

Confucius Institutes in the U.S.: Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom; Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend

On April 10, 2013, I joined a large group of students, faculty and administrators at a ceremony inaugurating the opening of a Confucius Institute (CI) at George Washington University (GW). Also present were not only officials from GW's Chinese partner in this enterprise, Nanjing University, but Madame Xu Lin, the director general of "Hanban," the Chinese organization in charge of the spread of Confucius Institutes around the globe. With this ceremony, the culmination of over two years of planning and negotiation, the GW Confucius Institute joined 97 others established in the U.S, mostly located on college campuses, as well as over 300 Institutes in other countries around the world. Although precise up-to-date statistics are hard to come by, since the founding of the first Confucius Institute in 2004 at least 2 million students have received instruction in Chinese language through the Institutes, or "Confucius Classrooms" located in elementary and secondary schools, and a far greater number of people have attended sponsored cultural activities including demonstrations of traditional Chinese crafts, dance and musical performances, and art exhibitions.¹

Just as many have viewed the rise of China to a position of increasing global power with trepidation, the spread of Confucius Institutes as a representation of this power has often been interpreted as an ominous development. Such worries have resulted in a growing body of oppositional literature, including short polemical pieces in the blogosphere and longer articles in respected journals, either questioning the establishment of these Institutes or calling for their closing. A recent and prominent example of this literature was an article written by the noted University of Chicago anthropologist Marshall Sahlins published in *The Nation*.² The main and most persistent concern of this literature, of which the Sahlins article is a good example, is that the insertion of Confucius Institutes into American campuses is a dangerous threat to academic freedom. This proposition is clearly stated in the subtitle added to the online version of the Sahlins' article: "Confucius Institutes censor political discussions and restrain the free exchange of ideas. Why, then, do American universities sponsor them?"³

The greatest problem with this anti-CI literature is that it often leaps from suspicions and concerns to a conclusion of fact. At most, a few narrow anecdotal cases are repeatedly used to charge a wide and systematic problem—most prominently the restraint of free speech. Thus it is somewhat startling to find a scholar of Sahlins' stature admitting: "For all the attention that the Confucius Institutes have attracted in the United States and elsewhere, there has been virtually no serious journalistic or ethnographic investigation into their

¹ The Hanban website notes a total enrollment of 260,000 in language courses in 2009 alone, and over 3 million attendees at cultural performances.

http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm

² Marshall Sahlins, "China U," *The Nation*, November 18, 2013.

³ <http://www.thenation.com/article/176888/china-u>

particulars.”⁴ One might wonder why the detractors of the CIs, given the depth of their concerns, don't put some effort into conducting such investigations to see if their concerns are warranted. In fact, if the serious charges against the CIs were true, then the public record alone from the nearly 100 CIs already operating in the U.S. should provide more than enough data to make their case. In the end, the detractors, who seem mainly motivated by antipathy to China's authoritarian government, often fall back on an imprecise logic that only works if one starts with the presumption that the open record of the CIs must be hiding a more duplicitous agenda. The result is to construct arguments that are intellectually contorted if not deliberately misleading.

One example of such questionable argumentation appears early in Sahlins' article where he notes that, "Although official documents describe Hanban as 'affiliated with the Ministry of Education,' it is governed by a council of high state and party officials . . . Simply put, Hanban is an instrument of the party state operating as an international pedagogical organization."⁵ This conflation of "affiliation" with "governance" suggests an attempt to hide actual state control behind a façade of a claimed "affiliation" with the Ministry of Education. Sahlins' source for this exposé, however, is the "Constitution and By-laws of the Confucius Institutes," a public document readily available on the Hanban website, which openly acknowledges that Hanban is governed by a council selected by the P.R.C. State Council.⁶ This admitted governance structure meanwhile does not disprove the asserted "affiliation" of Hanban with the Ministry of Education, which is an organizational necessity since CIs are created through partnerships with Chinese universities that are under the control of the Ministry of Education. But the suggestion of subterfuge is puzzling since the Ministry of Education is also an "instrument of the party state." (To be fair, the U.S. Department of Education also operates under, not independent of, political authority). If one believes there should be no collaboration by American universities with any Chinese institution then that principle should be debated openly. Feigned shock at the "discovery" that Hanban is a state-controlled organization is simple theatrics.

