

Confucius Institutes: Tools of China's Influence Campaign

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Colleges and universities are a prime target for the Chinese government's influence operations. Confucius Institutes, which are Chinese government-sponsored centers on college and university campuses, are a prime tool in this campaign.

I spent a year and a half investigating Confucius Institutes—primarily those in the United States, although I considered evidence and reports from other countries, including the United Kingdom. My report, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* (2017), concluded that

Some Confucius Institutes grant more authority to the host university and to the local faculty than do others. Institutes faced varied levels of scrutiny from the Hanban. Some reported an outright ban on discussing subjects that are censored in China; others reported freedom of speech. But overall we found that to a large extent, universities have made improper concessions that jeopardize academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Sometimes these concessions are official and in writing; more often they operate as implicit policies.¹

Because of the evidence that Confucius Institutes jeopardize academic freedom and enmesh their host colleges and universities in the Chinese government's web of influence, last year the National Association of Scholars formally recommended that all colleges and universities immediately close their Confucius Institutes. We continue to recommend this, and we also have also worked with members of the United States Congress and various Federal executive agencies to support legislation and policies that require greater transparency from foreign-funded university centers.

In this testimony, I first present evidence of the Chinese government's desire to leverage Confucius Institutes for political purposes. Second, I present specific instances in which the Chinese government used this leverage, exerting undue influence over higher education. Third, I offer some recommendations for the consideration of Members of Parliament.

The Chinese government seeks to leverage Confucius Institutes for political purposes.

The Chinese government has multiple tools at hand for its influence campaign in higher education. It can exert influence via the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, and it can entice universities with the lucrative and prestigious offer of permission to open a branch campus in China. Confucius Institutes are a central node in this web of influencing relationships.

¹ Rachelle Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education*, National Association of Scholars, 2017. https://www.nas.org/projects/confucius_institutes.

Ostensibly Confucius Institutes are benign goodwill gestures from the Chinese government, aimed at teaching Chinese language and culture. In fact, the Chinese government has sought to use these courses as a pretext for a more subversive political agenda overseen by the Chinese government.

Confucius Institutes are closely tied to the Chinese government. They are set up and sponsored by the Hanban, which is “affiliated with” the Chinese Ministry of Education, where Xu Lin, the director general of the Hanban, spent most of her career. She is currently a counselor of the State Council of China and was a member of the 12th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

The Hanban is overseen by Chinese Language Council International, which comprised representatives of twelve state agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (which handles propaganda). In March 2018, when President Xi Jinping oversaw a major government reorganization, some of the agencies were merged or moved to the Chinese Communist Party, and the current state of this council is unclear. However, its makeup as of March indicates the Chinese government’s interest in using Confucius Institutes for political purposes.

The Hanban plays an intimate role in individual Confucius Institutes. Memoranda of understanding typically call for the Hanban to provide up to 3,000 books, give \$150,000 (USD) for the first year (with \$100,000 in subsequent years), and select and pay both the Chinese teachers and the Institute’s Chinese co-director.

This structure, with the Chinese government choosing the teachers and sending textbooks, gives China an advantageous position. But three more clauses in many memoranda of understanding give the Chinese government additional leverage. First, the Hanban reserves the right to sign off on any course materials and public events, and to evaluate the teachers. Second, there is a prohibition against transgressing Chinese law. Third, there are prohibitions against tarnishing the reputation of the Confucius Institute.

It’s unlikely that clauses requiring adherence to Chinese law would hold up in a United States court, so some say these phrases are meaningless. Defenders also note that recently the Hanban updated a template memoranda on its website, removing some of the most egregious clauses about Chinese law (but retaining the structure in which the Chinese government appoints teachers and provides textbooks, in addition to funding). But these clauses serve another function—they are not primarily to set forth legal restraints but to signal to universities what kinds of behavior is expected in order to continue to receive Chinese largesse.

From time to time both the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party have admitted to using this leverage over Confucius Institutes for political purposes.

In 2009, Li Changchun, then the head of propaganda for the Chinese Communist Party and a member of the party’s Politburo Standing Committee, called Confucius Institutes “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda set-up.”² Two years later, he said, “The ‘Confucius’ brand has a natural

² “A Message from Confucius,” *The Economist*, October 22, 2009.

<https://www.economist.com/node/14678507>.

attractiveness. Using the excuse of teaching Chinese language, everything looks reasonable and logical.”³

In 2010, Xu Lin, the Hanban director general, accepted one of the World’s Most Influential Chinese People award at the You Bring Charm to the World Awards Ceremony. In her acceptance speech she noted, “Confucius Institutes are an important part of our soft power. We want to expand China’s influence.”⁴

There are numerous specific examples of the Chinese government using this soft power in higher education.

First, there are instances of censorship in class. In 2016, I visited the Confucius Institute at New Jersey City University, where the Chinese director Yin Xiuli told me that if a student asked about Tiananmen Square, she would “show a picture and point out the beautiful architecture.”⁵ Yin also said “we don’t touch” issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Falun Gong.

