staff faced when implementing administrative practices; experience referred to the lived onsite experiences of stakeholders regarding CIs around the world. These dimensions provided comprehensive insights into the complicated realities CIs and their administration encountered in the real world. The results of this part were recorded in a table (see Appendix B) for later synthesis. Then, those publications were coded with instructions from the theoretical framework (see Table 2). The relevant contents were coded in an abductive manner, producing a coding tree (see Appendix A) that structurally reflected the elements

in the theoretical framework. Lastly, the table and the coding tree were integrated to pinpoint saliente issues and form further analysis.

The processing of the selected publications followed the thematic analysis agenda, which facilitates the identification and interpretation of the patterns or themes in qualitative studies and is particularly efficient in exploring complicated phenomena through detailed analysis of textual data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Its features suited the purposes of this research to identify patterns across qualitative textual data and to explore the complex phenomenon of CIs' administration in order to provide a descriptive synthesis of relevant contents. Thematic analysis was conducted with the collaboration of the two authors. One author worked on the primary coding, while the other author oversaw the whole process in order to ensure consistency and rigor in coding and analysis. Throughout the process, both authors engaged in frequent discussions to review and refine the coding tree, resolve discrepancies and make necessary adjustments. This process enhanced the reliability of the findings and ensured the alignment with the research objectives.

Prior to analysis, a guideline was established to limit the dataset to sections of the publications containing original information, such as the results, findings, and discussions. Thematic analysis in six phases (ibid.) was then conducted, starting with familiarizing with the data and generating initial codes, exerted by collating interesting and patterned data to relevant codes. During the third phase, similar codes were grouped into themes based on both relevance and salience. After the initial themes were produced, they were reviewed and grouped, yielding the qualitative synthesis of CIs' administrative practices. In the fifth phase, the themes were refined.

Data analysis was conducted mainly in NVivo software, which enabled the exploration and organization of large volumes of text and qualitative syntheses. The 'Memos' function was used to recheck the imported abstracts and keywords of the publications. The 'Cases' function was employed to identify and gather metadata such as locations of CIs in the studies, methodologies used in the publications, and research foci of the studies. Coding was conducted in the PDF pane using 'Code Selection' (when the relevant codes were created or required addition) and 'Code *In Vivo*' (when the selected phrases were potential codes). The codes were created hierarchically and were refined regularly by checking the selected references within each code in the 'Codes' pane.

Hence, there were two main components of the output of this procedure: a thematic table of two levels with frequently reported and underreported sub-themes (see Appendix A), and a table recording the perceptions, resistance and experience regarding CIs emerging from the selected publications (see Appendix B).

3 Findings

In this section, the findings of this research are described in six parts. Firstly, an overview of the selected publications provides metadata of the publications. Then, an overview of the three dimensions of perceptions, resistance and experiences is reported. Next, an overview of the thematic table as well as the salient themes is presented. In the fourth part, the concrete information about the status quo of CIs' administration drawn from the thematic table is delivered, followed by the elaboration on the salient issues emerging from the synthesis of the three analytical dimensions and the thematic table. Finally, the development of the original theoretical framework based on content data is presented.

TABLE 2 Theoretical framework.

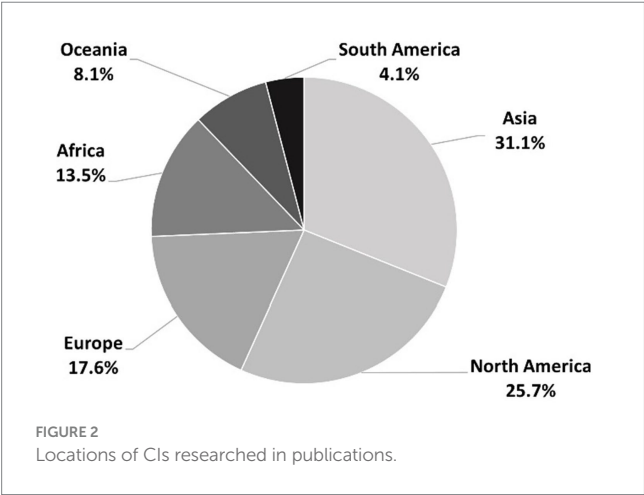| Organization	Policy
Organization	Policy
	Managerial model
	Decision making
	Staffing
	Assessment
	Resources
	Curriculum frameworks
Leadership	Role
	Leadership style
	Motivation
Administrative practices	Collaboration and partnership
	Interpersonal communication
	Localization strategy
	Conflict and resolution
	Staff building
	Resource provision

3.1 Overview of selected publications

In this part, the metadata of the selected publications are described to gain a grasp of the general knowledge of research data on CIs beyond the semantic level and before zooming into more specific content data.

According to the search strategies and inclusion and exclusion criteria (see 2.1 and 2.2 above), the selected publications are peer-reviewed English journal articles, book or chapters, and (published) PhD dissertations issued from January 2010 to December 2024, published by academic sources and searched from Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Scopus. The publications take CIs as the research subject, have research foci that are generally relevant to CIs' administration, and contain at least one section discussing CIs' administration in the main body. Hence, considering the objectives of this research which revolve around CIs' administrative practices, the publications are generally relevant literature with (some) highly relevant contents.

Among the 94 selected publications, most are journal articles ($n = 69$), complemented by 15 books or book chapters and 10 PhD dissertations. Fifty nine publications researching CIs in 38 countries or regions are included, with around 31.1% of the locations in Asia, followed by North America (25.7%), Europe (17.6%), and Africa (13.5%) (see Figure 2).

The research foci of the publications (see Table 3) are determined by skimming the abstracts and research questions, with 'Soft power' topping the list, comprising 61.7%, followed by 'CIs' administrative practices' (18.1%) and 'Intercultural communication' (12.8%). 'CIs' administrative features' (5.3%) and 'CFL education' (2.1%) constitute smaller proportions of the total. In general, the emphasis on CIs' administration during the selection process is effective, as publications focusing on CIs' administration comprise over half of the selection, and the research topics reflect many crucial matters concerning administration. However, greater attention is directed toward higher-order dimensions of CI's administration, especially those concerning soft power and intercultural communication, which investigate how China's cultural diplomacy is exerted through CIs, how CIs are interpreted officially, and how Chinese culture is promoted via CIs. Other topics regarding 'CIs' administrative practices' such as 'Status quo', 'Management' and 'Partnership' examine the current situations of CIs in various locations, the managerial practices at CIs, and the collaborations among partner institutions, emphasizing on the daily operations at CIs. Overall, most of the research foci and topics of the selected publications are strongly connected with CIs' administration.