Many American universities have, as a matter of fact, already begun to engage in a wide range of exchanges and collaborations with Chinese institutions, none of which operate outside of state control. As such, the universities involved should approach these activities with eyes wide open. At the same time, the fundamental question is whether mutual benefit can be found in these collaborations without harming the academic mission (including the academic freedom) of these American institutions.

In the case of Confucius Institutes, the starting point should be to look at their declared purpose. As stated in the "Constitution and By-laws," Confucius Institutes "shall develop and facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language overseas and promote educational and

⁴ Sahlins, p. 37.

⁵ Sahlins, p. 36.

⁶ http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm

cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other international communities.” This fairly limited focus suggests that the Chinese authorities are themselves aware of the need to avoid controversial activities that might make cooperation difficult. Simply based on the stated objectives of the CIs many American supporters have argued that, at least in terms of purpose and function, the CIs are similar to the Goethe-Institut or the Alliance Francais. Sahlins sees such comparisons as “feckless” because, unlike these other cultural organizations, CIs are often located within university precincts and, again, that “they managed by a foreign government, and accordingly are responsive to its politics.”⁷ But what specific “politics” are being served in the case of the CIs and does this necessarily make them inimical to American interests?

Most observers would agree that behind their stated educational purpose the establishment of CIs is meant to serve China’s soft power interests. They are intended, as Sahlins notes, to “put the P.R.C. in a good light.” Sahlins takes this a step further to suggest a more ominous purpose by parroting a statement, often found in the anti-CI literature, by Chinese Politburo member Li Changchun that the CIs are “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda set-up.”⁸ To be fair, the Chinese term translated as “propaganda” (*xuanchuan*), just as the original usage of this term by the Catholic Church, has no negative connotations. More to the point, when this quote is examined in the full context of the Chinese report in which it occurs, Li is clearly defining the specific role of Confucius Institutes in soft power terms. Thus he notes, “The establishment of Confucius Institutes quickens the international popularization of the Chinese language and strengthens cultural exchanges with various peoples of the world, benefiting China’s to move toward the world and the world’s better understanding of China.”⁹ There is no indication of any hidden agenda to use CIs as a tool for the spread of “political” propaganda.

The Chinese government clearly hopes that increased familiarity with Chinese language and culture will create a more favorable impression of China in the world. Should, however, cultural exchange programs sponsored by foreign states to enhance their soft power, also practiced by the U.S., be a cause for alarm? Indeed, there is some question as to whether such cultural programming actually translates into political influence. Ultimately Sahlins admits that, “the current Chinese regime is a hard sell” given that the generally understood condition for soft power success is “the appearance of an attractive political system.”¹⁰ Indeed, despite the proliferation of Confucius Institutes in the U.S., the percentage of Americans who have favorable views of China has declined by 5% over the past seven years.¹¹ Thus it seems that the American public has no difficulty distinguishing

⁷ Sahlins, pp. 42, 36.

⁸ Sahlins, p. 37. Although not always cited, the source of this quote appear to be an article, “A Message from Confucius,” published by *The Economist* in October 19, 2009.

⁹ “Li Changchun yaoqiu dali fazhan gangluo kongzi xueyuan chuanbo Zhongguo wenhua,” www.scio.gov.cn (2007-06-19).

¹⁰ Sahlins, p. 37.

¹¹ Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/chapter-3-attitudes-toward-china/>. Only 42% of

between Chinese language and culture, aspects of which they may admire, and the nature of the Communist Chinese regime.

So why does the Chinese government continue to promote these Institutes? Some supporters might argue that Sino-American relations might be even worse without these “people-to-people” exchanges. But the CIs may also serve a domestic political purpose. Sahlins strangely uses a passage from an article in the *The People’s Daily* that placed the spread of CIs “alongside other indices of China’s ascent to world-political prominence” as confirmation of propaganda function of the CIs. This is, of course, an illogical reading of the paper’s statement, which makes no claim about the CIs as effective propaganda tools, or even as factors behind China’s rising power. The causality is clearly in the other direction—and probably an indisputable fact—namely, that increased demand for the offerings of CIs around the world is a *result* of China’s rising global profile. Reflecting the commonly observed pleasure many Chinese take in the fact that foreigners take the time to learn their language, the article mainly seems to be feeding the national pride of its readers in China’s growing stature.

The ultimate question, then, is whether these soft power and nationalist goals are something that should be opposed—to the extent that we should be concerned about the teaching of Chinese language and culture to American citizens. If such instruction is intrinsically harmful to American interests, then shouldn’t the teaching of Chinese in universities outside of the CIs also be a source of concern?

