

**Confucius Institutes: Trojan Horses with Chinese
Characteristics**

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Confucius Institutes are described as non-profit public institutions aligned with the government of the People's Republic of China whose purpose is to promote Chinese language and culture, as well as facilitate cultural exchanges. This seemingly benign purpose leaves out a number of purposes both salient and sinister, namely, sanitizing China's image abroad, enhancing its "soft power" globally, and creating a new generation of China watchers who well-disposed towards the Communist dictatorship.

While the Confucius Institutes are sometimes compared to France's Alliance Francaise and Germany's Goethe-Institut, this is misleading. Unlike the latter, Confucius Institutes are neither independent from their government, nor are do they occupy their own premises. Instead, they are located within established universities and colleges around the world, and are directed and funded by the so-called Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), located in Beijing, which answers in turn to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and, chiefly, to the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, the Chairman of the Confucius Institute is none other than Liu Yandong, who served as the head of the United Front Work Department from 2002 to 2007.

The purpose of the United Front Work Department, it should be noted, is subversion, cooption and control. During the Communist revolution, it subverted and coopted a number of other political parties, such as the Chinese Socialist Party, into serving the interests of the Communist Party. After the establishment of the PRC, it continued to control these parties, which were allowed to exist on sufferance, albeit as hollow shells, to create the illusion of "democracy" in China. That it has *de facto* control over the Hanban suggests, more strongly than anything else, what one of the chief purposes of the Confucius Institutes are, namely, to subvert, coopt, and ultimately control Western academic discourse on matters pertaining to China.

Let me say at the outset that I am particularly troubled by this aspect of the Confucius Institute initiative, because of my own experience in how the Chinese Party-State deals with its overseas academic critics. Following my expose of human rights abuses in China's one-child policy in the early eighties, the PRC, acting through the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, put tremendous pressure on my university, Stanford University, to deny me the Ph.D. Beijing went so far as to threaten to abrogate its scholarly exchange program with the U.S. unless I was, in its words, "severely punished" for speaking out. In other words, I know from personal experience how ruthless the CCP can be when it comes to pursuing its own interests and how sycophantic, not to say craven, some academic administrators can be.

History and Expansion

Since the first Confucius Institute opened its doors on 21 November 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, hundreds more have been established in dozens of countries around the world. By October 2010, there were reportedly 322 Confucius Institutes and 337 Confucius Classrooms in secondary schools in 94 countries and regions, with the highest concentration of Institutes in the United States, Japan, and South Korea. The goal announced by Hanban is to have 1,000 Confucius Institutes in operation by 2020. Chinese state media suggests that the quick expansion of the institutes testifies to the irresistible influence of China in a world "begging for the opening

of Confucius Institutes." What the rapid expansion actually suggests is that this is a major foreign policy initiative of the PRC, which fact alone invites close scrutiny.

It is ironic that Communist leaders, who for nearly a century vilified Confucius as the very embodiment of feudalism, should now seize upon the name of the ancient Chinese sage, who lived from 551-479 BC, for their own purposes. It is characteristic of CCP united front tactics, however, that broadly inclusive terms, however hollow, be used to describe their efforts at subversion. Confucius is, after all, a universally recognizable Chinese figure, and an institute named after him does not evoke the distaste, even revulsion, that would have greeted the names of more recent Chinese political figures, such as the founder of the Chinese Communist Party. How many universities--other than those in, say, North Korea, Venezuela and Cuba--would have welcomed an institute named after Mao Zedong, one of the great mass murderers of the twentieth century? Chen Jinyu, Vice-Chairman of the Confucius Institute Headquarters, emphasized the importance that the Party attached to the choice of the name Confucius, saying "... brand name means quality; brand name means returns. Those who enjoy more brand names will enjoy higher popularity, reputation, more social influence, and will therefore be able to generate more support from local communities." In other words, the goals of the CI initiative include increasing China's *popularity, reputation, and influence* among the nations of the world.

The ongoing controversies surrounding the operation of the Confucius Institute program go far beyond its name, of course. They include, as already mentioned, the troubling fact that Hanban is effectively run by the CCP's United Front Work Department. In addition, there have been allegations of Confucius Institutes undermining academic freedom at host universities, engaging in industrial and military espionage, monitoring the activities of Chinese students abroad, and attempting to advance the Chinese Party-State's political agenda on such issues as the Dalai Lama and Tibet, Taiwan independence, the pro-democracy movement abroad, and dissent within China itself.

According to Fabrice De Pierrebourg and Michel Juneau-Katsuya, a number of individuals holding positions within the Confucius Institute system have backgrounds in Chinese security agencies and the United Front Work Department. Together, these agencies are responsible for a number of activities in foreign countries, including propaganda, the monitoring and control of Chinese students abroad, the recruiting of agents among the Overseas Chinese diaspora and sympathetic foreigners, and long-term clandestine operations.

For these reasons, a number of universities have rejected Hanban's efforts to establish Confucius Institutes on their campuses, including the University of Chicago and the University of Melbourne.

A Politicized Mission

That the mission of the Confucius Institutes is to extend the Chinese Party-State's campaign of "soft power" into the educational establishments of foreign countries cannot be doubted. No less a figure than Li Changchun, the propaganda chief of the Chinese Communist Party and the 5th ranked member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, has been quoted as saying that the Confucius Institutes are "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up." If the CCP's

propaganda chief says that the Confucius Institutes are “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda set-up,” they probably are.