In terms of research designs and methodologies applied in the publications (see Figure 3), qualitative research design applied in 87% of all publications is the most prevalent. Among qualitative approaches, case study ($n = 36$) focusing on specific CIs is the most frequently employed methodology, occupying 38.3% of all publications. Content/hermeneutic analytical approach ($n = 23$) based on existing literature and data ranks second, accounting for 24.5% of the total. Ethnography ($n = 16$) with onsite fieldwork at CIs is utilized in 17% of the publications. Mixed methods design ($n = 10$) jointly employing qualitative and quantitative research methods such as interviews and surveys constitute 10.6% of all methodologies. Quantitative approaches ($n = 2$) take up 2.1%. Notably, publications with onsite data of CIs make up slightly more than half of the whole selection (56%), contributed mainly by research using case study and ethnography. The publications without onsite data adopt multiple sources of existing literature and data such as literature reviews, policy texts, official websites, media reports, and online databases regarding CIs' development.

Based on the above overview, research gaps in selected publications can be identified. According to Official Website of CI (n.d.b), till February 2025, among the 481 CIs around the world, Europe hosts the largest number of CIs among all continents ($n = 167$), followed by Asia ($n = 139$), Africa ($n = 71$) and North America ($n = 5$). Whilst more than half of the research cases of CIs from the publications are from Asia and North America, the number of research cases from Europe and Africa are less prevailing compared

FIGURE 2
Locations of CIs researched in publications.

TABLE 3 Research foci.

| Research foci	Main topics	Numbers of publications	Percentages
Soft power	Soft power	58	61.7%
	Cultural diplomacy		
CIs' administrative practices	Status quo	17	18.1%
	Management		
	Partnership		
	Teacher training		
	Curriculum		
	Teaching resources		
Intercultural communication	Intercultural communication	12	12.8%
	Cultural dissemination		
CIs' administrative features	Attributes	5	5.3%
	Official discourses about CIs		
	Managerial models		
	Cross-institutional comparisons		
CFL education	Promotion of CFL	2	2.1%
	CFL Teaching		
Total		94	100%
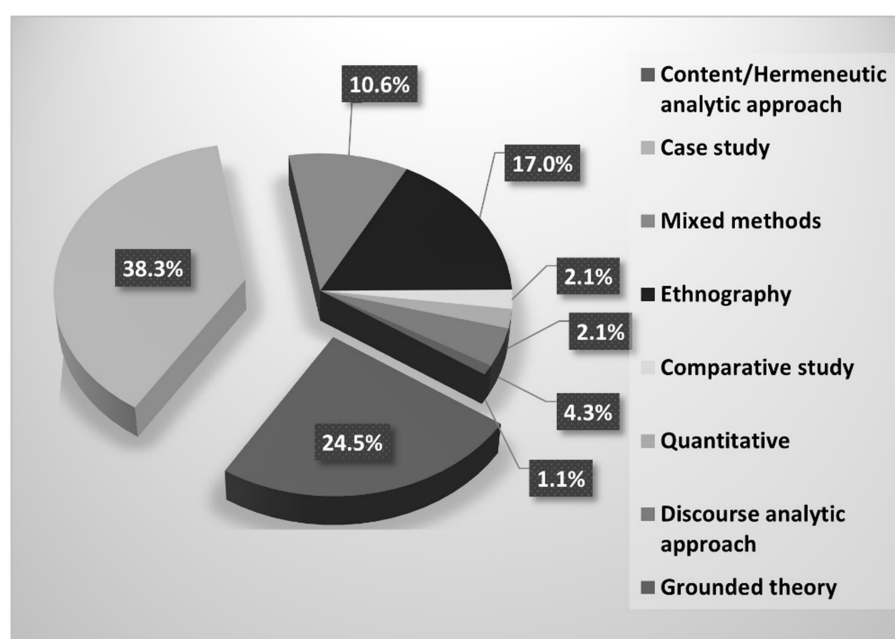
FIGURE 3
Methodologies.

with their high-ranking numbers of hosted CIs. Potential growth of regional research is desirable especially from these two areas.

Regarding research foci and topics, literature focusing on CIs' administrators and their leadership is critically underdeveloped. No article addresses administrators as the main topic, and the aspects of leadership styles, competences, roles and responsibilities, motivations, experiences and perspectives, training, and sustainable development of CIs' administrators lack systematic exploration in research. Another significant deficiency in research foci and topics is the lack of literature focusing mainly on the localization of CIs' management. Only few publications study the localization process and strategies structurally as the sole research focus. Other topics such as teacher training, teaching resources, curriculum planning, and assessment of management and organization are tackled in certain sections of some publications. Yet they are insufficiently explored as primary research foci of the research.

As for research designs and methodologies, considering qualitative designs as the majority, more quantitative and mixed methods designs are expected in the future. Moreover, nearly half of the selected publications employ methodologies engaging existing literature or data rather than real-life data collected onsite at CIs. More empirical studies on CIs' actual administrative performances based on onsite data are needed in the future. Additionally, the research designs leading to theoretical output, such as grounded theory, are underdeveloped in the current selection, and more theoretical explorations revolving around CIs' administration are anticipated.

3.2 Overview of perceptions, resistance and experience

This part reports on the tendencies of perceptions, resistance and experience (Scott et al., 2018) observed in the selected publications

(see Appendix B). Since the three analytical dimensions include beliefs and attitudes of CI stakeholders, the challenges and barriers CIs face and the lived real-life experiences of CI stakeholders, they provide an overarching picture of the complicated realities of CIs' administration and an informative perspective to be integrated with the thematic table for in-depth analysis.

With respect to stakeholders' perceptions of CIs and their administration, the most frequently addressed items are:

(1) CIs are perceived as tools for boosting China's soft power/cultural diplomacy (Liu, 2017; Li, 2021; Martín and Elias, 2021).
(2) Concerns are expressed regarding CIs about potential influence on local communities, partner universities and students from propaganda or violations of academic freedom (Lo and Pan, 2014; Cai, 2019; Wang, 2020).
(3) CIs are viewed as beneficial initiatives to promote language education and cultural exchange as well as to provide economic opportunities (Kwan, 2014; Stambach and Kwayu, 2017; Yellinek et al., 2020).