I suspect that most Americans (including most CI detractors) would agree that the teaching of Chinese language and culture is ultimately consistent with our core academic values and goals. This includes a humanities-based appreciation for cultural diversity, an area-studies perspective that advances language and cultural instruction as a positive means for building cross-cultural and transnational understanding, and, in the case of Chinese studies in particular, a purely pragmatic goal of preparing our citizens to deal with a global economy in which China plays an increasingly dominant role. There is then a congruence of objectives that provides a strong basis for collaboration in the establishment of Confucius Institutes.

CI opponents argue, however, that the CIs are not simply engaged in neutral instruction in Chinese language and culture but in the Trojan-horse-like promotion of a “global project designed to increase the political influence of the People’s Republic of China.”¹² China’s capacity to make effective use of the CIs in this manner is attributed to the position of the CIs as “autonomous” entities in universities, which, as Sahlins notes, gives Hanban “the right to supply the teachers, textbooks, and curriculum of the courses in its charge.”¹³ The clear implication is that American universities have willy-nilly handed over their China-

Americans viewed China favorably in 2007, climbing to 51% in 2011, then plummeting to 37% in 2013.

¹² Sahlins, p. 42.

¹³ Sahlins, p. 36.

related classes to Chinese Communist Party apparatchiks who transmit the party line in classes under their control using party-approved content. But can this “right” (a very strong term!) be shown either in the documentation involving the CIs or in actual practice?

Some of the suspicion about the operation of CIs on American campuses arises from the confidential nature of most of the founding memoranda of understanding (MOU) negotiated between universities and Hanban. One sympathetic justification for this secrecy is that it allows both parties to negotiate their own specific deals (mainly for levels of financial support) without creating precedents for other applicants. CI detractors, though, assume the worst by seeing this secrecy itself as proof that the MOU must contain conditions that would not stand up to open examination.

This assumption, first of all, reflects a complete lack of trust in any of the faculty or administrators involved in CI negotiations. Indeed, the motives of all those involved are impugned with highly loaded language. Sahlins, for example, argues that the CI at the University of Chicago was negotiated with “the ready complicity of the university administration, which like many others is given to an unseemly avidity for gelt, glitz, and glory.”¹⁴ As such, the integrity of CI advocates is easily dismissed. Thus Sahlins brushes aside the unanimous approval of the CI initiative by the faculty of the University of Chicago’s Center for Chinese Studies (the very people one might assume most qualified to evaluate the agreement) with the apparently shocking revelation that Korean and Japanese scholars, and other university faculty, were left out of the loop. The detractors’ presumption that concessions to China must be hidden behind the secrecy of CI agreements also assumes a massive dereliction of duty by university lawyers across the country in protecting their universities’ legal rights and academic prerogatives. In the end, even if one believes that some faculty or administrators provided less than due diligence in crafting CI MOU, it is another thing to assume a vast conspiracy of silence by faculty and administrators across the country in nearly 100 institutions.

The concern over the secrecy of individual MOU is more puzzling, though, since much of the documentation used to construct these agreements is actually openly available on the Hanban website as references for potential applicants.¹⁵ This not only includes the “Constitution and Bylaws” that cover all agreements, but also a suggested model agreement that contains the optimum conditions sought by Hanban prior to any negotiations over specific MOU. As such, Sahlins statement that “Subject to nondisclosure are the articles of the model agreement” makes no sense—since the model agreement is in fact an open document.

To the extent that these documents have actually raised serious concerns, they are mainly focused on a passage in the “Constitution and Bylaws” (and a similar but differently worded clause in the model agreement) that the CIs, “shall abide by the laws and regulations of the countries in which they are located, respect local cultural and educational traditions and

¹⁴ Sahlins, p. 42.

¹⁵ http://english.hanban.org/node_7879.htm

social customs, and they shall not contravene concerning the laws and regulations of China.” Sahlins raises the specter that American universities, by signing agreements including this clause, would be forced to accept the criminalization by Chinese law of “forms of political speech and systems of belief that are protected in the United States,” and by extension that “the officers of host universities must accept the Chinese control of academic work in their institutions.”¹⁶ Although these clauses are indeed awkwardly worded (which university lawyers no doubt seek to clarify in their specific MOU), the Chinese government in the end has no legal standing, and has in fact has never attempted, to enforce Chinese laws in regard to the activities of CIs in “the countries in which they are located.”