Similarly, in 2014 *Bloomberg* reported on an anthropologist, Jennifer Hubbert, studying Confucius Institutes, who found that students reported efforts by Confucius Institute teachers to redirect conversations away from Tiananmen Square. Hubbert interviewed two sophomores who “referred to a lack of discussion about the much-publicized 1989 Tiananmen crackdown on public dissent as representative of the censorship they perceived also taking place in the classroom.” The students told Hubbert, “If you ever get into these issues in the class, it gets steered away. ‘Wait, there’s no Tiananmen Square. Let’s talk about fluffy bunnies.’”⁶

Second, there has been censorship in conferences and public events. In 2014, at a European Association for Chinese Studies conference in Portugal, which a Confucius Institute affiliate was co-sponsoring, Hanban director general Xu Lin confiscated all printed programs. She ordered pages torn out that showed advertisements for the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, a Taiwanese co-sponsor of the conference. Xu also removed a page advertising the Taiwan National Central Library’s book exhibit.⁷

In 2008, Tel Aviv University closed a student art display on the treatment of Falun Gong followers in China. When the students sued, a District Court judge ruled in their favor, finding that the university had

³ Wesley Rahn, “Why is the US targeting China's Confucius Institute?” *Deutsche Welle*, March 16, 2018. <http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-the-us-targeting-chinas-confucius-institute/a-43403188>.

⁴ *In the Name of Confucius*, Mark Media, 2016.

⁵ Peterson, *Outsourced to China*, p. 99.

⁶ Adam Minter, “China's Soft-Power Fail,” *Bloomberg*, October 7, 2014. <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2014-10-07/china-s-soft-power-fail>.

⁷ Elizabeth Redden, “Censorship at China Studies Meeting,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 6, 2014. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/08/06/accounts-confucius-institute-ordered-censorship-chinese-studies-conference>.

“violated freedom of expression” under pressure from a dean who feared harming the university’s Confucius Institute.⁸

Earlier in 2018, *Foreign Policy* reporter Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian gave a speech co-sponsored by the Confucius Institute at Savannah State University, where she found that all mention of Taiwan had been deleted from her biography printed in the programs.⁹

Third, there is censorship in academic writing. In 2014, journalist Isabel Hilton wrote that she contributed a chapter to a book that she later learned was sponsored by a Confucius Institute. At the formal launch of the book, Hilton discovered that all mention of Chinese dissident Wu Lihong’s environmental activism and subsequent arrest had disappeared. Lihong’s tireless documentation of chemical contamination of Lake Tai had been a thorn in the side of the Chinese regime. “I wish I could believe that it was just coincidence,” Hilton said of the erasure.¹⁰

Fourth, there is self-censorship among scholars. Multiple professors, requesting anonymity, told me they self-censored. They were afraid of two kinds of retribution. One was from China. The threat of losing contacts and relationships, losing archive access, and losing visas was a real obstacle to them, and some felt that the presence of the Confucius Institute served as a way for the Chinese government to keep close tabs on what they were writing and saying.

The other kind of retribution came from their university administrators, who wanted nothing to jeopardize the income stream from China. One professor told me, “this is my career and livelihood on the line.”¹¹ Another, afraid to be seen with me, insisted we meet in the basement of another building. Others described the way an American director of a Confucius Institute had grown close to university administrators as a result of the funding he secured from China, helping him to ascend the ranks to a senior professor who would sit on promotion and tenure committees.

Fifth, there have been disinventions. In 2009, North Carolina State University disinvented the Dalai Lama, under pressure from its Confucius Institute.¹² In 2013, Australia’s Sydney University, afraid to jeopardize its Confucius Institute, moved an event with the Dalai Lama off-campus, forbade organizers from using

⁸ Marshall Sahlins, *Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware*. Chicago: PricklyParadigm Press, 2015, page 22.

⁹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “How China Managed to Play Censor at a Conference on U.S. Soil,” *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2018. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/09/how-china-managed-to-play-censor-at-a-conference-on-u-s-soil/>.

¹⁰ Isabel Hilton, “The Debate Over Confucius Institutes,” *China File*, June 23, 2014. <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/debate-over-confucius-institutes>.

¹¹ Peterson, *Outsourced to China*, p. 89.

¹² Daniel Golden, “China Says No Talking Tibet as Confucius Funds U.S. Universities,” *Bloomberg News*, November 1, 2011. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-11-01/china-says-no-talking-tibet-as-confucius-funds-u-s-universities>.

the university's logo, and demanded that organizers prevent media coverage and turn away pro-Tibet activists from the door.¹³

Sixth, there have been discriminatory hiring practices. The most well-known example is the case of Sonia Zhao, a Chinese teacher placed at the Confucius Institute at McMaster University in Canada. In 2011 Zhao, who secretly practiced Falun Gong, alerted McMaster that she had felt forced to sign a Hanban contract banning Falun Gong for fear that acknowledging her religious practice would expose her to punishment. Zhao's mother had been jailed for two years for her own Falun Gong affiliation. Zhao filed a complaint with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, reporting that McMaster University's relationship with the Hanban was "giving legitimization to discrimination."¹⁴ McMaster University terminated its relationship with the Hanban and closed its Confucius Institute.