In many cases, the perceptions of CIs and the administration show mixed trends, with the coexistence of negative perceptions such as CIs' political controversies and positive ones such as applause for CIs' contributions in cultural exchange (Cai, 2022).

As for the resistance to CIs, the actions from stakeholders mainly fall into the following categories:

(1) Scepticism about CIs in terms of potential propaganda and violations of academic freedom (Theo and Leung, 2018; Wang, 2020).
(2) Explicit pressures or rejections such as protests and closures (Fan, 2018; Zhu and Li, 2023).

(3) Implicit doubts about CIs' intentions and influence and reluctance to host CIs (Leung and Du Cros, 2014; Wang and Adamson, 2015; Zhou, 2022).

The results in this category exhibit a spectrum of resistance ranging from subtle and quiet personal doubts and reluctance to overt oppositions such as closures of CIs, exerted by a variety of stakeholders including local governments, partner universities, local administrators, students, etc.

Regarding stakeholders' experience with CIs, the results can be categorized in three directions:

(1) Educational experiences of students, parents and teachers engaging in language learning and cultural activities onsite (Hubbert, 2014; Huang and Xiang, 2019).
(2) Operational challenges posed to CI administrators such as difficulties in cultural adaptation and staff shortages (Hartig, 2015; Lu et al., 2019).
(3) Influence of soft power related issues on educational or administrative contexts, such as participants' different interpretations of activities at CIs (Hubbert, 2019; Martín and Elias, 2021).

What can be drawn from the three dimensions of perceptions, resistance and experience is that CIs are in complex positions that might not be evident to administrators. Regarding the stakeholders, there are ones at macro level (global media, international critics, governments, policy makers), ones at meso level (local communities, host universities, local coordinators, CI directors) and ones at micro level (other administrators, teachers, students, parents). At each level, there exists a diversity of perceptions (positive, negative, neutral, mixed), resistance (subtle, overt) and experience (educational, operational, reflections). Their influence on CIs' administration can be internal (e.g., unstable student enrolment rate) or external (e.g., pressure from critics to address sensitive topics). These dimensions interact with each other and produce complicated situations in real-life administration. The awareness of this fact and the systematic instructions about how to tackle such situations are thus essential to administrators' onsite navigation.

The analysis of the selected publications demonstrates broad coverage of CIs' administration among perceptions, resistance and experience, whereas the foci of a majority of the publications fall within the angle of soft power/cultural diplomacy. Perceptions, resistance and experiences are often framed in terms of CIs' representation of China's soft power, thereby shaping how resistance and experiences are understood. What remains lacking are internal perspectives, attention to administrators' roles and perceptions, and analyses of agency and flexibility in practice, including how stakeholders respond to these realities.

3.3 Overview of thematic table and content data

In this part, the report of findings delves into more detailed content data. A thematic table demonstrating a hierarchical structure of themes emerging from contents relevant to CIs' administration in the selected publications is presented. The overview of relevant and salient themes and content data shows how CIs' administration is conceptualized in the selected publications and facilitates the composition of the status quo and salient issues of CIs' administration as well as the development of the theoretical framework (see 2.5.1 above).

Grounded in the analysis of content data extracted from the selected publications as well as the theoretical framework, the thematic table (see Appendix A) is constructed with two levels depending on the generalization of the themes. Themes at Level 1 are the most general categories relevant to CIs' administration, namely, 'Organization' (the higher-order design of CIs), 'Leadership' (information regarding the stakeholders in administration), successes and challenges of CIs' administrative practices, suggestions for the future administration, which are in line with the first column of the theoretical framework (see Table 2). In the selected dataset, the contents tend to describe the practical issues at CIs reflected by a larger quantity, which matches the purpose of the selection process. However, in the higher-order categories of 'Organization' and 'Leadership', the contents on the former significantly outweigh those on the latter, as the publications are more inclined to discussing the macro design of CIs compared with investigating the stakeholders as institutional agencies. As for CIs' Administrative practices, the themes are separated into three sections, addressing the successful achievements so far, the challenging issues posing risks to CIs' administration and the suggestions provided for improvement.

Regarding the coverage of Level 1 themes the publications involve slightly more contents on 'Challenges for administrative practices', and less contents on 'Successful administrative practices' and 'Suggestions for future administration'. Most areas are balanced in the contents regarding CIs' challenges, successes and suggestions.

The themes at Level 1 are broken down to Level 2 to address notable issues of CIs' organization, leadership, and administrative practices emerging from the data. The salient Level 2 themes can be visualized in a word cloud (see Figure 4). Compared with the second column of the theoretical framework (Table 2), Level 2 themes of 'Organization' covers most of the original items, such as 'Managerial model' and 'Staffing', while 'Leadership' is deficient in almost all subcategories. 'Policy' and 'Resources' of the theoretical framework are partially covered by 'Positions', 'Objectives' and 'Funding'. The Level 2 themes 'Partnership' and 'Competence' are unexpected outcomes arising from the data. Regarding the administrative practices, 'Collaboration and partnership', 'Interpersonal communication', 'Localization strategy', and 'Conflict and resolution' of the original framework are mainly reflected by Level 2 themes such as 'Partnership', 'Localization', and 'Cultural exchange'. 'Resource provision' remains the same, whereas 'Staff building' is strikingly represented by 'Teachers' in the thematic table. 'Development' and 'Soft power' are unexpected Level 2 themes added to the original framework. In terms of salience of Level 2 themes, 'Curriculum frameworks' and 'Staffing' are the most addressed themes under 'Organization' and 'Leadership'. 'Partnership' and 'Cultural exchange' are the most prominent successes in CIs' administrative practices, demonstrating a higher-order tendency. In the categories of challenges and suggestions, 'Teachers' and 'Soft power' are the most salient in both categories, addressing a mix of on-site practical issues and higher-order insights. 'Partnership' accounts for the largest share of all Level 2 themes, exhibiting CIs' emphasis on partnership and collaboration.

