Opinion – The Status of China's Confucius Institutes in American Universities

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Great Power competition normally plays out far from the classrooms where the concept is studied as international relations theory. But sometimes it occurs just outside our windows. Over the past 1½ years, a “soft power” skirmish in that IR conflict has reached critical mass as dozens of U.S. universities have broken ties with Confucius Institutes (CI) sponsored by the People’s Republic of China. Two Universities central to my academic life and career are on this ideological front line—my alma mater Troy University, and Middle Tennessee State, where I work and study International Affairs. With this debate reaching its zenith just as I began studying IR, I began to view the issue from that perspective: Is the demise of CIs is a U.S. victory over Chinese propaganda, or merely a strategic retreat by the Chinese after accomplishing their goal?

MTSU broke off a 10-year relationship with its CI in August 2020, at the height of the COVID pandemic. With most faculty, staff, and students working from home and interacting through ubiquitous Zoom, not many noted the move. As with many universities that have rejected CIs, the official explanation was vague:

Simply put, we are unwinding our contractual relationship with Confucius Institute. We no longer accept funding from CI or engage with them in programming. Meanwhile, our Center for Asian Studies, formed by MTSU in 2009, coordinates our remaining academic ties with universities in China, and works to develop and expand opportunities with institutions throughout the region. – Robert Summers, MTSU Vice Provost for International Affairs.

The Confucius Institute Headquarters known as Hanban was founded in 2004 by former Chinese vice premier and Politburo member Liu Yandong to “promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries.” When MTSU opened its CI in April 2010 through a partnership with Hangzhou Normal University, there were 322 CIs in 96 countries and regions around the world. That would peak at 541 institutes worldwide including nearly 100 at American universities. Starting in 2014, however, many U.S.-based CIs began to close and since the start of 2020 there has been a landslide of nearly 50 contracts terminated. In Tennessee, the move was partly due to growing political pressure. Gov. Bill Lee called on the Legislature to ban CIs from state universities. U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tennessee, and colleagues introduced a bill seeking transparency in university-CI relationships. A version was approved by the Senate in March 2021 calling for:

- delineation between a CI program and a university’s own Chinese language program
- removing the Chinese assistant director position from institutes
- subjecting the staff and professors to appropriate background checks
- ending confidentiality in CI-university agreements and making them publicly available online.

MTSU’s involvement with its CI was extensive and high-profile. In December 2013, MTSU President Sidney A. McPhee received Person of the Year honors from the global organization of Confucius Institutes. He was one of 30 university presidents or heads of CIs to receive the award presented by Yandong during the eighth annual Global Confucius Institute Conference in Beijing attended by 2,200 people from 110 countries. China Agricultural University in Beijing named McPhee as an honorary professor in May 2007, and he was appointed in October 2010 as senior adviser to Hanban. Over the years, MTSU’s institute offered Chinese language and music studies, cultural events,

and even Tai Chi lessons. Most significantly, the institute helped local K-12 schools offer Chinese language programs and led students and school officials to China for educational collaboration and exchange. Participants mostly paid their own expenses, but some housing and travel costs were covered by grants from Chinese sources including Hanban, according to reports. The substantial relationship made the quiet nature of the split more notable. But such vague explanations are typical following a CI-university breakup. Peterson, (2021) described it as follows:

Few colleges and universities close Confucius Institutes for any of the reasons urged by state and federal officials… A university official who cites national security is a rarity. Only two—at Texas A&M and the University of South Florida—did so. Even rarer is one who cites academic freedom. Not a single one did.

Some of the closure battles have been high-profile. For example, Tufts University's decision came after months of protests by local Tibetan, Taiwanese, Hongkonger, Uyghur, and Chinese residents, who also sent nearly 600 letters to the university's president. But Peterson (2021) argues it was an illusory victory:

Tufts could close the Confucius Institute without offending Chinese government sponsors because the Chinese government isn't prioritizing Confucius Institutes anymore. … American academia, with its cutting-edge technology, access to American thought leaders, and ability to shape future generations of American citizens, remains a top target for the Chinese government. But China knows that Confucius Institutes have become politically toxic, and it has shifted its focus toward other means of engagement.

Meanwhile, Troy University is stubbornly attempting to keep its CI against the trend of closures. As of this writing, Troy's CI is still active. Peterson writes that Troy convinced the state Legislature to appropriate $6 million for a Confucius Institute building, and "foolishly signed a contract obliging it to repay 100% of China's investment in the Confucius Institute, plus 'legal expense' and 'indemnity for defamation,' if the university breaks its contract early. Troy's lobbyists have sought to stall a bill to bar CIs in the state," Peterson writes. Troy President Jack Hawkins defended the CI in a letter to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education in 2020, touting its "many benefits" and denying any intellectual theft occurred during the relationship.

What evidence is there that China is willingly abandoning CIs after achieving soft power goals? Studies led by University of Texas-San Antonio Prof. Donald Lien documented that the institutes help increase trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flow between China and host nations.Lienwrites: "Some have suggested the Institutes were put in place specifically for the purpose of enhancing China's soft power … While soft power is difficult to quantify, our results indicating that China's trade and FDI have increased after CI establishment are consistent with this view." (Lien et al, 2011) Lien et al conclude that a new CI "does not have a significant impact on China's exports, "yet increases more than 48% (but less than 118%) of China's outward FDI." For their developing country sample, they found that a CI "increases trade by a minimum of 4% and a maximum of 27%, while enhancing FDI by at least 46% and a maximum of 130%." (Lien et al, 2011) Subsequent studies by Lien and colleagues continue to confirm this principle for all such cultural centers:

Once a cultural institute programme is created in a country, one can expect a positive effect on foreign trade and the level of FDI from each additional cultural institute established in that country. Most importantly, given that cultural institutes are under the direct control of the policymakers, and that a substantial positive effect on FDI from a cultural institute has been documented, cultural institutes can serve as a particularly effective policy tool in promoting FDI with a much stronger effect from cultural institute host countries with developing economies (Lien et al, 2018).

