RESEARCH

The Consequences of Confucius Institutes

Understanding the Opposition

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Confucius Institutes (CIs) are Chinese public educational organizations that promote Chinese language and culture around the world. The Chinese government has invested over $1 billion USD in establishing 500 of these CIs in existing academic institutions. The rapid growth and behavior of these CIs, however, have resulted in significant opposition from academic institutions. By analyzing statements made by faculty members and administrators, this paper concludes that widespread CI opposition stems from concerns over academic freedom. This research further elucidates the underlying causes of widespread CI opposition and examines the potential impact on China’s and the United States’ global image.

As China becomes a global economic power, more students in the United States are studying Chinese. The number of students in the United States that attended an Advanced Placement Chinese exam quadrupled over the last decade. This increase in Chinese language studies is largely driven by the fact that many people believe that studying Chinese will provide better job opportunities in the future. In response to the growing global presence of the Chinese language and the need for more Chinese speakers, the U.S. government has supported—and even stimulated—Chinese language education. President George W. Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative in 2006, funding new and existing Chinese language programs. President Barack Obama continued to prioritize Chinese language programs by launching the 100,000 Strong initiative in 2009, providing scholarships to students studying abroad in China.

The United States government’s investment is not the only source of funding for Chinese language education in the country. The Chinese government has spent tens of millions of dollars in the United States on Confucius Institutes (CIs), non-profit public educational organizations that promote Chinese language and culture. By creating language and culture programs within partner universities and colleges, China hopes to quicken the international “popularization” of the Chinese language and strengthen “cultural exchanges” between people, ultimately allowing students to have a better understanding of and respect for China.\(^5\) CIs complement President Obama’s investment in the 100,000 Strong initiative, which also aims to strengthen the U.S.-China relationship through cross-cultural communication.\(^6\)

A unique aspect of CIs is that they partner with and reside in an existing academic institution. Universities and colleges that agree to house a CI receive funding, instructors, and teaching materials from Hanban, a managing organization affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education.\(^7\) These resources are very attractive to cash-strapped schools that struggle to provide high-quality Chinese language instruction for their students. As a result, Hanban has been able to establish 110 CIs in the United States and a total of 500 worldwide.\(^8\) Steadily increasing annual budgets suggest that the number of CIs in the United States will continue to grow.\(^9\)

Despite the growth of CIs and the benefits they provide, there has been a significant amount of pushback in the United States. For instance, a CI closed at the University of Chicago due to opposition from professors.\(^10\) This opposition has also extended beyond the United States into Canada, Sweden, and even Japan, where CIs closed as a result of substantial opposition.\(^11\) The concern has become so widespread that The House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs even held a hearing regarding CIs in 2012.\(^12\) The emergence of such opposition makes one wonder why scholars and government officials resist CIs despite the fact these institutes provide colleges and universities with funding, teachers, and educational materials that promote Chinese language education.

\(^5\) Adam Minter, “China’s Soft-Power Fail,” *Bloomberg View*, 7 October 2014.
\(^6\) U.S. China Strong Foundation, “About Us.”
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^12\) U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Price of Public Diplomacy with China: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 112\(^{th}\) Cong. 2\(^{nd}\) sess., 2012.
As CIs continue to multiply and situate themselves in academic institutions in the United States and around the globe, it is necessary to learn from previous hosts about the potential drawbacks of these institutes. For instance, while the economic benefits of CIs can help universities fulfill their own programming initiatives, CIs, similar to other public diplomacy initiatives, may compromise other academic or societal norms. The fact that some academic institutions are cancelling and not renewing CI partnerships signals that CIs are more problematic than initially anticipated. Do CIs have a more elusive mission—one that extends beyond merely promoting Chinese language and culture? Are CIs Trojan horses as some experts suggest? Or are some academic institutions xenophobic? Without a thorough investigation of the causes of CI opposition, the answers to these questions remain unknown.

By analyzing public statements from faculty members and administrators who are associated with CIs, this research finds that academic freedom concerns are the leading cause of widespread opposition to CIs. While CIs have received a fair amount of attention—especially when Chicago decided to close its CI in 2014—there has been relatively little work consolidating existing research and public statements to examine the main drivers behind CI opposition. In this paper, I first provide a deeper investigation of CIs and then discuss why these institutes may be perceived as limiting intellectual freedom. After identifying alternative explanations to the widespread CI opposition, implications of my argument are discussed followed up with a conclusive summary of the findings.