Finally, Sahlins’ suspicion of the possible hidden terms in institution-specific CI agreements is blunted by his admission that Chicago was successful in getting Hanban to strike the secrecy clause in its MOU. Sahlins discounts this concession by noting that this secrecy was not needed because the Confucius Institute is, “still a secret in important respects to the chair of the faculty board that monitors its operation.”¹⁷ Sahlins then relates an interview where this chair indeed expresses rather appalling ignorance of the actual terms of the MOU and the operation of the CI at Chicago in practice. Despite this twisted logic, this person’s ignorance does not in fact show that the Chicago MOU is “still a secret.” Instead the agreement provides a fairly good picture of the arrangements between Hanban and Chicago in the operation of its CI; and what Sahlins reports from that agreement is not very different from arrangements seen (in practice even if without access to all their agreements) in other universities. The openness of the Chicago agreement is therefore a positive step because it makes it harder for Hanban to negotiate more unfavorable agreements with other schools.

Despite his effort to put the Chicago agreement in the worst possible light, Sahlins is forced to admit that in cases such as the Chicago negotiations Hanban has often been flexible and accommodating in the face of American concerns. But this does not allay his suspicions. Instead, this positive is turned into a negative by charging that these accommodations are “a means of increasing China’s own soft power in the camp of its greatest competitor for world supremacy.”¹⁸ Even worse, such accommodations are seen as encouraging other schools to sign up by increasing their comfort level with the establishment of CIs. Of course, this baneful effect only makes sense if one assumes what needs to be proven—that the operations of the CIs on American campuses are harmful to academic freedom.

In the end, though, the alarmist charges that CI agreements give Hanban “the right to supply the teachers, textbooks, and curriculum of the courses in its charge” is at the very least misleading if not a deliberate misrepresentation, particularly in the insertion of the word “right,” which suggests Hanban precedence over the American parties in these agreements. Detractors often neglect to note that all CIs are headed by a director

¹⁶ Sahlins, p. 37.

¹⁷ Sahlins, p. 43.

¹⁸ Sahlins, p. 40.

appointed by the American university, that each CI is overseen by its own Board of Directors with at least one-half American representation (the Chinese members are appointed by the Chinese university partner), and often have a faculty advisory committee for additional oversight. Hanban cannot, then, simply dictate terms over American objections. Hanban does provide funding for each CI based on budgets submitted annually by their Boards, which Hanban must then approve. This means that Hanban may refuse to fund some projects; but it also can't force the university hosting the CI to do anything against its will. Each CI is also given a large collection of books and language materials as potential resources for instructional activities—but there is no requirement that specific courses use specific texts. There is simply no “right” for CIs to determine curriculum in partner U.S. universities.

One particular focus of concern by CI detractors has been the “supply of teachers” as provided for in CI agreements. One of the advantages offered to American universities for in the creation of CIs is that Hanban agrees to provide teachers for their instructional activities. In most cases, the CI's Chinese partner university recommends these teachers. The American side in turn has the right of refusal if the qualifications of the teachers are seen as insufficient. The controversy over the supply of these teachers often focuses on how much control the American side actually has on the selection process. Thus Sahlins contests the claim of Chicago administrators that “the university is fully engaged in the hiring process for Chinese teachers” by contrasting it with the testimony of the Chinese director of the Chicago CI's language program that:

... all Chinese-language teachers can apply for the job, but that they must hold advanced degrees in Chinese language and have taught foreign students at their own university. “Then they need to take some tests, such as English and psychological tests. If they are chosen by Hanban, they need to attend a training session. They say they learned things such as traditional folk arts.” When asked what role Chicago plays in choosing the teachers, the director, then in Beijing, responded: “We don't choose. They recommend, and we accept.”¹⁹

To the extent that this exchange was supposed to be a “gotcha” moment, it is largely the result of language nuance. Saying a university is “fully engaged in the hiring process” is hardly an assertion that the university has an actual role in “choosing” the teachers who will be offered to the CI. The statement that “they recommend, and we accept” does not deny that a university has the right of refusal; it only shows that this right is rarely exerted. While Sahlins may intend to suggest a dereliction of duty by university administrators, the low rate of rejection may suggest that the process is working effectively to provide top-quality instructors for CIs. In the end, it is in the interest of both Chinese and American universities, and Hanban itself, to make sure that the program succeeds, and good teachers are necessary for this result.