The stated mission of the Confucius Institutes is, as to be expected, far more innocuous. They claim to be engaged in promoting knowledge of Chinese language and culture abroad, as well as commercial and trade cooperation. Indeed, the director of the CI program, Xu Lin, goes so far as to claim that the program was started in response to a sudden uptick in interest in the Chinese language around the world. In other words, China was simply responding to a growing consumer market, rather than, say, engaging in cultural diplomacy to strengthen China’s soft power abroad, or seeking to proactively create positive perceptions of its policies.

One other aspect of the Confucius Institutes deserves mention, that is, that Hanban actually sends Chinese language teachers from China to teach at the Confucius Institutes. As of 2011 there were 200 such teachers working in the United States. It goes without saying that these teachers are carefully vetted for ideological purity before being assigned to indoctrinate young Americans in a “correct,” which is to say positive, understanding of the Chinese Party-State and its growing role in the world, as well as explaining to them why Chinese dissident groups abroad, such as Tibetan independent activists, democracy groups and the Falun Gong, must be opposed. It is naïve to think that teachers trained in the PRC will limit themselves to teaching language and cultural programs, while avoiding such controversial subjects as China’s military buildup, its abysmal human rights record, and its disdain for democracy. Such subjects invariably come up in the classroom, and Beijing’s trained cadre of “language teachers” will know exactly how to allay the concerns of their young and impressionable charges.

It is understandably difficult to assess how successful the Confucius Institutes have been in carrying out their politicized mission to date, since neither the Chinese Party-State, nor their American or Chinese employees, are eager to talk about this aspect of their work. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the presence of CIs has had a chilling effect on academic discourse. As *The Economist* noted, “An online Confucius Institute, also supported by the Chinese government, includes an article noting the ‘active’ efforts of some unspecified Confucius Institutes in opposing independence for Tibet and Xinjiang, pro-democracy activism and the Falun Gong sect. “

More specific criticisms have been leveled by Peng Ming-min, a Taiwan independence activist and politician, who claims that colleges and universities where a Confucius Institute is established have to sign a contract in which they declare their support for Beijing’s “one China” policy. In consequence, the open discussion of Taiwan and Tibetan issues is *verboten* at the institutes, he claims. Michael Nylan, professor of Chinese history at the University of California at Berkeley, acknowledges “early missteps,” such as insisting that universities adopt a policy that Taiwan is part of China and attempting to block guest speakers critical of China from campus events, but suggests that the Chinese government is becoming “less heavy-handed.” Note that Nylan does not deny that Hanban has abandoned its political mission; only that they have become more subtle about it.

A closer look at the way the Confucius Institutes are organized and funded only increases these concerns. The Chinese Party-State, acting through Hanban and the Confucius Institute

headquarters, provides anywhere from \$100,000 to several million dollars in annual funding. The local university is nominally required to match funding. Since this is generally provided in kind, however, by providing campus facilities and office space, as well as administrative and accounting services, there is little in the way of out-of-pocket expenses for the recipient of Chinese largess.

The Chinese Party-State claims to take a hands-off approach to management, but does admit to providing “guidelines.” The budget, too, is subject to approval by Hanban and the Confucius Institute headquarters, which impose various restrictions on how their funds may be used as well as earmarking certain funds for specific purposes. The Confucius Institutes in the U.S. and elsewhere also answer to China in another way as well. Each is paired up with a Chinese university, and is governed by a board composed of roughly even numbers of directors from this Chinese university, with the remainder of the directors affiliated with the foreign university. Usually, but not always, the director is appointed by the

In addition to their local partner university Confucius Institutes operate in co-operation with a Chinese partner university.^[36] Many Institutes are governed by a board which is composed of several members from the Chinese partner school and the remainder of the members are affiliated with the local partner university or are local individuals who are considered to be “friends of China.” For example, one of the directors of the Confucius Institute at the University of New South Wales is a Chinese-Australian who is the President of the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China. The board of directors in turn appoints the director in consultation with the local partner university.

There are additional problems as well. Hanban specifies that Chinese language instructors should be “Aged between 22 to 60, physical and mental healthy, no record of participation in Falun Gong and other illegal organizations, and no criminal record.” Such discrimination against Falun Gong and, presumably, others who have tried to exercise their rights to freedom of conscience, assembly, speech, and association violates anti-discrimination laws and international standards of human rights. Marci Hamilton, Paul R. Verkuil Chair in Public Law at Yeshiva University in New York City, commented that the policy is “unethical and illegal in the free world.” I agree.

Because of these concerns, a number of countries, confronted with the reality of growing Chinese aggressiveness, have banned or restricted the establishment of Confucius Institutes. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs opposed the establishment of Confucius Institutes in universities, arguing that they were nothing more than “a Chinese design to spread its 'soft power' – widening influence by using culture as a propagational tool.” The Japanese government has serious reservations as well. It is telling that of 20 or so CIs that Hanban has been able to set up in Japan, all were at private colleges. Government-funded public universities have so far refused to play host to what is obviously an ideologically driven political power play.

The final word belongs to James Paradise, who in an *Asian Survey* article notes that Confucius Institutes may be viewed as Chinese “Trojan horses.” While ostensibly about promoting the Chinese language and culture, he says, they are “part of a broader soft power projection in which China is attempting to win hearts and minds for political purposes.”

Given that the Chinese Party-State does not share our democratic institutions, nor our commitment to open markets, nor our understanding of human rights, their purposes are antithetical to ours. Should we really be allowing a cruel, tyrannical and repressive regime to educate our young people?

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United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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