**Confucius Institutes**

Beyond teaching Chinese language and culture, CIs are meant to reinforce “friendship and cooperation between China and the rest of the world.” The first CI was established in South Korea in 2004, which was soon followed by the creation of a CI at the University of Maryland. Since the conception of CIs, these institutes have been erected on every inhabited continent. Such progress has culminated in an ambitious goal by Hanban to create 1,000 CIs around the world by 2020.

It is assumed that China is establishing these CIs as a public diplomacy initiative to increase its soft power around the world, with Donald Clarke, a professor of China Studies at George Washington University, describing CIs as “China’s official soft power project.” A concept first developed by Harvard professor Joseph Nye, soft power is

13 Ibid.
14 Hanban, “About Confucius Institutes.”
16 Ibid.
the “ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion.”¹⁹ Unlike hard or economic power, which uses coercion or payment to push another country towards a desired objective, soft power pulls a country in a prescribed direction.²⁰ This type of power is of increasing interest to Chinese leaders. For instance, following President Hu Jintao’s 2007 speech to the 17th Party Congress, where he stated that China must “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country,” the CI program expanded rapidly.²¹ President Xi Jinping continued investing in CIs, saying that the Chinese government “should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world.”²²

Structurally, CIs are managed by Hanban, which is officially described as being “affiliated with the Ministry of Education.”²³ Through investigating the affiliation between Hanban and the Ministry of Education, however, University of Chicago Professor Marshall Sahlins found that Hanban is “governed by a council of high state and party officials from various political departments and chaired by a member of the Politburo, Vice Premier Liu Yandong.”²⁴ Sahlins calls Hanban an “instrument of the party state operating as an international pedagogical organization.”²⁵ Hanban also manages Confucius Classrooms (CC), which are similar to CIs but intended for K-12 students, and CI Online, which is an online platform to teach Chinese language and culture.²⁶ According to their website, CI Online has over 604,000 registered students around the world.²⁷ Furthermore, CIs and CCs have been growing steadily over the past 10 years, as illustrated in Figure 1. CI contracts between Hanban and the host university or college gives Hanban the right to supply teachers, textbooks and curricula of the courses it manages. In 2014, Hanban dispatched over 15,000 teachers worldwide, as shown in Figure 2. Moreover, research on China that utilizes CI funds requires approval by Hanban.²⁸ Although there have been exceptions to some of these requirements, such as if Hanban wants to enlist a prestigious university (i.e., Stanford University or the University of Chicago), a typical contract between Hanban and the host academic institution will have a number of stipulations.

²³ Sahlins, “China U.”
²⁴ Ibid.
²⁵ Ibid.
²⁶ Hanban, “About Confucius Institutes.”
²⁸ Ibid.
Figure 1. Total number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms worldwide

*Data from CI Annual Reports

Figure 2. Total number of dispatched teachers to Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms worldwide, in thousands

*Data from CI Annual Reports
While often compared to the British Council, France’s Alliance Française, or Germany’s Goethe Institute, Chinese CIs differ in two main respects.\(^{29}\) Firstly, CIs are housed within existing institutions; most of these European organizations are stand-alone organizations operating out of their own premises.\(^{30}\) Secondly, British, French, and German language institutes represent governments, not a political party.\(^{31}\) This difference is subtle, but the fact that China is a one-party state suggests that CIs represent the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is because of these two reasons that scholars hesitate to associate CIs with other countries’ language and cultural institutions.

CIs are not an inexpensive investment. According to CI annual reports, Hanban spent just over $50 million (USD) on CIs in 2006.\(^{32}\) Annual investments in CIs have continued to increase, with the exception of 2010. In 2015, China’s annual investment in CIs rose to over $300 million.\(^{33}\) China’s growing investment in CIs is illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Confucius Institute total expenditures, in millions (USD).

Many CIs not only teach language and culture, but also other subjects based on the needs of the locality. For example, the CI at the University of Arkansas provides business training sessions for professionals to help them expand their trade in China, while the CI at the University of California, Los Angeles focuses on health and medical issues.\(^{34}\) Moreover, CIs have different responsibilities at different schools. In larger colleges and universities, CIs tend to be responsible for only a portion of the overall investments.

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\(^{30}\) Guttenplan, “Critics Worry About Influence of Chinese Institutes on U.S. Campuses.”


\(^{34}\) Jamie Walden, “Confucius Institute Helps Arkansas Companies Go Global,” *Arkansas Business*, 13
Chinese curriculum, but in smaller academic institutions, CIs have more control of the language and culture instruction. Therefore, although CIs are identical in name, their activities are not uniform across the United States or around the world.