The thematic table also includes both frequently reported and underreported sub-themes under Level 2 themes, highlighting the

FIGURE 4
Salient Level 2 themes.

most addressed as well as the underexplored topics (see Appendix A). Those sub-themes are later incorporated into the analysis of this research. For example, frequently reported sub-themes under Level 2 themes such as 'Positions' and 'Objectives' describe essential attributes of CIs' macro design. In terms of 'Successful administrative practices', 'Partnership' and 'Cultural exchange' are remarkable achievements, applauding CIs' efforts in tackling higher-order administrative tasks such as boosting collaboration and cultural exchanges. Concerning 'Challenges for administrative practices', issues regarding 'Teachers' and 'Soft power' such as shortages of qualified teaching staff and soft power/cultural diplomacy scrutinization are profoundly debated. For 'Suggestions for future administration', the heated topics from the challenges are generally addressed, with more focus on the issues concerning macro management, e.g., 'Boosting strategic collaboration'. Thus, many suggestions might be rough guidelines for future administration, rather than specific instructions for daily operations at CIs.

Regarding underreported sub-themes, i.e., topics rarely or not yet studied, the 'Effectiveness' of managerial models as well as its systematic assessment are underdeveloped research directions under 'Organization'. As for sub-themes under 'Leadership', most of the relevant topics (e.g., 'Administrators' navigation and agency', 'Shared values in partnership') are understudied. Concerning CIs' administrative practices, 'Sustainable development', 'Local coordinators' and 'Synergy' are not sufficiently discussed under 'Successful administrative practices'; 'Imbalanced roles of Chinese and foreign stakeholders' and 'Lacking interaction with local culture' are underexplored pressing concerns under 'Challenges for administrative practices'; 'Systematic strategies for administrators to handle issues regarding soft power' and 'Systematic localization strategies' are critical strategies for staff at CIs that are not systematically investigated under 'Suggestions for future administration'.

Recapitulating the thematic table (see Appendix A), the selected content data are comprehensive in coverage, as all categories of the theoretical framework (see Table 2) are covered. However, it is also evident that in general the thematic table shows a higher-order tendency, which means that the themes explored by the publications are inclined toward the macro design and management of CIs, whereas less attention has been drawn to the onsite practicalities. To be more specific, prevalent Level 2 themes 'Partnership', 'Cultural exchange' and 'Development' reflect the higher-order positions and tasks of CIs to establish the global communication network for Chinese language and culture, while 'Teachers' and 'Managerial

model' match the aspects of staff building and generic structuring of CIs' administration. Daily operations, which generally refer to the practices enhancing the institutional mechanisms, are underdeveloped among Level 2 themes. Contents under themes highly relevant to daily operations at CIs such as 'Localization' and 'Assessment' are often general perceptions of the issues. For example, regarding suggestions for localization, the complete ecology of CIs can only be delineated and scrutinized by integrating the processes of globalization and glocalization (Yuan et al., 2016); in terms of the lack of assessment (Ren, 2022), three general criteria are proposed to measure the success of the organizational culture at CIs (Lu et al., 2019). These statements generally address the issues of localization and assessment, but they are broad outlines for the daily operations at CIs, rather than practical guidelines for stakeholders such as CIs' administrators. Thus, future research on CIs' administration is expected to emphasize more on further examinations and interpretations of the specific issues of daily operations at CIs (e.g., specific localization practices and their effectiveness) and practical instructions applicable for stakeholders (e.g., detailed guidelines for conducting assessment at CIs), preferably based on onsite data collected at CIs. Moreover, as the selected publications with onsite data often center on soft power or cultural diplomacy of China, the contents on CIs' daily operations tend to be in lack of quantity and depth, generating fewer relevant themes. For instance, in Xiao (2017), CI's operations are discussed in a relatively descriptive manner, as a part of analysis of CIs in relation to China's soft power, with a higher-order concern. More in-depth empirical studies on CIs' micromanagement and analysis of onsite data in the direction of CIs' daily operations are much needed in future research.

Another trait explored from the stakeholders' perspective is that comparatively, there is much less content on administrators than teachers. In publications, administrators are sometimes described in relation to CIs' partnership, while rigorous research focusing on the roles, motivations, leadership styles, and competences of them as individuals is scarce. Besides, the contents on teachers and administrators in many cases are prone to viewing the stakeholders as human resources rather than agencies at institutional level. In-depth onsite studies on administrators and teachers as individuals are insufficient. More research is expected to explore the stakeholders in different positions, their perspectives and proactivity, as well as instructions for their sustainable development.

3.4 The status quo of CIs' administration

As the thematic table draws a general picture of CIs' administration, a brief account of the status quo of CIs' administration developed from the table is presented in this part, aiming to provide a comprehensive description of CIs' higher-order tasks, daily operations, staff building, and resource provision. The first half introduces CIs' organization and leadership, in accordance with the first two Level 1 themes of the thematic table (see Appendix A) and elements of the theoretical framework (see Table 2), while the second half describes CIs' administrative practices in regard of successes, challenges, and suggestions. The account applies a balance between relevance and salience of the themes, as the first half takes into concern the relevance to draw a comprehensive picture, and the second half puts more weight on salience to include information with more prominence.

To start with, CIs are non-profit educational institutes cooperatively founded by Chinese and overseas partnership (You, 2012). Apart from their official objectives, the focus of the institutes has turned from improving the teaching quality of CFL to cultural exchange since the development reached the stable period (Kluver, 2017).

In general, the managerial style of CIs is centralized, with the headquarters supervising CIs around the world and arranging the higher-order tasks through the Council (Hubbert, 2014). The daily operations and funding of CIs are tackled through cooperation among the headquarters and the partner institutions upon invitation (Liu, 2017). In practice, the managerial models are highly diverse, varying according to the local conditions (Li and Tian, 2016; Kluver, 2017). They can be divided into three main types: the headquarters model, host university model, and mutual cooperation model (Li and Tian, 2016). The three models are different in power distribution, and the first two models often appear in countries in need of more central support and institutions with strong internal support respectively, with the Chinese or foreign director taking the lead of daily affairs. The mutual cooperation model is common among overseas CIs, working on a basis of joint decision-making between directors from both sides (ibid.).

