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Chinese Efforts to Infiltrate American Higher Education

1. The impact on Confucius Institutes (CIs) on American university campuses is detrimental to academic freedom, human rights, and national security. Ostensibly Chinese language programs, CIs and their replacement programs offer the Chinese government a structural basis for conducting a number of operations beneficial to China's national interests. At a minimum, CIs are an elemental component of China's propaganda and soft-power strategy to promote the worldview of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 2009, Li Changchun, who then headed propaganda for the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee declared CIs to be "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up."¹ While CIs assist China's efforts to influence public opinion they also allow the Chinese government to track dissidents, conduct espionage, and target intellectual property with dual-use purposes.

The political nature of CIs derives from its structural placement on college campuses, and as an initiative of China's United Front Work Department (UFWD).² One of the UFWD's main areas of focus is the monitoring of Chinese abroad, the ethnic Chinese diaspora, and college campuses through academic programs and student organizations.³

In 2017, we at NAS documented a number of areas of concern regarding the impact of CIs on US universities. We discovered that CIs, as stipulated by China's oversight body for the programs, mandates that CIs adhere to Chinese law. Furthermore, we discovered that CIs must follow Chinese speech codes that can influence American college classrooms. This precludes discussion of topics detrimental China's national image, such as the status of Tibet, Taiwan, criticisms of Communism, the treatment of Uyghurs, and other human rights abuses.⁴ The impact of CIs varies from one university to another, though academic freedom is jeopardized when CIs are present.⁵ For example, when

¹ "A Message from Confucius," *The Economist*, Oct. 22, 2009, (<https://www.economist.com/special-report/2009/10/24/a-message-from-confucius>), accessed March 11, 2023.

² Lin Yang, "Controversial Confucius Institutes Returning to US Schools Under New Name," Voice of America, June 27, 2022, (<https://www.voanews.com/a/controversial-confucius-institutes-returning-to-u-s-schools-under-new-name/6635906.html>), accessed March 11, 2023.

³ Joshua Kurlantzick, "Beijing's Influence Tactics With the Chinese Diaspora: An Excerpt," Council on Foreign Relations, Feb. 6, 2023, (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/beijings-influence-tactics-chinese-diaspora-excerpt>), accessed March 11, 2023.

⁴ Rachele Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholar, 2017), (<https://www.nas.org/reports/outsourced-to-china/full-report#Summary>), accessed March 11, 2023. See also Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes, Hanban, (https://web.archive.org/web/20170221021727/http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm), accessed March 11, 2023.

⁵ Rachele Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholar, 2017), (<https://www.nas.org/reports/outsourced-to-china/full-report#Summary>), accessed March 11, 2023

interviewing Chinese teachers about how they would respond to in-class questions about Tiananmen Square, a common response was that the architecture at the location would be discussed. In another account, North Carolina State University canceled a campus invitation to the Dalai Lama after pressure from the school's CI.⁶ Both in the US and abroad, China tracks dissidents on college campuses.

There is significant concern regarding the role that CIs and their replacement programs play in assisting China in procuring American technology or dual-use technologies with simultaneous economic and military significance. From an intelligence standpoint, college campuses and universities offer ideal targets for collection. Universities produce new technologies that are often nascent, under loose guard and security, and often have no export controls. Additionally, intellectual property and economic secrets can be indirectly stolen by students from abroad obtaining training before repatriating their expertise to their home country. There is substantial concern regarding CIs and the espionage threat that they pose.

Internationally, multiple countries have shuttered their CIs over the risk of espionage. Finland's Helsinki University closed its CI over censorship and the risk of espionage.⁷ In Australia, it was discovered that the Chinese military was collaborating with Australian universities.⁸ Intelligence services in India share concerns over CIs and their connection to Chinese espionage.⁹ The United Kingdom also harbors reservations about CIs and their role in facilitating espionage and Chinese harassment of dissident students on British campuses.¹⁰

In the US, two cases of potential espionage are a particular cause for concern. The first case involves Western Kentucky University (WKU), while the second involves Alfred University in New York. In the WKU case, a flash drive was seized from a professor named Martha Day while traveling in China.¹¹ Day, a WKU Associate Professor of Science Education described the flash drive being commandeered by "Hanban personnel"

⁶ Rachele Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholar, 2017), (<https://www.nas.org/reports/outsourced-to-china/full-report#Summary>), accessed March 11, 2023

⁷ Pekka Vantinen, "Finland shuts down Confucius Institute amid censorship, espionage accusations," *Euractiv*, June 20, 2022, (https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/finland-shuts-down-confucius-institute-amid-censorship-espionage-accusations/), accessed March 11, 2023.