Selecting Confucius as a symbol of CIs is an interesting choice given China’s recent history. Chairman Mao Zedong led an anti-Confucius campaign during the 1970s, vilifying Confucius as a symbol of backward feudalism. Mao despised Confucius so much that he even ordered Red Guards from Beijing to destroy a Confucian temple in Qufu, the venerated philosopher’s hometown. Now after using ‘Confucius’ in the title of 500 established CIs around the world, the Chinese government has clearly changed its narrative. By embracing Confucius, who possesses a positive reputation in the West, the Chinese government is using his image to promote the CIs’ mission of “reinforcing friendship and cooperation between China and the rest of the world.” However, even the use of Confucius has failed to bring about cooperation between CIs and host institutions in certain instances.

Academic Freedom Concerns

This paper utilizes the definition of academic freedom given by Cary Nelson, President of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP): engaging in “intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation.” By this definition, many scholars fear that CIs censor academic dialogue at colleges and universities. The AAUP recommended that all academic institutions either terminate their CIs or renegotiate their contracts to ensure academic institutions’ full control over academic matters, noting that “allowing any third-party control of academic matters is inconsistent with principles of academic freedom.”

There is evidence that CIs directly and indirectly censor academic discourse. The director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University described a “strange silence about Tibet” around the same time the CI was established at the school, falling in line with China’s policy of avoiding discussions about Tibet. While this occurrence could have been a mere coincidence, it is also plausible that the new CI encouraged self-censorship. At North Carolina State University, the CI director

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37 Ibid.
38 Hanban, “About Confucius Institutes.”
told the University’s provost that a planned visit by the Dalai Lama, a proponent of freeing Tibet from Chinese rule, would disrupt “some of the strong relationships we were developing with China.” The visit was ultimately canceled, partly due to concern over a Chinese government backlash. In this instance, the CI directly influenced the University in a way that may not have been possible had the CI not been there. One junior faculty member at a United States campus with a CI explained that criticizing the CI would end his career. The professor stated, “I am an untenured professor in a department which receives a lot of money from a CI, which is run by senior faculty that will vote on my tenure case.” In this instance, self-censorship stemming from the apparent financial needs of the academic institution hindered the professor’s ability to criticize the CI.

Academic freedom concerns were so severe at the University of Chicago that 108 faculty members petitioned the University to discontinue the CI. The deputy director of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University admitted that there was a “certain amount of self-censorship” on campus due to the presence of a CI. The deputy director implied that self-censorship was tied to Hanban funding when claiming, “thank goodness we have money for the Center for East Asian Studies; we can go there for these kinds of projects.” Although the deputy director recognized the self-censorship imposed by CIs, he or she downplayed the issue since the University had other sources of funding independent of CI influence. It is worth noting, however, that not all academic institutions enjoy this same privilege. Due to substantial opposition from faculty members, the University ultimately suspended renewal negotiations and closed the CI.

Some schools are able to negotiate a better deal with Hanban—one that guarantees academic freedom. Stanford University was offered $4 million by Hanban to host a CI and endow a professorship. The University rejected the initial offer since it came with a suggestion that the professor refrain from discussing Tibet, but after renegotiations, Hanban and Stanford University were able to come to an agreement. The University would still receive $4 million, and the endowed professor would teach classical Chinese poetry, which by one professor’s account is “convenient for everyone concerned.” Because of Stanford University’s highly-esteemed reputation, it was able to negotiate a better deal that minimized academic freedom concerns.

43 Ibid.
44 Guttenplan, “Critics Worry About Influence of Chinese Institutes on U.S. Campuses.”
45 Ibid.
46 Harini Jaganathan, “Confucius Institute Protested by Faculty,” The Chicago Maroon, 2 May 2014.
47 Sahlins, “China U.”
48 Ibid.
49 Redden, “Chicago to Close Confucius Institute.”
50 Guttenplan, “Critics Worry About Influence of Chinese Institutes on U.S. Campuses.”
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid. Sahlins, “China U.”
Academic institutions that do not host CIs are well aware of concerns over academic freedom that come along with CI agreements. June Teugel Freyer, a professor of Chinese government and foreign policy at the University of Miami, told the *New York Times* how she understood CIs: “you’re told not to discuss the Dalai Lama—or to invite the Dalai Lama to campus. Tibet, Taiwan, China’s military buildup, factional fights inside the Chinese leadership—these are all off limits.” Although her university does not host a CI, she said that the rapid growth and potential influence of CIs are regularly discussed among China specialists. Freyer’s account speaks to the widespread awareness among academic institutions, even those who do not host CIs, of the risks of taking on such a partnership.