Regarding decision making, the Council has the highest position in the power structure (Hartig, 2012), while in many countries, a Board of Advisors consisting of members of the host institution also serves as a decision-making mechanism (Liu, 2017). Other staff in charge of operations at CIs includes directors, coordinators, other local administrators, as well as teachers and volunteers originating from China (Lahtinen, 2015). A 'director responsibility system' is applied in daily operations, enhancing the role of directors in onsite administration (Li and Tian, 2016). Some leaders at different levels have exhibited expertise in CFL education and work experience in cooperating with Chinese institutions (Li, 2012), whereas some Chinese directors are criticized for limited intercultural competence (Li and Tian, 2016). Due to the headquarters' affiliation to the Chinese government and the high-power position of the Council, CIs' administration has been censured for being state-controlled (Lahtinen, 2015).

The successes of CIs' administrative practices revolve around CIs' rapid development in scale (Wang, 2020), CIs' effective partnership with local partners through establishing cultural and economic networks (Li, 2021) and CIs' contribution in cultural and academic exchanges through spreading Chinese culture among overseas communities, establishing academic platforms for China studies and arranging diverse cultural activities (Schmidt, 2013; Hartig, 2015; Chen, 2016). The structured provision of the curriculum comprising language, culture, and specialized courses (Zhao and Huang, 2010), is also a notable achievement. For example, Chen (2016) points out that CIs facilitate the promotion of China's scientific and technological advancement through academic collaboration with partner universities. Li (2021) studies African CIs and finds that those CIs collaborate closely with local Chinese government agencies as well as Chinese businesses. In this way, a Chinese network is formed via the combination of partnership in multiple aspects.

For challenges encountered in administrative practices, issues regarding soft power might be a pressing issue. CIs are scrutinized in terms of China's soft power and cultural diplomacy and criticized for the soft power projection on overseas partners (Kluver, 2014; Cai,

2019). The center of discussion, teaching staff, is marked by the lack of expertise of the employed teachers at CIs, the shortage of local teachers, the high turnover rate of the teaching staff, and the lack of localized teacher training (Hartig, 2012; Lei and Chang, 2016; Liu, 2017; Yi, 2021). Partnership is another salient issue, noted by unclear responsibilities and rights, ineffective communication, and the lack of shared values among stakeholders (Gil, 2015; Lahtinen, 2015). For example, for soft power issues, Theo and Leung (2018) suggest that although CIs might have been promoted as a cultural initiative to boost China's soft power, the effort could be impacted by unpredictable local specificities. Concerning teachers, based on the questionnaire survey conducted among 16 Confucius Institutes in Thailand, Yi (2021) points out that Confucius Institutes in Thailand have a larger number of well-trained faculty from China but fewer local Thai teachers, and opportunities for their training remain limited. Regarding partnership, some opinions from the interviews conducted by Gil (2015) among stakeholders at CIs primarily in Australia indicate that some universities hosting CIs are not fully aware of their expectations of CIs in terms of academic achievement, and that a lack of communication between CIs and the local university departments can be spotted at times.

Suggestions are also proposed for future administration at CIs. Regarding soft power, it is suggested to alleviate the pressures by downplaying CIs' governmental affiliation and authorizing more institutional autonomy at local CIs (Fan, 2018; Lu et al., 2019). To tackle the problem of teaching staff, cooperating with local teaching staff and organizing localized teacher training are proposed (Procopio, 2015; Chen and Sit, 2018; Wang and Yao, 2019; Cui, 2022). For strengthening partnerships among CIs, Chinese institutions, and overseas institutions, it is recommended to develop compatible collaborative structures and enhance the network established by CIs in local communities (Ruane, 2016; Ma, 2018). To achieve other higher-order goals, establishing a quality-oriented development mode and assessing system, expanding funding sources, improving the managerial model as well as linking with local communities are presented as constructive suggestions (Leung and Du Cros, 2014; Liu G.-Q., 2015; Ying, 2016; Qiao et al., 2021). For example, by investigating CIs and language centers in Europe, Ruane (2016) emphasizes establishing cross-language associative structures in networks and improving collaboration between Chinese and other languages, in order to prepare CIs for stakeholders and opportunities at local, regional and international levels. Wang and Yao (2019) state that as the demand for CFL teaching increases, CIs should enhance the presence of CFL teachers and systematically localize training on CFL teaching and teachers' professional development. Ying (2016) proposes that CIs should engage in community and charitable events to attract media attention, thereby broadening cultural influence and improving cultural dissemination. Overall, as mentioned above in 3.3, many suggestions are general in expression, and more concrete solutions to onsite problems regarding routine operations are needed.

3.5 Salient issues of administrative practices at CIs

In this part, the salient issues of administrative practices at CIs drawn from the three dimensions of perceptions, resistance and experience, the thematic table and the status quo of CIs' administration

are probed in more detail. Considering the salient results, it is not surprising that partnership is stressed, due to CIs' emphasis on building networks. On the other hand, the issues of soft power and teachers arise as unexpected major concerns.

According to the findings above, the issues regarding soft power are thorny challenges regarding CIs' administration. CIs are frequently scrutinized in terms of their functions to boost China's soft power or cultural diplomacy in other countries/regions by various stakeholders including media, governments, local partners, local staff as well as students and their parents (Liu, 2017; Li, 2021; Martín and Elias, 2021). In administration, CIs are criticized for projecting soft power/cultural diplomacy onto the local communities (Hughes, 2014). These perceptions lead to counteractions at different levels ranging from severe ones such as closures of CIs to subtle ones such as students' mistrust in CI activities (Leung and Du Cros, 2014; Fan, 2018; Zhou, 2022; Zhu and Li, 2023). CI administrators experience both external pressures from media and critics to explain and defend and internal pressures from their students and partners that foster doubt and mistrust.

In respect of teachers, to meet the increasing demand for professional teachers at CIs, the headquarters has adopted measures and invested resources in cultivating teachers from both China and local communities, whereas local differences still exist (Lin, 2016). The difficulty of solving the shortage of CIs' teaching staff is mainly due to the lack of professional literacy of the employed teachers and the high turnover rate of teaching staff (Yuan et al., 2016; Mhunpiew and Liu, 2020). As for the former, some teachers and volunteers sent by the headquarters have limited familiarity with the local language and culture, which seriously impedes effective teaching and cultural exchange (Lu et al., 2019). In terms of the turnover rate, the officially sent teachers and volunteers usually work within 2–3-year contracts, resulting in the high turnover rate and the instability of the management (He et al., 2017; Mhunpiew and Liu, 2020). Meanwhile, the local teachers who are professionally qualified and familiar with the local conditions are scarce, with the shortage of localized teacher training adding to the problem (Mhunpiew and Liu, 2020).

