

Commentary

The Hard Side of CCP's Soft Power: Confucius Institute

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The Confucius Institute (CI, 孔子学院) program is a Chinese Communist Party soft-power initiative which aims, on the surface, to promote Chinese language¹ and culture around the world. There are around 500 CIs worldwide, including one in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). The program is overseen by Hanban (汉办 / 国家汉语国际推广领导小组办公室, Office of Chinese Language Council International), the CI headquarters in Beijing.

Unlike other countries' language and culture programs (such as the Alliance Française, the British Council, the Goethe Institut or the Instituto Cervantes), the Confucius Institute does not settle itself in an independent building, but rather inside university campuses, schools and other institutions depending on foreign jurisdictions. This bilateral relation (foreign jurisdiction-Chinese Communist Party) threatens academic freedom, human rights and national security in those cities where CIs are welcomed.

The CI program is controlled by Sun Chunlan, Politburo member and chair of the Hanban Council.²

CI Does Not Have Educational Purposes

Zhao Guocheng, Hanban's deputy director general, was interviewed by the Beijing Youth Daily on August 3, 2010: "Why has China created the CIs and is proactively pushing forward the CIs to the world?" Zhao Guocheng replied: "It is because China has been attacked and demonized over the past decades. Many people view China with coloured glasses. The primary purpose of setting up the CIs is to promote an accurate understanding of China, rather than the promotion of Chinese culture".³

CI's Risks, Controversies and Problems

- 1) CIs censor topics such as the Tiananmen Massacre, Tibet and Taiwan. Self-censorship of university officials and professors may happen in universities with a CI if they fear their activities go against CCP's interests. The CI agreements usually threatens universities with a clause against tarnishing the CI reputation and losing its funding if so.⁴
- 2) CIs praise Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong and the One-child policy in one propaganda textbook, among other examples of propaganda.⁵
- 3) CI has discriminatory hiring policies (back in 2011, Hanban website stated that Falun Gong practitioners could not be teachers in CIs).⁶
- 4) CIs require compliance with Chinese law outside China.⁷
- 5) CI's HSK exams (汉语水平考试) are an alleged fraud: In 2010, Hanban stated that the HSK's six levels correspond directly to the six levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, this statement has been rejected by the German association of Chinese language teachers, which argue that HSK level 6 is equivalent to CEFR level B2, instead of a C2 level claimed by Hanban.⁸

- 6) CIs pose a national security risk and serve as a tool of CCP influence around the world (FBI in the USA and CSIS in Canada have long warned these past years about CIs’ operations).

Spanish Civic Platform’s Campaign against CI

- 1) The civic platform got CI agreements with governments, schools and universities through the freedom of information act and transparency laws.⁹
- 2) The platform has generated a public debate on the issue by making public and available its findings online. Social media and website proved to be useful to get interviews with the media (journalists found the platform website while searching for CI information on the Internet).
- 3) Platform members attended a public hearing in Aragon regional parliament on CI risks.¹⁰
- 4) The platform organized several “In the name of Confucius” (假孔子之名) movie screenings (NTU screened this film last year).¹¹
- 5) “Stop Confucius Institute” volunteers translated information about CI risks into Spanish language (according to the Special Eurobarometer 386, only 22% of Spain’s population is able to hold a conversation in English).
- 6) When doing a letter-writing campaign on the street, people came to our booth and gave us a lot of valuable ideas.

Why This Is Important

- CCP wants to control the narrative outside China through CI and other tools to keep its totalitarian power.
- Spain’s lack of China knowledge is a risk for future Spanish leaders in universities to develop a pro-CCP vision of the world and so be in the

future on the wrong side of history. All dictatorships have not lasted too much.

- The CI program can be used by the CCP as a tool of elevating the image of the CCP domestically back in China.
- Foreigners will have less Chinese language and Chinese culture and history knowledge through CI. The CCP benefits from this loophole and lack of knowledge of Westerners to advance on its own agenda.
- Students and parents are seriously misled because CIs benefit from the local prestige of the universities they are attached to, and people do not know which institution is really behind CI.

Alternatives

- Taiwanese model: TOCFL (華語文能力測) exams comply with CEFR.
- Universities and governments should not outsource the Chinese studies to the CCP, and rather keep or create their own independent programs.

Final Remarks

As of May 2019, there have been 33 closures of CI worldwide.¹² In 2018, Pentagon banned the Department of Defense from funding American universities with CIs.¹³

In 2011, Valencia Supreme Court banned a Hanban program in Valencia public schools: Hanban teachers sent from China did not pass through any Spanish official hiring process, although they were going to teach at Spanish state-funded schools.¹⁴

Notes

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 2. “Sun Chunlan: Promote high quality development of Confucius Institutes and contribute to building a community of shared future for mankind”, *Hanban News*, 7th December 2018. <http://english.hanban.org/article/2018-12/07/content_754970.htm>
 3. “Confucius Institute: China’s Public Relation project 孔子學院：文化還是公關？”, *Youtube*, 31st January 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku73BVfv4Vg>>
 4. Alexander Bowe, *China’s overseas United Front Work: Background and implications for the United States*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report, August 24, 2018. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf>
 5. Liu Xun and Jerry Schmidt, *New practical Chinese reader 4*, Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 2004.
 6. “Overseas Volunteer Chinese Teacher Program”, www.hanban.org. <https://web.archive.org/web/20111217044556/http://www.chinese.cn/hanban_en/node_9806.htm>
 7. Chapter 1, Article 6 of “Constitution and by-laws of the Confucius Institutes”, www.hanban.org. <http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm>

8. “德语区汉语教学协会 对新汉语水平考试的几项说明”, Fachverband Chinesisch e.V., 1st June 2010. <https://www.fachverband-chinesisch.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Chinesisch_als_Fremdsprache/Sprachpruefungen/HSK/FaCh2010_ErklaerungHSK_ch.pdf>
9. Convenios Instituto Confucio España <<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/vjd0vr cx3ml99i6/AAAOReHL31SLwLUSigz4qEgda?dl=0>>.
10. 【禁闻】孔子学院引争议 西班牙举行听证会, Youtube, November 2, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVENz kf-dTA&feature=youtu.be>>
11. “《假孔子之名》影片簡介”, 《假孔子之名》 *In the name of Confucius: A documentary exposing the hidden truth behind China's global push to educate our youth.* <<https://inthenameofconfuciusmovie.com/tw/>>
12. “關閉孔子學院””, 《假孔子之名》 *In the name of Confucius: A documentary exposing the hidden truth behind China's global push to educate our youth.* <<https://inthenameofconfuciusmovie.com/tw/cutting-ties-with-confucius-institutes/>>
13. “Defense bill restricts funds for colleges with Confucius Institutes” (reported by Elizabeth Redden), *Inside Higher Ed*, August 2, 2018. <<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2018/08/02/defense-bill-restricts-funds-colleges-confucius-institutes>>
14. “El TSJ de Valencia anula la enseñanza del chino mandarín en los colegios públicos” (reported by Rodrigo Terrasa), *El Mundo*, 14th January 2012. <<https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/01/14/valencia/1326559975.html>>

Postscript