Scholars affiliated with, or even loosely connected to, CIs may self-censor their publications and activities out of a fear of retaliation by the Chinese government. There are politically sensitive topics that the Chinese government does not want to be discussed at all known as the “Three Ts”: Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen. Some scholars who ignored the Chinese government’s wishes and published on these topics have been blacklisted by Beijing and banned from entering China. Perry Link of the University of California and Andrew Nathan of Columbia University have been denied entry into China since the 1990s due to the fact that they were two of the main editors and translators of *The Tiananmen Papers*, a book describing the 1989 crackdown on the democracy movement in China. China has even detained scholars for publishing politically sensitive materials. In April 2017, Chongyi Feng, a scholar who had been vocal about Beijing’s influence in Australian politics, was banned from returning back home to Sydney after a visit to China. He was eventually allowed to return home, but the details of his detention are still publicly unknown. Although these events have not dissuaded all academics from debating sensitive issues, many have refrained from being outwardly critical of the Chinese government because they worry about the future of their careers.

Even the United States federal government investigates concerns about academic freedom. In March 2012, the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing pertaining to CIs undermining academic freedom. In the hearing, Mr. Rohrabacher, the chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, described CIs as “penetrating . . .

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53 Guttenplan, “Critics Worry About Influence of Chinese Institutes on U.S. Campuses.”
54 Ibid.
55 Volodzko, “China’s Biggest Taboos.”
57 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
public education to spread its own state propaganda.” In a February 2018 Senate Intelligence Committee hearing, FBI director Christopher Wray shared Senator Marco Rubio’s concerns over CIs’ “efforts to covertly influence public opinion and to teach half-truths designed to present Chinese history, government or official policy in the most favorable light.” The fact that these concerns have been discussed in the halls of Congress signals how widespread the opposition has become.

The closing of CIs due to academic concerns is not only a phenomenon in the United States. Stockholm University was the first university in Europe to shut down its CI after faculty accused the CI of damaging the University’s academic integrity. To mitigate fears that this closure would create a domino effect, official Chinese media outlet Xinhua published an article stating that Stockholm University’s decision to close their CI would not “cause a chain reaction.” In France, the CI at Lyon University closed its doors; the Chair of the CI Board of Directors stated, “it seemed that our institutional and intellectual independence became unacceptable to Beijing.” Clearly, universities and colleges abroad are similarly concerned that CIs limit academic freedom.

Furthermore, these concerns over academic freedom are afflicting colleges and universities in many parts of the world. In a case study of German CIs, Falk Hartig, a professor at Queensland University of Technology, believed that it was “obvious” that scholars would not risk losing money coming from Hanban by covering “anti-China topics.” Even at liberal arts universities like Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany, the deputy director of the CI said that CIs may not be the correct venue to debate sensitive issues like Tibet, and such topics were better left to Sinology departments. At Sydney University in Australia, a scheduled trip of the Dalai Lama was canceled to avoid jeopardizing CI funding sources. These concerns have brought about significant opposition; concerns were so severe in Canada that the Canadian Association of University Teachers called for all academic institutions to sever ties with their CIs due the “fundamental violation of academic freedom.” In Israel, a judge concluded that Tel Aviv University violated freedom of expression by shutting down a student-organized Falun Gong oppression art exhibition. It was revealed that the University acted in this way out of fear that the

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62 Ibid.
68 Sahlins, “China U.”
70 Canadian Association of University Teachers, “Universities and Colleges Urged to End Ties with Confucius Institute,” 17 December 2013.
exhibit would jeopardize CI support. Therefore, academic institutions that host CIs still struggle to find a balance between the benefits of acquiring much-needed resources and the very real concerns about limits to academic discourse.

CI censorship was evident in a European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) Conference in Braga, Portugal. Upon orders from Xu Lin, the Director-General of Hanban, portions of the EACS Conference program were deleted after the conference had commenced. The president of EACS was outraged, stating in a letter that the “seizure of conference materials and deletion of pages in an unauthorized manner . . . was extremely injudicious.” He continued on to say that “providing support to a conference does not give any sponsor the right to dictate parameters to academic topics or to limit open academic presentation and discussion, on the basis of political requirements.” This event, now referred to as the “Braga Incident,” confirmed what many people already suspected: CIs subvert academic freedom.

