

PREFACE

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“Confucius Institutes” are a project by the Chinese government to shape American attitudes towards that nation’s Communist government. The Institutes are housed at American colleges and universities, and there are currently more than one hundred of them. The name “Confucius Institute,” like almost everything else about the initiative, is misleading. Confucius Institutes have nothing to do with the ancient Chinese sage. They are ostensibly centers for teaching American students Chinese language and puff courses on Chinese arts. In reality, they are instruments of what Harvard University professor Joseph Nye calls “soft power.” That is, they attempt to persuade people towards a compliant attitude, rather than coerce conformity.

But even this is not quite exactly right. Confucius Institutes don’t overtly force their views on Americans, but behind the appearance of a friendly and inviting form of diplomacy lies a grim authoritarian reality. The Confucius Institutes are tightly managed from China by an agency of the government. They are staffed by Chinese nationals on short-term contracts. Their relations with their American hosts are governed by secret agreements enforced in Chinese courts under Chinese law. And many students from China studying in the U.S as well as faculty members believe the Institutes are centers of surveillance. There is no positive proof that the Institutes are also centers for Chinese espionage against the United States, but virtually every independent observer who has looked into them believes that to be the case.

The study that follows says nothing about that speculation, but not for lack of testimony. The author, Rachelle Peterson, spoke to numerous individuals who demanded total anonymity as the condition for saying anything. Their stories go unreported here because the body of this report presents only verifiable facts. In this preface, however, I am granting myself license to go beyond what we can fully verify. That’s because the off-the-record stories we collected were consistent in their portrayal of the Confucius Institutes as centers of threats and intimidation directed at Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans, and as cover for covert activities on the part of the Chinese government.

Possibly this is a collective illusion harbored by Chinese nationals and by Americans who hold hostile views of the Chinese Communist government. We cannot with certainty say whether the accusations are warranted. But it would be a failure on our part if we did not report the allegations, which form a forest of suspicion surrounding the castle of Confucius Institutes.

A major question that hangs over this report is why American colleges and universities lend themselves to serving as hosts for the Confucius Institutes. Are they unaware of the unsavory reputation of these instruments of “soft power” in the hands of one of America’s international adversaries? Are they naïve about the appearance of putting the credibility of their institutions at risk by making them subject to the whims of a foreign government that summarily rejects the freedom of expression and open inquiry that are bedrock principles of American higher education? Are they indifferent to the possible abuse of the rights of the Chinese students studying in the United States?

They are definitely not unaware of the unsavory reputation of Confucius Institutes. Within the world of American higher education, word has spread, and no college president could entertain an offer from the Hanban (the Chinese government body that orchestrates this effort) without finding out about the controversies that swirl around the Institutes.

The unfortunate answer to the other two questions is yes. The American colleges and universities that sign up are naïve, and they are generally indifferent to the consequences. What motivates the college administrators who accept these invitations is a combination of greed and vanity. The Hanban knows exactly how to play the contemporary American college president and his staff.

As Rachele Peterson explains in the pages that follow, Confucius Institutes pay their way. Typically they enter into five-year contracts in which they pay their host universities a substantial annual fee. And they provide services, such as Chinese language instruction, that the host university need not pay for. It seldom stops there. The officials of the host university are invited to junkets in China where they lecture and are feted. And the Hanban supplies Chinese officials who hold impressive titles to speak at events on the American campuses.

The beribboned accolades go surprisingly far in turning the heads of American college presidents, but that isn't all there is to the Chinese soft-power strategy behind the Confucius Institutes. The Chinese government fully realizes the vulnerability of American colleges and universities that lies in their financial dependence on tuition. China can turn on the tap to full-tuition paying Chinese students, turn it down, or shut it off. A college or university that becomes dependent on this flow of international students is loath to offend the Chinese government. China is now by far the largest source of international students in the U.S., comprising 31 percent of the total. In 2015, there were some 328,000 Chinese students studying in American universities.

Vulnerability to China's control of the flow of students to the U.S. is one thing. The opportunity for American colleges and universities to their own open programs in China is another. This prospect is regularly dangled in front of American college and university presidents, and with it comes both a potentially large new income stream and international prestige.

Forfeiting a bit of academic integrity to attain such rewards must seem to many college presidents a small price to pay. Or if not "many" college presidents, at least the hundred or so who have said yes to the offer to have a Confucius Institute on campus.

There is much more to this story, but I will leave it for Rachele to tell. She is the intrepid researcher who has ventured forth on a series of NAS projects that have taken her into counsels of groups that are not naturally friendly to the National Association of Scholars. Rachele was the lead researcher and first author of *Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism* (2015); researcher and author of *Inside Divestment: The Illiberal Movement to Turn a Generation Against Fossil Fuels* (2015); and our observer at a Black Lives Matter training seminar. Studying Confucius Institutes proved even harder than these previous assignments. It became clear that the Chinese government did not at all welcome our attention.

A last few words of prefatory caution. We limit ourselves in the body of this report to what we know for sure. There are no smoking guns. There is instead a scrupulously clean room and a cast of very polite people who have hardly anything to say beyond banalities. Rachelle describes this eerie scene in exact detail and without shading. The reader is free to take all this at face value, in which case the report will supply only a minimalist description of décor. All nations, after all, attempt to put their best foot forward with both friends and rivals. There is no harm in that, and it is possible that Confucius Institutes are best seen as the equivalent of the Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institut, the British Council, the Instituto Cervantes, or the Società Dante Alighieri. You must be the judge of that.