⁸ Hagar Cohen, "China's military liaising with Australian universities: report," ABC News, Oct. 29, 2018, (<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/am/chinas-military-liasing-with-australian-universities:-report/10445712>), accessed March 11, 2023.

⁹ Rakesh K. Singh, "China's Confucius Institute on India's covert agencies' radar," *Daily Pioneer*, Oct. 15, 2017, (<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/india/china---s-confucius-institute-on-india---s-covert-agencies---radar.html>), accessed March 11, 2023.

¹⁰ "What Are Chinese 'Confucius Instiutes' And Why Rishi Sunak Wants to Ban Them," *Outlook India*, July 26, 2022, (<https://www.outlookindia.com/international/what-are-chinese-confucius-institutes-and-why-rishi-sunak-wants-to-ban-them-in-uk-news-212085>), accessed March 11, 2023. See also Viggo Stacey, "Sunak "looking to close" Confucius Institutes in UK," *The Pie News*, Nov. 2, 2022, (<https://thepienews.com/news/uk-sunak-looking-close-confucius-institutes/>), accessed March 11, 2023.

¹¹ See Rachele Peterson and Ian Oxnevad, *After Confucius: China's Enduring Influence on American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2022), (https://www.nas.org/reports/after-confucius-institutes/full-report#_ftnref463), accessed March 12, 2023.

and corrupted with malware before being returned to her.¹² To reiterate, the Hanban was the primary bureaucracy used by China to manage its CIs abroad. The flash drive in question was later examined by FBI agents based out of the Louisville field office, and found to contain a malware program called Backdoor:Win32/Bifroze.IZ that was timestamped and found to have been installed at a time corroborating Dr. Day's account of the incident.¹³ Brent Haselhoff, WKU's cybersecurity manager, noted that the flash drive's malware was set to install "spyware across the entire university" and that it threatened the "integrity of the entire university."¹⁴ While any potential espionage was avoided in this instance, it does indicate that China attempts to access the data at US universities.

A more concerning case involves Alfred University in New York. Unlike most colleges in the US that have distanced themselves from CIs or closed their programs, Alfred University retains its CI and its partnership with China University of Geosciences in Wuhan.¹⁵ In a letter to Alfred University in February 2022, Senator Marco Rubio's office expressed concerns about the college's Chinese partner university (China University of Geosciences) and its ties to both the People's Liberation Army and Chinese intelligence services.¹⁶ China University of Geosciences has collaborated with the Chinese military and intelligence services since 2009 on classified projects relevant to Beijing's national security in the field of geology.¹⁷ More problematically, Alfred University also receives U.S. government funding to develop "ultra-high temperature ceramic material" needed to develop hypersonic missile technology for the U.S. Army.¹⁸

Last year, Senator Chuck Schumer announced that Alfred University would receive \$4 million to develop "ultra-high temperature ceramic material for the U.S. Army."¹⁹ Such ceramic material is critical to hypersonic missile technology. The close relationship that Alfred University maintains between its Chinese partners and the ceramic sciences program creates structural opportunities for malfeasance. Notably, Alfred University's

¹² Rachele Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholar, 2017), (<https://www.nas.org/reports/outsourced-to-china/full-report#Summary>), accessed March 11, 2023. This incident was described in an interview NAS conducted with Martha Day on October 24, 2021.

¹³ See Rachele Peterson and Ian Oxnevad, *After Confucius: China's Enduring Influence on American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2022). (https://www.nas.org/reports/after-confucius-institutes/full-report#_ftnref463), accessed March 12, 2023. Interview NAS conducted with Martha Day on October 24, 2021.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Alfred University Confucius Institute official website, (<https://confucius.alfred.edu/>), accessed March 12, 2023.