Scholars are not the only ones who feel pressured to self-censor. Chinese students were upset to find that the London School of Economics hosted a CI because these students felt that they were under Chinese surveillance, even abroad. Arthur Waldron, a professor of international relations at the University of Pennsylvania, notes that “Chinese embassies and consulates are in the business of observing Chinese students,” and since CIs answer to the CCP, academic institutions should think twice before inviting CIs onto their campuses. By hosting a CI, Chinese students may feel the need to censor their own academic discourse due to the fear that the CI is monitoring them.

The secrecy of the arrangements between each local academic institution and CI only exacerbates academic freedom concerns. The agreements themselves have nondisclosure clauses, barring anyone familiar with the agreement from publicizing its content. Even early negotiations with CIs do not involve senior faculty who conduct research on Asian affairs. A member of the faculty at the University of Oregon found out that the University was hosting a CI only after it came out in the press; the professor stated that the whole process of hosting a CI was conducted under an “orchestrated silence.”

Even Bruce Cumings, a tenured professor on the board of the University of Chicago’s East Asian study center, was never informed about the University’s agreement to host a CI “until the day it was opened.” At the University of Hawaii-Manoa, the Faculty Senate submitted a formal complaint to the administration about being inadequately
consulted about the CI before it was established at the school.\textsuperscript{82} Faculty members have expressed discomfort with secret negotiations and contracts containing nondisclosure agreements.

By directly and indirectly censoring academic discourse at academic institutions, CIs have led faculty members around the world, United States government officials, and Chinese students to fear infringement on their academic freedom. Although this is the main factor causing widespread opposition to CIs, there are other, less significant variables. These alternative explanations are discussed in the next section.

**Alternative Arguments**

There are three other alternative explanations that may help explain the reasons for opposition to CIs around the world: academic rigor concerns, hiring practice concerns, and xenophobia. I analyze these three arguments within the context of the previously discussed academic freedom concerns to better understand how they fit into a larger framework for understanding the opposition to CIs.

It is possible that concerns regarding the academic rigor of CIs fuels opposition to these institutes. There is a broad understanding among Chinese language teachers in the Washington D.C. area that teachers from China who volunteer to teach at CIs are more interested in traveling abroad than actually teaching.\textsuperscript{83} This sentiment is not limited to Washington D.C.; China scholars at the University of Pennsylvania rejected the idea of hosting a CI on campus because they did not want a program of inferior pedagogy competing with their own.\textsuperscript{84} Therefore, academic institutions that already have respectable Chinese language programs may neither have the need nor the desire to host a Chinese language program that has a reputation for lower quality.

The Chinese government acknowledges many of these concerns. China’s Minister of Education, Yuan Guiren, said in a 2013 speech that academic institutions hosting CIs are demanding higher quality services from Hanban.\textsuperscript{85} Even last year, the Deputy Director General at Hanban, Wang Yongli, admitted that CIs have a long way to go and that the level and quality of the Chinese-language education services provided by CIs needs to be improved.\textsuperscript{86} Christopher Hughes, a professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, noted that Chinese citizens often complain that the instructors selected to teach Chinese abroad in CIs are typically poorly trained.\textsuperscript{87} Thus, concerns about the academic rigor of CIs have been recognized within Hanban.

\textsuperscript{82} Schmidt, “At U.S. Colleges, Chinese-Financed Centers Prompt Worries About Academic Freedom.”
\textsuperscript{83} Conversation with a Chinese language teacher in the Washington, D.C. area.
\textsuperscript{84} Sahlins, “China U” Sahlins, Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware, 55.
\textsuperscript{86} Yongwen Qian, “Exclusive: Looking Forward to Greater Improvements in the Level and Quality of Chinese-Language Education at Latin America’s Confucius Institutes,” Hanban News, Xinhua, 29 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{87} Hughes, “Confucius Institutes and the University,” 45-83.
Despite the concern over the pedagogical quality of CI Chinese teachers, this is a minor concern compared to restrictions on academic freedom. There seems to be more concern coming from the Chinese government than from the academic institutions themselves. This lack of widespread criticism from academic institutions suggests that academic rigor concerns are neither compelling nor unique to CIs. Therefore, while concerns over the academic rigor of CIs are valid, greater controversy stems from concerns over the freedom of academic discourse.

A second alternative explanation for the widespread opposition to CIs is Hanban’s hiring practices. In Canada, McMaster University failed to renew its agreement with its CI following a discriminatory hiring complaint filed by Sonia Zhao, a CI instructor. Zhao claimed that the university was “giving legitimation to discrimination” because she was forced to conceal her belief in Falun Gong under her CI work contract. Beyond religious beliefs, there is evidence that Hanban discriminates based on age, disability, and political beliefs when awarding contracts. This incident led to the closure of the CI at McMaster University. Andrea Farquhar, McMaster’s assistant vice-president of public and government relations, confirmed that the decision was due to Hanban’s hiring practices, saying “it’s really about the hiring decisions, and those decisions were being made in China.”