Although language barring Falun Gong has disappeared from the English version of the Hanban's website, the fact that Falun Gong practitioners remain persecuted in China suggests that the ban has not actually been lifted. One Confucius Institute director, Randy Kluver, acknowledged that the Chinese government had been brutal to Falun Gong followers, but defended the Hanban's decision. Forcing the Chinese government to hire Falun Gong members "would be like a member of Al Qaeda working in an American Arabic program. This is banned. This is illegal. That's how it's seen in China," Kluver told me. But he also believed that despite the ban on Falun Gong practitioners, the Chinese government engaged in no ideological litmus tests: "If China imposed ideological hiring criteria, I think most of us would shut down. If at any point we were being told Hanban is making these decisions based on something other than competence, we would walk away."¹⁵

Seventh, there has been extreme secrecy regarding Confucius Institutes, giving one the impression that either Confucius Institutes have something to hide, or that they are entirely indifferent to American norms of transparency. In conducting case studies at 12 Confucius Institutes, I met significant resistance to any questions about the Confucius Institutes. At only two of the 12 institutes did the director agree to speak to me. Two directors, at the University at Albany and Binghamton University, agreed to a meeting but cancelled at the last minute. At Binghamton University, director Zu-yan Chen also cancelled my meetings with members of the Confucius Institute staff.

Alfred University, one of the private universities in my case studies, displayed the greatest secrecy. After I secured permission to visit a Chinese 101 class from the Confucius Institute instructor Lanfang "Haley" Gao, I arrived on campus and introduced myself to Professor Gao. But midway through class, Alfred University provost Rick Stephens interrupted class to call me outside. Citing worried phone calls he'd received from the Confucius Institute director, who had learned I was on campus, Stephens ordered me off campus and escorted me with another Confucius Institute teacher, one on each side, directly to my

¹³ "Sydney University Criticised for Blocking Dalai Lama Visit," *Guardian*, April 18, 2013.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/sydney-university-dalai-lama>.

¹⁴ James Bradshaw, Colin Freeze, and Mark Mackinnon, "Canadian Universities, Colleges Confront Questions About Chinese Ties," *Globe and Mail*, June 19, 2012.
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadianuniversities-colleges-confront-questions-about-chinese-ties/article4353705/>.

¹⁵ Peterson, *Outsourced to China*, p. 44.

car a few blocks away. I emailed the president of Alfred University, Mark Zupan, requesting him to explain Alfred University's behavior. He never responded. Months later, Alfred attempted to explain away the incident by claiming I had trespassed and had misrepresented myself as a student — both accusations contradicted by the evidence of my conversation with Professor Gao.

Eighth, there are concerns about espionage. In February 2018, Christopher Wray, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the US, testified before the US Senate that he was “watching warily” and in some cases had taken “investigative steps” at Confucius Institutes that may be engaged in espionage. Wray said that “in almost every field office that the FBI has around the country,” agents were seeing China’s “use of nontraditional collectors, especially in the academic setting.”¹⁶

National governments, in conjunction with individual colleges and universities, must take action to protect against the threat of Confucius Institutes.

The National Association of Scholars recommends legislation to require greater transparency from foreign donors to colleges and universities, and greater accountability and transparency regarding agents working for foreign governments.¹⁷ Two bills to that effect, the Foreign Influence Transparency Act and the Stop Higher Education Espionage and Theft Act, are currently before the U.S. Congress.

We recommend that colleges and universities with a Confucius Institute should become ineligible for a proportionate amount of funding from their own government. This reform should provide an incentive for colleges and universities to close their Confucius Institutes. The governments of all countries hosting Confucius Institutes should also formally ask the Hanban about its hiring practices, in order to shine light on potentially discriminatory practices.

We recommend that governments review all visas of Confucius Institute teachers. The U.S. Department of State did so in 2012 and found that many did not qualify for the visas they had applied for.¹⁸ We believe governments should enforce to the fullest extent of the law all visa requirements on Confucius Institute personnel.

We recommend that all colleges and universities should be required to seek government approval before signing an agreement with a foreign government. Each country should keep a public database of all agreements between foreign governments and colleges and universities in their nation. This reform will help provide transparency and accountability.

Finally, we recommend that government bodies should go on record, stating their concerns that the Chinese government seeks to exert undue influence by way of Confucius Institutes over higher

¹⁶ Christopher Wray, Testimony on “Worldwide Threats,” U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 13, 2018. <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-worldwide-threats-hearing-1>.

¹⁷ Rachelle Peterson, “Get China's Pernicious Confucius Institutes out of US Colleges,” *The Hill*, February 22, 2018. <http://thehill.com/opinion/education/375092-get-chinas-pernicious-confucius-institutes-out-of-us-colleges>.

¹⁸ Karin Fischer, “State Department Directive Could Disrupt Teaching Activities of Campus-Based Confucius Institutes,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 21, 2012. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/State-Department-Directive/131934>.

education and over the future of all free countries. Such a statement would make the stakes clearer for colleges and universities.

The Chinese government has succeeded in suborning significant portions of higher education by way of Confucius Institutes. This is a threat not only to the integrity of our institutions today, but more importantly for the future of higher education and the future of all free countries.