¹⁶ Letter from Senator Marco Rubio to Office of the President of Alfred University, Feb. 8, 2022, (<https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/cache/files/dd997055-f3a5-4bc5-921b-34ceaad2011a/D0B3A2776161048A41AD4F80AE127B9F.02.08.22---smr-letter-to-alfred-u-re-mcf.pdf>), accessed March 12, 2023.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Neal Simon, "Alfred University gets \$4 million to research high-temperature ceramics for US Army," *Evening Tribune*, (<https://www.eveningtribune.com/story/news/local/2022/08/12/military-ceramics-research-alfred-university/65401928007/>), accessed March 12, 2023.

¹⁹ "Alfred Univ. Gets Big Contract from US Army," WLEA AM 1480, April 29, 2022, (<https://wlea.net/alfred-univ-gets-big-contract-from-the-u-s-army/>), accessed March 12, 2023.

CI assistant director, Susan Steere, has a background in ceramic sciences.²⁰ Alfred University retains its CI, and at present, I know of no investigation into the university's relationship with China and its own ceramics program.

Operationally, CIs parallel other Chinese initiatives with a more explicit orientation towards espionage, such as its Thousand Talents Program that seeks to recruit knowledgeable professionals abroad who can assist China in accessing sensitive technology.²¹ In regards to CIs, China has the means, motive, and structural opportunity to utilize them to access technologies emerging out of American higher education. Unfortunately, until a systematic nationwide counterintelligence program or investigation is undertaken, the extent of how CIs and their replacement programs threaten US national security will not be fully known.

2. The current status of CIs in the US is adaptive and resilient. In our work published last year, NAS documented that CIs have not disappeared, but rather adapted by rebranding themselves. In our report, *After Confucius: China's Enduring Influence on American Higher Education* (2022), we documented the rapid closure of CIs across the US. Of the 118 CIs once open nationwide, 104 had closed as of June 2022. The number of closures has increased since last year. However, the vanishing of CIs does not indicate a cessation of China's presence in American higher education. Of the original 118 CIs, 40 have been replaced or have altered their programs. Fifty-eight universities retained their partnerships with their Chinese counterpart universities that they forged with CIs. A small number of devolved their CI program to other host institutions, including with K-12 school districts. At the K-12 level, CI-like programs are called Confucius Classrooms (CCs). While the number of CCs is unknown, there is an estimated 500 such programs in the American primary education system.²²

The most common form of CI retention by US universities is through simple rebranding due to the current toxicity the "Confucius Institute" label. Such programs vary from one college to another, and little systematic nationwide study has been conducted on how such replacement programs have been rebranded and restructured. However, the CI at Portland State University (PSU) offers an example of how CIs are replaced by deepened relationships with China.

PSU shuttered its CI in January 2021; however, in its closing announcement, PSU stated that it looked forward to "expanded academic ties with the faculty, students and staff at Soochow University in China."²³ Portland State University's Vice President, Susan Jeffords, penned an agreement with Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications

²⁰ Alfred University Confucius Institute official website, (<https://confucius.alfred.edu/instructors/index.cfm>), accessed March 12, 2023.

²¹ Ellen Barry and Gina Kolata, "China's Lavish Funds Lured US Scientists. What Did It Get in Return?," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 2020, (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/us/chinas-lavish-funds-lured-us-scientists-what-did-it-get-in-return.html>), accessed March 12, 2023.

²² Gary Sands, "Are Confucius Institutes in the US Really Necessary," *The Diplomat*, Feb. 20, 2021, (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/are-confucius-institutes-in-the-us-really-necessary/>), accessed March 12, 2023.

²³ Confucius Institute at Portland State University, Jan. 28, 2021, (<https://www.pdx.edu/international-affairs/confucius-institute-portland-state-university>), accessed March 12, 2023.

several months later that same year to establish the “Portland Institute.”²⁴ Focused on engineering, optics, and other technology-related fields, the Portland Institute was declared to be guided by the “spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” and would “strive to build a brand of Sino-US cultural exchanges and educational cooperation.”²⁵ Such a restructuring deepens the risk of Chinese influence at PSU, despite the formal closure of its CI.