Opposition to CIs based on hiring practices actually aligns with concerns regarding CIs’ academic freedom. While it is permissible in China to refuse to hire someone due to their belief in Falun Gong, such discrimination is not tolerated in Canada. By selecting teachers based on their religious and political beliefs, China is essentially discriminating against teachers with beliefs that run contrary to the Chinese government line during the hiring process. This results in a lack of ideological diversity among CI teachers, which further censors certain beliefs from CI classrooms. If a teacher cannot practice or teach about Falun Gong, then the values of academic freedom are breached.

A third alternative cause of the widespread opposition to CIs is xenophobia. It is hard to ignore the fact that most of the highly publicized opposition to CIs comes from Western countries. This has led to some questions about the role of race in the widespread opposition to CIs. There was tension at a 2014 school board meeting regarding a Confucius Classroom in Hacienda Heights, California, during which protestors held up signs with slogans such as “America, not Confucius.” This reaction came from the same community that opposed the construction of a Buddhist temple on the hillside in the 1980s over fears that animals would be sacrificed and the chime of gongs would

88 Sahlins, “China U.”
89 Ibid.
90 Hughes, “Confucius Institutes and the University,” 45-83.
disturb the peace.\footnote{Ibid.} Jane Shults, a middle school history teacher from the area, said the protests are not rational and are actually xenophobic.\footnote{Ibid.} This event suggests that racist and nativist beliefs may in fact play a role in perpetuating CI opposition.

The xenophobic fervor seen in the Hacienda Heights community cannot be ignored, but it should also not be overstated. It would be dishonest to suggest that xenophobia plays no role in some of the CI opposition, especially given the variety of ideologies held by CI critics, but widespread CI opposition seems to be mostly directed at the Chinese government, not necessarily at Chinese people. Copenhagen University in Denmark rejected a CI in 2006, with the Dean for Academic Research at the time explaining that they “prefer to collaborate directly with Chinese academics at Chinese universities, rather than collaborate directly with the Chinese government.”\footnote{Sahlins, “China U.” Sahlins, Confcucius Institutes: Academic Malware, 51.} In fact, even the University of Chicago, which experienced a high-profile case against its own CI, continues to maintain a University of Chicago Research Center in Beijing.\footnote{Center in Beijing, The University of Chicago, Internet, https://www.uchicago.edu/research/center/center_in_beijing/ (date accessed: 21 October 2018).} The fact that institutions like the University of Chicago or Copenhagen University seek and maintain ties with China through alternative avenues provides evidence that they are not discriminating against Chinese people but rather are opposing the structure and academic restrictions of CIs.

These three alternative explanations, while helpful in understanding widespread opposition to CIs, play a relatively minor role compared to opposition fueled by academic freedom concerns. Hanban is more worried about lack of academic rigor than academic institutions are. Hiring practices amplify concerns regarding academic freedom. Although xenophobia may in fact affect CI opposition, academic institutions’ willingness to engage with China in other ways suggests that such xenophobia also plays a minimal role in widespread CI opposition. In summary, these three alternative explanations are relatively inconsequential in comparison to the widespread concerns surrounding CIs’ restriction of academic freedom.

**Discussion**

Despite widespread opposition to CIs in the United States and around the world, CIs continue to multiply. This is partly due to the fact that hosting CIs can bring an academic institution additional revenue. In recent years, there has been a 47 percent decline in U.S. government funding for language training and area studies programs.\footnote{Sahlins, “China U.”} The additional resources from CIs have made U.S. higher learning institutions more heavily dependent on Chinese money.\footnote{Ibid.} Colleges and universities that are financially independent may not need extra funding from Hanban, but academic institutions that are struggling financially are more inclined to agree to host a CI in order to add more

\footnote{Ibid.}
revenue to the their insufficient budgets. For instance, it was the University of Montana's “institutional poverty rather than . . . greed” that motivated them to establish a CI.\textsuperscript{100} Terry Russell, the director of Asian Studies at the University of Manitoba, argues that funding is, in fact, the primary reason that academic institutions decide to open a CI, stating that “It’s not a huge amount of money, but for some [universities] it could be the difference between having a Chinese studies programme and not having [one].”\textsuperscript{101} Russell believes that there will always be institutions willing to capitalize on Hanban’s resources.\textsuperscript{102}

Besides the direct financial leverage, CIs may have additional leverage on publicly-financed state universities. When North Carolina State University canceled a scheduled visit of the Dalai Lama, the provost, Warwick Arden, cited China as being “a major trading partner for North Carolina.”\textsuperscript{103} For a university affiliated with a state with substantial economic ties to China, it may not be in that university’s best interest to criticize, let alone shut down, a CI because of a difference of opinion regarding the Dalai Lama. As long as China remains a large trading partner with individual states, it may become harder to resist CIs’ demands at state universities.