Concerning the issues of partnership, the lack of localization strategy and awareness in some CIs' administrative practices might lead to decisions with inadequate consideration about the local sociocultural conditions. For example, monolingual operation at CIs in multilingual contexts might be demanding for the local partners at the current stage and might cause miscommunication (Ruane, 2016; Li, 2021). Hence, ineffective communication between CIs and local partners is a foreseeable result, which leads to the lack of cooperation between the two sides (Gil, 2015) and their constant searching for equilibrium regarding authority (Ma, 2018). Moreover, insufficient concern of localization might give rise to unpreparedness when exposed to local sociocultural surprises, as well as cultural clashes, resistance, or frictions (Theo and Leung, 2018).

The discussion of the above salient issues points to the ubiquitous challenge of localization in CIs' administration. For soft power issues, surveying beforehand about the local sociocultural concerns and more communication about these issues at work might relieve the local anxiety to some extent; for teachers, shortages of localized teachers and training can be alleviated with more adaptation concerns when building the teaching staff; for partnership, communication between the Chinese staff and local partners might be strengthened by improving administrators' intercultural competence. All these in action, however, require a systematic design of multiple facets of CIs' administration to achieve synergy, and in this case, CIs' administrators play essential roles in negotiating the localization strategies and ensuring the smoothness of daily operations (Li and Tian, 2016).

While a systematic design for the localization of CIs' administration is urgently demanded, contents focusing on the localization process or strategies at CIs are insufficient in the selected publications. Li and Tian (2016) state that CIs around the world have generally completed the localization process, as local conditions such as managerial models, collaboration platforms, curriculum planning and teaching materials are taken into consideration, whereas in-depth exploration of such situations such as how CIs' managerial models are adapted to local contexts is not presented. Yi (2021) includes sections emphasizing Russian CIs' localization efforts to collaborate with the local government and institutions, and Thai CIs' urgent need for strengthening the local teachers and localizing the textbooks, without delving into the issues more specifically concerning the localization of CIs in general. Zhou (2022) and Theo and Leung (2018) include relatively systematic analyses of the localization of CIs' administration. Zhou (2022) frames the localization study in four aspects of teaching and learning system, organizational structure, financial management, and personnel arrangement, and finds that the localization is prominent at CI-NTU, optimizing the effectiveness and credibility of the CI, whereas Theo and Leung (2018) analyzed three cases of CIs in Indonesia and focus on the frictions during the localization process and the various ways they are generated, resisted and handled in terms of dynamics of actors and power structures in CIs' mobility. The main focus of these articles, however, is the soft power of China, rather than the localization of CIs' administration. There is a deficiency in systematic analysis of the localization of CIs' administration as the main focus among the selected publications.

3.6 Development of theoretical framework

Evolving from the original theoretical framework (see Table 2) and the thematic table (see Appendix A), the refined theoretical framework is provided as in Table 4, to offer a reference for further research on CIs' administration. The items selected are mainly based on the comparison between the original theoretical framework and the thematic table (see 3.3 above), so that most of the salient issues from the analysis are included or added. Compared with the items under 'Organization' and 'Leadership', the items under 'Administrative practices' are more drastically changed. As those items are influenced by the higher-order tendency of the themes (i.e., a number of items under 'Administrative practices' in the refined theoretical framework are within the scope of higher-order tasks), 'Other daily operational practices' is added to include more practical information of CIs' administration. It is worth mentioning that this framework is derived from existing literature around the world, and adjustment and validation are expected before applying it to real-life conditions.

4 Discussion

In this section, implications from Findings are further discussed in order to provide messages for administrators and researchers in terms of future actions and research directions. A number of

TABLE 4 Refined theoretical framework.

Category	Subcategory
Organization	Policy
	Managerial model
	Partnership
	Decision making
	Staffing
	Assessment
	Resources
	Curriculum frameworks
Leadership	Role
	Competence
	Leadership style
	Motivation
Administrative practices	Development mode
	Partnership
	Managerial model
	Funding
	Assessment
	Curriculum frameworks
	Soft power
	Cultural exchange
	Localization
	Staff building (teachers and administrators)
	Resource provision (teaching materials)
	Other daily operational practices

publications out of the selected dataset are referenced to inform the development of the future guidelines.

From the findings, three key observations can be identified. Firstly, regarding theoretical lenses, the selected publications involve a significant amount of soft power/cultural diplomacy angles, whereas theoretical perspectives exploring individual contextualization and agencies are insufficient. Though many included onsite data, the selected publications often frame CIs' administration at macro level, with Western-dominant narratives (Cai, 2019) treating CIs as the cultural 'other'. Aligned with this, those studies probe CIs as an entity from the outside, employing an external (etic) viewpoint when analyzing CIs' administration. Research adopting micro lenses such as organizational role and intercultural competence from the internal (emic) and individual angles is underexplored. As intercultural educational programs, CIs are multi-faceted in nature, with dynamic interactions with a myriad of perceptions, resistance and experience (see 3.2 above). Emic perspectives are thus essential to the thorough understanding of CIs' complicated realities.

Secondly, localization is the ubiquitous underlying issue drawn from salient issues and requires systematic concern to achieve synergy. Although some selected publications mention localization, localizing different aspects of CIs' administration are often presented in a fragmented manner, while systematic considerations of localization are rare. Since localization is a holistic process, the comprehensive

structuring of the guidelines for localizing CIs' administration is desirable for achieving synergy in practice.

Thirdly, the latent complexities of the roles of CI administrators are insufficiently acknowledged in the selected publications. According to 3.2 above, CI administrators need to navigate perceptions, resistance and experience at macro, meso and micro levels from diverse stakeholders, among which pressures and tensions exist. For example, administrators might struggle between the politicized tendency of CI portrayals from the media (Li and Tian, 2016) and the apolitical efforts the directors make onsite (Hubbert, 2019); they might be pressurized to maintain operation and avoid being closed while receiving applause from the students about CIs' contributions to cultivating cosmopolitan competence (Cai, 2022). These pressures and tensions are crucial to examining CIs' administration from the emic perspective and forming guidelines for administrators' future practices.