3. The Trump Administration’s 2020 designation of the Confucius Institute US Center (CIUS) as a foreign mission was one of several developments that pressured American colleges to restructure or close their CIs. This declaration, along with the passage of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that restricted funding to CIs and to Chinese language programs at schools that also host CIs represent the culmination of official Federal pressure against these programs. However, bottom-up civil society pressures from concerned faculty, students, and a general increased public relations challenge to CIs similarly contributed to the official closure of CIs. Problematically, these efforts simply catalyzed US colleges to rebrand or restructure their CIs such that risky Sino-American academic partnerships could continue and deepen without running afoul of Federal law and regulation.
4. China rebranded the Hanban as the Ministry of Education Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation (CLEC), and its CI oversight body as the Chinese International Educational Foundation (CIEF) in order to continue similar work under ostensibly different auspices. This rebranding and restructuring are partly for public relations and appearances as scrutiny of CIs increased in the US and elsewhere. Additionally, the CIEF’s status as a nonprofit organization offers a degree of secrecy by which funds can flow to CIs and CI-like programs while presenting regulators, counter-intelligence personnel, and policymakers with an opaquer apparatus to scrutinize. CIs and their replacements are structures of soft-power projection and a means to conduct informational warfare at their most basic level. Restructuring the CIEF as a nonprofit offers China more disarming initiative by which to continue the efforts that animated its CIs.
5. All CIs and their replacement programs are predicated on bilateral partnerships between foreign universities and a Chinese counterpart. CIs and their equivalent programs have no independent autonomy or viability without these structural partnerships. These partnerships are part of the core problem that the CI phenomenon poses for US interests and security. While CIs may have initiated these relationships, they have survived CI closures and have often deepened far beyond simple language exchanges.

For example, Purdue’s CI, which closed in 2019 due to provisions in the NDAA, facilitated ties far beyond Chinese language instruction. Purdue’s CI hosted the “Indiana

²⁴ Confirmation of the Enrollment of Portland Institute, NJUPT Remote Signing Held, April 28, 2021, (<https://www.njupt.edu.cn/en/2021/0513/c13237a193282/page.htm>), accessed March 12, 2023.

²⁵ “The college launched the new school year’s goal task combing [sic] and optimization seminar work,” Portland College of Nanjing official website, Feb. 17, 2023, (<http://psu.njupt.edu.cn/2023/0220/c14668a233922/page.htm>), accessed March 12, 2023.

State Department of Education Director’s Roundtable Forum” that brought state policymakers and K-12 schools to experience the program. In 2010, Purdue’s Provost Timothy Sands lauded the college’s CI and its relationship with Shanghai Jiaotong University of Shanghai (SJTU) in helping build ties between Indiana mayors and China.²⁶ Under the guise of educational programming, Purdue’s CI helped facilitate relationships beneficial to China’s national economic interests.

At the university level, Purdue’s CI sponsored students from the US to travel to China in order to work alongside Chinese media outlets covering the 2008 Summer Olympics.²⁷ The Purdue students, all communications majors, received training from the Communication University of China (CUC). The CUC is one of China’s premier schools for training journalists for its state-run media outlets.²⁸ Notably, this was not a one-time affair. In 2010, Purdue’s CI hosted a training for 16 CI directors in the US. At the training seminar, the CI directors agreed to work with Hanban to craft effective branding and information strategies to shape perception.²⁹

CIs and their successor programs do pose a multifaceted threat to the US. These threats are multiple, and China’s use of academia as a venue for promoting its national worldview, accessing technological development, and influencing policymakers should all be of concern. Academia in the West is often viewed as an apolitical educational institution. While this outlook is a product of the West’s classical liberal tradition, Western academia’s international openness renders it vulnerable to entering into partnerships with totalitarian regimes abroad.

6. To date, Confucius Classrooms (CCs) have not been nationally studied, though they are believed to be roughly 500 of them across the country. The problems with CCs parallel those of CIs, though the threat of soft power influence predominates over the threat of espionage at the primary school level. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they are widely dispersed, and are present in urban and rural settings alike. In the 2022 NAS report, *After Confucius Institutes: China’s Enduring Influence on American Higher Education* (2022), we discovered that Western Kentucky University’s CI was handed off to a local school district through a nonprofit middleman organization. At WKU, the CI devolved to a CC

²⁶ Letter from Purdue Provost Timothy Sands to Hanban Chair Xu Lin, “Letter of Appreciation and Renewal of the Confucius Institute at Purdue University,” Nov. 22, 2010, cited in Rachele Peterson and Ian Oxnevad, *After Confucius: China’s Enduring Influence on American Higher Education*, (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2022). (https://www.nas.org/reports/after-confucius-institutes/full-report#_ftnref463), accessed March 12, 2023.