As CIs actively censor academic topics, one might wonder if CIs are strictly a soft power initiative. North Carolina State University’s decision to change its academic plans—due to the fear stemming from the potential economic consequences on the university or state—signals that economic power plays a vital role in CIs’ activity. Moreover, the Braga Incident, where pages of conference materials were physically deleted, is not in line with the soft power principles of attractiveness and persuasion but is rather more similar to coercive hard power. While some pundits believe that CIs are meant to expand Chinese soft power, the high-profile opposition cases have proven that some CIs are actually detrimental to China’s image.\textsuperscript{104} The fact that CIs employ these economic and coercive tactics signifies that China moves beyond the principles of soft power to achieve their goals, thereby challenging the narrative that CIs are strictly a soft power initiative.

Additionally, as more highly selective schools, such as Stanford University, host CIs, other schools may be more willing to sign an agreement with Hanban. A dean at George Washington University stated that the University of Chicago’s adoption of a CI before the CI’s eventual closure increased George Washington University’s comfort level with hosting a CI.\textsuperscript{105} The acceptance of CIs by top-tier institutions could prompt

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{102} Ibid.
\bibitem{103} Sahlins, “China U.”
\bibitem{104} Zhou and Luk, “Establishing Confucius Institutes.”
\end{thebibliography}
other schools to open CIs as well, thus creating a domino effect.

When looking at the data, however, the domino effect hypothesis seems to be disproved. Figure 4 shows the number of CIs in the United States increasing, but they are doing so at a decreasing rate, thus proving that the growth of CIs in the United States is slowing. Some academic institutions may have indeed been more willing to sign an agreement with Hanban due to the influence of Hanban’s past agreements with prestigious schools, but there seems to be little evidence in support of this domino phenomenon. Since the CIs’ restriction of academic freedom has prompted a number of host colleges and universities to terminate their CI agreements, Hanban will face an uphill battle in extending its influence worldwide.  

![Figure 4: Total number of Confucius Institutes in the United States](image)

CI s may also affect the reputation of the United States. One of the United States’ competitive advantages in the world lies in its deeply respected higher education—even Xi Jinping sent his daughter to Harvard. Due to the increasingly negative reputation of CIs, by hosting a growing number of CIs in the United States, the global image of U.S. higher education could diminish if people believe the narrative that U.S. academic institutions are compromising academic freedom for economic resources. Students already question if paying such high tuition in the United States is worth the degree, and if CIs continue to multiply in the United States, fewer people may be willing to pay the steep tuition fees at colleges or universities that host CIs due to their limits on intellectual freedom and sub-par programs.

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106 Pan, “Confucius Institute: Promoting Language, Culture and Friendliness.”
CIs could prove to be a useful stepping stone in pushing other Chinese foreign policy objectives. In the online CI magazine that commemorated the 11th CI Conference, one of the articles was titled “Confucius Institute: A key player in the implementation of the ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative.” In the article, the Vice Minister of Education and Executive Council Member of Hanban, Hao Ping, said that CIs will meet the overall requirements for the development of the “Belt and Road” initiative. It is important to note that China has more CIs in the United States than in any other country. While China’s “Belt and Road” initiative is limited to Eurasia, it will be interesting to observe which foreign policies, if any, will permeate CIs in the United States. Although perhaps unanswerable at this point, it will be necessary to monitor how China implements broader foreign policy goals through CIs.

It is hard to know under which circumstances an academic institution should refuse external funding. Academic institutions require resources from multiple funding streams, but a problem emerges when colleges and universities accept outside funds that come with too many strings attached. In an imperfect analogy, would it be appropriate to accept money from Vladimir Putin if he were willing to sponsor a Russian Studies Center on the condition that Crimea and Ukraine could not be discussed? Moving forward, it will be important to discuss when it is reasonable to accept external funding sources.