Thus, the tentative guidelines for CIs' future administration should (a) involve both etic and emic perspectives, (b) address localization systematically, and (c) encompassing the latent complexities of CI administrators' roles. In the following sections, these principles are integrated into the three aspects of 'Achievement of objectives', 'Localization' and 'Educational leadership' to provide tentative guidelines for future research and administrative practices at CIs.

4.1 Achievement of objectives

As mentioned above, CIs' official administrative objectives mainly cover higher-order tasks, daily operations, staff building, and resource provision. Evaluating the achievements of CIs in relation to official administrative goals reveals that CIs tend to receive more praise for higher-order tasks, such as rapid scaling and the creation of local networks. However, when it comes to more specific and practical issues, there is often room for improvement in CIs' administrative practices, and many criticisms are rooted in the insufficient concern about local conditions. This poses risks to the achievement of the more practical aspects of CIs' administrative objectives, and the achievement of higher-order tasks will be harmed in turn. As the program of CI evolves and matures over two decades, the quality of services, the localization of the program, and the effectiveness of cultural exchanges have become the central concerns in CIs' development (Kluver, 2017). Thus, it is worthwhile to further evaluate the operational issues systematically relating to the achievement of official administrative objectives and the effectiveness of localization strategies, and to provide constructive instructions for daily administrative practices in the future.

From another perspective, the tendency described above is in line with CIs' top-down administrative style (Chen, 2016). According to Amanchukwu et al. (2015), goal congruence is accomplished when all the operations and endeavors of an organization contribute to the achievement of the objectives, which means that individuals, departments, and divisions work in a unified direction toward the goal, and different leadership styles can be applied according to the situation. If the organization is more centralized, leadership is inclined to a directive style, in which input from lower-level staff is rarely expected. In CIs' case, the inadequate knowledge of local conditions and the lack of shared values are frequently spotted among administrators and teachers (Lahtinen, 2015; Li and Tian, 2016), reflecting the lack of awareness of their institutional agency in

operating decisions, which is in line with the centralized leadership style. To ameliorate the goal congruence at CIs, the ownership of CIs' administrative stakeholders is to be enhanced, and adjustment of the leadership style according to the local contexts might be considered.

Therefore, in future administration and research, goal alignment in administrative practices at CIs can be examined from two perspectives: the institutional perspective (etic), which addresses systematic operational issues like localization strategies, and the individual perspective (emic), which focuses on administrators' leadership in tackling these issues. Combining the two perspectives, the achievement of CIs' administrative goal can be viewed systematically, leading to goal congruence as it emphasizes the unified work towards one direction.

4.2 Localization

The universal presence of localization among salient issues results from the fact that CIs are intercultural educational institutions with multiple cultural perspectives. Thus, the subcategories of CIs' administration are also intercultural in nature, and localization is the demand that all components of CIs' administration necessitate.

Therefore, localization can serve as the focal point to structure the systematic guidelines for improving CIs' administration. Induced from suggestions regarding localization from relevant publications (Yuan et al., 2016; Liu, 2017; Bai, 2020; Yuan and Li, 2021; Gu, 2022; Mo, 2022), the localization of CIs' administration is expected to address the following aspects:

(1) Raising awareness of localization (e.g., respecting and understanding local cultures and cultural diversity; treating target groups as interactive individuals rather than audience);
(2) Investigating realities of localization (e.g., examining the current situations of the localization activities at CIs; collecting data about local sociocultural situations and interests and needs of the target groups);
(3) Adapting to local realities (e.g., adapting managerial models, curriculum planning, teaching and textbooks to local realities; creating tailored localization strategies for CIs in different countries or regions);
(4) Integrating into local communities (e.g., seeking cooperation with relevant local institutions);
(5) Combining the continuous processes of globalization and localization (e.g., globalization and localization are mutually supportive in that globalization creates demands for China through local institutions, while localization impacts the effectiveness and sustainability of CIs' globalization).

Integrating these aspects with the practical components of the refined theoretical framework (see Table 4), the localization of various aspects of CIs' administration can be structured. For example, to localize the managerial models, the relevant local cultures and knowledge should be introduced to CIs' administrators, and investigations of current situations onsite such as the leadership styles of the partners and the opinions of the stakeholders should be conducted. Then the tailored strategies of localizing managerial models (e.g., Who makes the decisions? How much flexibility does each administrator have?) are established according to the specific situations of each region or CI. Afterwards,

cooperation with local communities is to be enhanced through managerial collaborations between CIs and local governments, etc. Finally, connecting daily operations with globalization, such as balancing local needs with global criteria, brings the localization of CIs' managerial models to another level.

In this way, all the practical components of CIs' administration can be structured for localization, and together they form systematic guidelines for administrators to take actions and for researchers to design a research agenda to explore CIs' operations, which might potentially improve the effectiveness of CIs' administration.

4.3 Educational leadership

Another crucial side of CIs' administration is the individual perspective of administrators, which mainly concerns the leadership of the stakeholders and their personal viewpoints, though underdeveloped in the selected publications. Based on the refined theoretical framework (see Table 4) and the localization guidelines discussed above, leadership concerns the administrators' roles, motivations, leadership styles and competences during the localization process. Adapted from Dimmock and Walker (2000), roles refer to the positions and power of the administrators; motivations highlight the degree the staff are motivated and the way it is accomplished. Leadership styles stress the authoritarianism-democracy continuum and the balance between instruction and administration demonstrated by the administrators. Competences encompass the skills and knowledge administrators need to achieve the administrative objectives.

Referring to the localization guidelines presented above, roles, motivations, leadership styles, and competences of the administrators in leadership are closely related to all the localization components. To achieve successful localization of CIs' administration, administrators are supposed to be aware of their motivations, leadership styles and competences according to the local conditions. Their leadership is also in action while adapting administration to local realities and establishing local partnership. In their decisions to balance the globalization and localization requirements, their leadership is also in effect.