²⁷ Amy Patterson Neubert, “Students to Work with Media in Beijing During 2008 Olympics,” *Purdue University News*, September 20, 2007, (<https://www.purdue.edu/uns/x/2007b/070920SypherOlympics.html>), accessed March 12, 2023.

²⁸ “Beijing Imposes Propaganda Beyond Its Borders,” Reporters Without Borders, Sept. 24, 2015, (<https://rsf.org/en/news/beijing-imposes-its-propaganda-beyond-its-borders>), accessed March 12, 2023.

²⁹ “Purdue University Confucius Institute Hosts Media Training Seminar,” *Xinhua*, May 9, 2010, (http://www.china.org.cn/learning_chinese/news/2010-05/09/content_20001013.htm), accessed March 12, 2023.

when it was adopted by Simpson County Schools.³⁰ CCs are present elsewhere, such as Chicago, and Southern California.³¹

At the heart of concern regarding CCs is the loss of educational sovereignty that such programs cause. No other country hosts an equivalent effort to teach in American classrooms and have a presence in US academia as does China. Indeed, colonial powers of past eras made educational programming in would-be colonial holdings a main strategic goal. Allowing a foreign power, let alone a hostile one, teach at the primary school level poses a threat to the national interest. In the last century, the US did not allow the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or Imperial Japan a foothold in the educational system.

Recent revelations at Virginia's Thomas Jefferson High School indicate that fears of foreign influence are well founded, and are not a product of patriotic paranoia. Since 2014, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology received nearly \$1 million from a nonprofit organization tied to China's United Front Work Department.³² The school also received funds from a Cayman Islands-based company, and a Chinese school with ties to the Chinese military.³³

7. If the desire is to curtail Chinese influence in the education system, it must disincentivize American educational institutions from taking foreign funds from all sources. The simplest means of accomplishing this is to move beyond seeking greater transparency on foreign funding, and instead seek to mandate "ratio funding" at a dollar-for-dollar basis. National legislation seeking to mandate ratio funding should curtail a university's eligibility for taxpayer dollars at the amount a university receives from all foreign sources. In other words, should an institute at a university or college receive \$250,000 from a foreign source, that would eliminate \$250,000 in taxpayer assistance for the following year. Foreign sources should be deemed to include any entity with a majority ownership based abroad.

Congress should immediately require the Internal Revenue Service to annually audit any school receiving Federal funds to determine how much money comes from foreign sources and foreign beneficiaries. This should include tuition revenue from foreign students, and should be itemized by country of origin. Congress must then reduce the dollar amount of Federal funds given to the school in the same number of dollars

³⁰ "WKU transfers Confucius Institute program to Simpson County Schools," Western Kentucky University official website, July 1, 2019, (<https://www.wku.edu/news/articles/index.php?view=article&articleid=7814>), accessed March 12, 2023.

³¹ Chicago Chinese Language Center, official website, (<https://chicagochineselanguagecenter.com/>), accessed March 12, 2023. See also Ching-Ching Ni, "Chinese government's funding of Southland school's language program fuels controversy," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2010, (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-apr-04-la-me-confucius-school4-2010apr04-story.html>), accessed March 12, 2023.

³² Josh Christenson, "Elite US high school took more than \$1M from Chinese state-tied groups," *New York Post*, March 7, 2023, (<https://nypost.com/2023/03/07/elite-us-high-school-took-1-million-from-chinese-entities/>), accessed March 12, 2023.

³³ Nick Minoek, "It's Incredibly alarming' Chinese donations to top Virginia high school questioned," ABC News, March 8, 2023, (<https://wjla.com/news/crisis-in-the-classrooms/thomas-jefferson-high-school-fairfax-county-public-schools-chinese-donations-to-top-virginia-high-school-questioned-parents-defending-education-communist-party-alex-nester-glenn-youngkin-mark-warner>), accessed March 12, 2023.

received from foreign sources. In this way, the incentive to take foreign funding is removed. Furthermore “foreign sources” should consist of any entity that is held by beneficial owners abroad. This must be included in order to remove China’s ability to utilize middlemen organizations, such as nonprofits and private companies, to offer funding to US universities.