In order for CIs or host institutions to mitigate academic freedom concerns, Shai Oster, an award-winning Bloomberg reporter, suggests taking CIs out of the academic institutions or taking the government out of CIs. Taking CIs out of the academic institutions would make them more comparable to British, French, or German language and culture centers, which are housed outside of established colleges or universities. Alternatively, taking the government out of CIs would ease many critics’ concerns about CIs toeing the party line; however, since CIs are a Chinese government initiative, taking the government out of the CIs is extremely unlikely. Moreover, Avery Goldstein, the director of the Center for the Study of Contemporary China at the University of Pennsylvania, suggests crafting a “best practices” agreement among colleges and universities that focus on CI issues. Through collaboration, academic institutions could be better able to successfully negotiate with Hanban. Oster’s and Goldstein’s suggestions could potentially mitigate concerns regarding a lack of academic freedom at CIs, but Hanban would likely have a difficult time accepting these terms since Hanban benefits from negotiating independent agreements with each institution.

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110 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
While this paper analyzes the key variables that cause widespread CI opposition, it would be interesting to further examine the extent to which CIs are accomplishing their intended goals. The negative reactions to CIs are well understood, but the extent to which the Chinese government benefits from CIs remains unclear. Since China must expect to receive returns on its investments in CIs around the globe, quantifying and qualifying these returns may be a fruitful avenue for additional research.

The CI website clearly shows where CIs exist, but it does not disclose which schools have refused to host CIs. This paper provides a rare glimpse into where CIs have failed to take root. According to Hanban, outside institutions apply to host CIs, but Hanban actively courts certain institutions as well. For example, conversations with faculty at Georgetown University revealed that Hanban wanted to establish a CI within the University, but this proposal was rejected. This refusal occurred without the fanfare that took place at other academic institutions, and most of the general public were unaware of these conversations. It would therefore be interesting to calculate the rate at which Hanban’s offers were accepted by targeted institutions. Marshall Sahlins has collected data through the public domain or personal communications to create a short list of institutions that have rejected CIs, but a more comprehensive study surveying all of the universities and colleges in the United States would provide the necessary information to identify patterns in Hanban’s selection criteria and comprehensively analyze which colleges and universities decide to accept versus reject hosting CIs. Further research would elucidate the intentions and activities of CIs in the United States.

Conclusion

Although there are many reasons why an academic institution may refuse to host a CI, this paper has shown that widespread CI opposition mainly stems from concerns regarding CIs’ restrictions of academic freedom. These concerns are consistent among faculty members in both the United States and abroad and have even permeated the U.S. government. Chinese students have also felt that their privacy has been compromised while attending schools with CIs. By directly and indirectly censoring academic discourse at academic institutions, CIs have received considerable backlash in the United States and around the world.

There are three other minor factors that have contributed to CI opposition. Concerns over academic rigor have caused Hanban officials to admit that teaching pedagogy must improve. Hanban’s hiring practices have also caused a Canadian CI to close, which echoes similar concerns about limiting academic freedom. Thirdly, xenophobia may play a role in opposition to CIs. However, there remains considerable interest among academic institutions to acquire partnerships with Chinese institutions to increase external funding, which suggests that xenophobia plays a minor role in explaining CI opposition.

115 Conversations with Georgetown University Faculty.
Regardless of CIs’ intentions, CIs are widely perceived as violating academic freedom. This not only negatively impacts China’s image but may also compromise the reputation of the U.S. education system. One of the United States’ competitive advantages lies with its greatly revered higher education system. Yet the increase in CIs across the country, and their reputation for violating academic freedom, may have repercussions on the perceived quality of Chinese language programs—and perhaps institutions of higher learning—within the United States.

In addition, CIs have been known to push foreign policy objectives in Asia, particularly relating to the “Belt and Road” initiative. In the future, it will be important to monitor which foreign policy objectives, if any, China plans to promote within CIs situated in the United States. This prompts a larger question regarding the value of China’s financial investments in CIs: Is China getting the desired returns on its investment in CIs? This question, along with examining where and under which conditions colleges and universities have refused to open CIs, may be interesting avenues for future research.

In summary, widespread CI opposition among faculty members and government officials may prevent Hanban from achieving its goal of establishing 1,000 CIs around the world by 2020. The rapid expansion of CIs since the establishment of the first CI in 2004 is an impressive feat for Hanban and the Chinese government; however, if China wants to continue to expand its global influence, it will need to rise to higher standards and represent itself as a language and culture institution that values the academic freedoms articulated by many of its host institutions. Until these host institutions are assured that CIs will contractually commit to protecting academic freedom, CIs will continue to encounter opposition to their initiatives.

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