In CIs' cases, the most complex exemplifications of administrators' leadership might often be those of CIs' directors. Firstly, CIs' directors often take on multiple responsibilities. Apart from onsite operations, they are usually in charge of building partnerships and local networks, public diplomacy, and sometimes teaching (Zhong and Jiang, 2023). Hence, the directors must tackle the competition among tasks regarding onsite administrative operations, cultural promotion and teaching. Moreover, this also complicates the situation as multiple responsibilities bring complex social relations (e.g., partnership with local universities, collaboration with local companies). Secondly, CIs' directors are the institutional leaders and often the centers of stakeholder relationships, such as relationships with CI headquarters, CI councils and teachers. Thus, it can be challenging to address all the relationships smoothly to achieve CIs' administrative objectives. Thirdly, CIs' directors are faced with multicultural contexts with Chinese and local cultures interacting onsite (ibid.). Combined with their own intercultural backgrounds, the multiple cultural perspectives might be demanding to navigate.

Drawing from the localization guidelines, CIs' directors can start with raising awareness of localization-related issues. For example, the multiple responsibilities, leading to diverse roles and motivations,

might be synergized to facilitate the localization process systematically. Teaching and cultural promotion are the main goals of CIs while onsite administrative operations link the two goals and ensure their smooth exertion at the local level. Stakeholder relationships might vary among different CIs, whereas the delineation of the directors' responsibilities for the stakeholders might affect the leadership styles. The navigation of multicultural perspectives at work requires intercultural competences. Then, the directors can examine the issues onsite and know more about the current situations. These actions deepen their understanding of roles, motivation, leadership styles and competences, which leads to the adaptation of the leadership components to the local realities and the cooperation with the local communities. Additionally, the directors are supposed to take the globalization requirement into account and incorporate the relevant content into the leadership components.

From the above analysis, competence is an underlying issue throughout, since the appropriate understanding of leadership knowledge and localization actions are based on the sufficient competence of administrators. For administrators of intercultural programs such as CIs, there is also a pressing need to cultivate intercultural competence (Cherkowski and Ragoonaden, 2016). According to Byram (1997, pp. 50–53), intercultural competence consists of five components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education. From the above analysis, the insufficiency of localization is conspicuous in CIs' administrative practices, which reflects the lack of intercultural competence among some administrators and teachers. The demonstration of this feature can either be attitudinal (e.g., unwilling to adapt to the local administrative style), knowledge and skill-oriented (e.g., not able to communicate fluently with foreign partners), or awareness-related (e.g., insufficient concern of local conditions). To acquire the components of intercultural competence, in-class training and real-life practices are both essential. Administrators might take the initiative to develop and participate in training on intercultural competence. Moreover, they might also refine the content and organization of teacher training to tailor to the need of intercultural competence cultivation at local CIs and allow the teachers to practice intercultural competence in real-life situations and their CFL teaching. Cherkowski and Ragoonaden (2016, p. 39) propose the conceptualization of intercultural communication competence workshops for leadership for diversity, emphasizing 'Cultural knowledge', 'Understanding otherness', 'Understanding how an identity and a culture are socially constructed', and 'Integration of the three previous savoirs into practical applications', and it might serve as a general framework for training on intercultural competence, with adaptations and revisions according to the specific needs onsite.

4.4 Implications for future directions

This study contributes to research on CIs' administration by conducting a qualitative systematic review of the post-2010 research literature. Regarding CIs' administrators as the core stakeholders, this study formulates a descriptive synthesis on the status quo and salient issues of CIs' administration around the world and provides insights for administrators and researchers based on content data from the selected publications pertaining to administrative practices. Methodologically, this study includes a comprehensive coverage of 94

English publications with research cases from 38 countries or regions. Theoretically, it adapts and advances the existing theoretical framework according to the data findings.

Findings of this study provide an overview of the selected data from aspects of locations, research foci, and methodologies, as well as literature gaps in the selected publications and content data. A structured 2-level thematic table is also provided for administrators and researchers to refer to the status quo and salient issues of CIs' administration based on the theoretical framework. The Discussion involves the findings in relation to the achievement of CIs' administrative objectives, the systematic localization guidelines and the educational leadership of CIs' administrators.

The research outcomes of this study have significant implications for future actions and research. Firstly, the main research gaps in the selected publications and content data are pointed out to instruct future research in the following directions:

- Research focusing mainly on the localization of CIs' administration;
- Research focusing on CIs' administrators and their leadership;
- In-depth and systematic empirical studies on daily operations at CIs with onsite data.

Secondly, theoretical advancement marked by the refined theoretical framework for researching CIs' administration and the localization guidelines provide structured frameworks for administrators and researchers to formulate actions of systematic localization and research on onsite operations at CIs. This framework and these guidelines advance the research on the administration of intercultural organizations such as CIs and might inspire empirical studies in the applications and validations of the framework and the guidelines.

Thirdly, abundant practical insights and suggestions for administrators and researchers are provided to facilitate future operational and research practices. The lack of localization is a recurring issue in multiple aspects of administrative practices. Tackling the challenges, the literature provides suggestions for strengthening localization, improving educational leadership in relation to localization, and enhancing the cultivation of intercultural competence through localized training.

The limitations of this study mainly include foci on qualitative content of the literature and administrators as the core of interest without analyzing quantitative data and other stakeholders systematically. Besides, the diachronic perspective is missing as there is no comparison among literature in different time periods. Finally, the potential constraints in onsite operations of CIs such as severe soft power scrutiny, political pressures and shortage of funding are not sufficiently discussed.

In future research, more empirical studies can be conducted using quantitative or mixed methods paradigms and focusing on other stakeholders such as learners and teachers at CIs in the future. Comparative perspectives can be explored via directions such as comparing CIs with alternative models of decentralized administration, comparing CIs with other intercultural institutions (e.g., Goethe Institute and Alliance Française), and comparing different CIs with diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Also, a diachronic perspective can be adopted to investigate the evolution of CIs' attributes and administrative practices. Furthermore, addressing the potential constraints in onsite operations of CIs and their impacts

on CIs' administration and future development can be another interesting direction to explore.

For stakeholders at CIs, it is expected that systematic localization will be conducted onsite and localized staff training will be developed. Research evaluating and validating the effectiveness of the refined theoretical framework and the localization guidelines is also anticipated. The synergy between CI stakeholders and researchers will also boost research on CIs. CIs might cooperate with local researchers from partner institutions and local communities to conduct empirical research as well as strengthen partnerships. Cooperating with researchers from China (e.g., researchers from partner universities, invited scholars) to conduct studies is also another way to expand the empirical research.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

MS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LS: Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1521819/full#supplementary-material

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