Hanban adopted an institute strategy similar to Germany's Goethe Institutes, France's Alliances Frances and the UK's British Council. In a 2019 article, Xin Liu, a lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, highlighted similarities and distinctions between the CIs and the Euro-centric institutes. She argues CIs were part of a "counter-hegemonic stance" by China to fight a "'defensive' battle against the West through 'offensive' expansion into overseas educational institutions."

The difference in operating models is surely a major factor that distinguishes the Confucius Institute from its Western counterparts, but it is an oversimplification to only focus on the visible difference in locations without challenging the

roles of Orientalism and cultural hegemony, at the heart of which lie hidden differences in power positions in this uneven terrain. … The Chinese government's role as both a sponsor and censor is another critical difference and a major factor that attracts scepticism. (Liu, 2019)

Liu concludes that the European institutes, like the CIs, seek to "improve their international status and the position of their cultures in the global multicultural spectrum through the promotion of their languages." But one of the stated goals of Hanban has deeper meaning: "To 'enhance understanding' is therefore the other task set for the CI with the hope of also constructing global legitimacy. As one scholar noted, 'the founding of the CI is, by and large, an image management project . . . to promote the greatness of Chinese culture while counterattacking public opinion that maintains the China threat,'" Liu writes. Chinese rhetoric about the CI and its state-sponsored status has fed suspicions about its purpose, she wrote. For example, a Chinese report in 2007 called CIs the "brightest brand for China's soft power."

U.S. academic groups have expressed concern that there are "strings attached" to a university's partnership with a CI. Lie (2019) writes:

There are still worries that those who pay the piper may call the tune. The common list of censored topics includes the 'three Ts' (Tibet, Taiwan and Tiananmen), human rights, China's military build-up, and factional fights inside the Chinese leadership … In other words, it is the government's role as sponsor and censor that lies at the core of such worries.

Meanwhile, diplomatic reciprocity has been an issue as well. American efforts to start similar centers in China have been stymied. American Cultural Centers sponsored by U.S. universities were proposed for cities across China. The U.S. Department of State funded a total of 29 ACCs, of which seven were supposed to have opened but never did (Lien, 2021).

One of the most controversial IR ideas is Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations," which posits that Great Power conflict is driven by competition between regions of the world distinguished by history, political philosophy, religion, and language. As an IR student, it sometimes seems selecting one theory to account for all nation-state conflict or cooperation is a forced and false choice. Indeed, the U.S. has followed an alternating and sometimes simultaneous realist-neoliberal foreign policy over the past 60 years. Some say the clash of civilizations is an incomplete explanation of the world system, or even xenophobic, but surely a clash is at work in the CI debate? Is it too much to argue that Western "civilization," with all its flaws, is preferable to that which is currently being practiced and promoted by the PRC? Duerr writes, quoting Huntington: "The futures of the United States and of the West depend upon Americans reaffirming their commitment to Western civilization. Domestically this means rejecting the divisive siren calls of multiculturalism. Internationally it means rejecting the elusive and illusory calls to identify the United States with Asia." (Duerr, 2018) The ultimate irony is that Confucianism is not the religion of modern China:

Only several decades earlier, during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, Confucius was reviled, seen as an obstacle to social change and a throwback to the past. Now, however, Confucius is back in fashion, useful for the government that needs symbols to unify the nation and lending a basis for ideas such as the 'harmonious society,' which is essentially a Confucian concept … Whether China's soft-power projection succeeds will ultimately depend on the sources from which soft power derives––a country's culture, the attractiveness of its political values, and its foreign policies. (Paradise, 2009)

It is no coincidence so many CI agreements concluded since the start of the COVID crisis. The PRC's handling of the catastrophe illustrates why these partnerships had to end. Beijing has accepted no responsibility and has not even helped scientists discover the origin. Add to that its aggression against Taiwan and Tibet, crushing democracy protestors in Hong Kong, persecuting Christians and practitioners of Falun Gong, and reported genocide against the Muslim Uyghurs. The PRC is spreading billions around the world as part of its Belt and Road Initiative to buy support for replacing the "Washington Consensus" of development based on free market and liberal democratic principles with something chillingly called the "Beijing Consensus." For all these reasons, MTSU was right to break ties with its CI, while maintaining other avenues of engagement with Chinese language, culture, and especially students. Troy

should do the same soon.

As Peterson (2021) pointed out:

The United States is headed toward a post-Confucius Institute world. The Chinese Communist Party knows that and is prepared. Chinese government influence is appearing under new names, in new guises. Our colleges and universities must have the strength of character to resist.

Regardless of whether academic interference or intellectual property theft are proven, whether the benefit of increased trade and FDI goes both ways, or whether universities and the surrounding community benefit from this relationship, the PRC's PR professionals did not need an office on American campuses as Great Power competition moves beyond the "soft power" stage.

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