¹⁹ Sahlins, p. 43.

Some of the controversy that arises over the “supply” of Chinese teachers is a result of a misunderstanding of the status of these teachers in the universities where they are assigned. This misunderstanding is facilitated by the use of the word “hiring.” The official status of these teachers is as “visiting professors/instructors,” who retain their affiliation with, and continue to draw salaries from, their home Chinese institutions. They are in fact not “hired” by the host U.S. university. As such, the process described for the supply of CI teachers follows the normal practice in many international academic exchanges—where the exchange partners recommend their faculty to be visiting professors while the host institution reserves the right to accept or reject the recommendation based on whether the scholars have the qualifications necessary for any classes they propose to teach. To the extent that value in such programs is on academic and intellectual exchange, qualified scholars for such positions are rarely rejected.

This distinction about the status of CI instructors (as visiting professors) is at the base of a controversial case at McMaster University in Canada. As noted by Sahlins, this case involved a grievance filed by a CI instructor with the Canadian human rights tribunal after her term of teaching ended (and as the instructor applied for asylum in Canada), that the “CI contract that enabled her to work at the university required her to conceal her belief in Falun Gong.”²⁰ Chinese government designates Falun Gong as an illegal cult (a view admittedly not shared by authorities in the U.S. or Canada) and as such does require all potential CI instructors (indeed all university faculty in China) to sign a statement that they are not members of Falun Gong or any other illegal organization. The CI instructor claimed that the need to hide her Falun Gong beliefs while teaching at McMaster made McMaster complicit in discriminatory hiring practices.

The core issue for this case is whether a university is responsible for the hiring practices of the universities or countries from which they accept visiting professors. If this argument were to be accepted by U.S. courts, it would have a drastic effect on all academic exchanges—since it would present the unprecedented requirement that American universities reject any “visiting professors” from other countries unless the hiring practices in those countries were fully congruent with all requirements (federal and local) applicable to the host university. Ultimately McMaster seemed to accept this principle, agreeing to abolish its CI while noting, “The way the university normally functions is incongruent with the way decisions were being made there [referring to China].”²¹ In the end, though, the issue at stake is not the “hiring” practices of host universities per se, but whether universities are comfortable with academic exchanges with countries whose hiring practices (or state policies) are at odds with their own. This is certainly a debate worth having, but as a general principle it cannot and should not be solely applied to the case of CI visiting instructors.

²⁰ Sahlins, p. 40.

²¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/mcmaster-cuts-chinese-institute-worried-by-discrimination-1.1321862>

Of course, the unease that many CI detractors have with CI instructors is not just based on how they are supplied but their alleged influence within host universities, going back to the assertion about Hanban's "right to supply the . . . curriculum of the courses in its charge" and the extent to which such instruction is "responsive to the politics" of the Chinese government. The alarmist nature of this concern as expressed by CI detractors is heightened by a lack of clarity about where this interaction with universities occurs. While Sahlins' states that CIs are "an academic unit that provides accredited instruction in Chinese language and culture," the role of CI's in such *accredited* instruction in most universities is actually fairly limited. Although CIs may be 'autonomous' in the sense of being under the direct supervision of a dean or the central administration separate from other departments or centers, few (if any?) universities allow them to create and offer for-credit courses independent of regular academic approval systems. Most CI instructors are actually involved in non-credit outreach language programs. To the extent that CI instructors are involved in for-credit courses in the regular curriculum, they are mainly involved in language instruction—and usually on loan to regular language departments not through classes offered thru the CI itself. For example, the Confucius Institute at the University of Maryland, the first CI in the U.S. founded in 2004, has never offered for-credit courses.²²

At the same time, there is no evidence that Hanban dictates specific lesson plans for CI instructors to use in language or any other classes. And the materials used in these classes are not secret. If these materials were loaded with exercises or texts meant to exert "improper" political influence over the tender minds of young American students, then they certainly would have come to the attention of CI opponents. In the absence of any widespread evidence of problems with class materials, detractors focus on a few examples of what they portray as unacceptable political expression by CI directors or instructors.

The main example used by Sahlins is a 2008 case at the University of Waterloo (Canada), involving the so-called "militant action" by a Chinese CI director, Yan Li, (ominously identified as a former reporter for the Xinhua news agency) in countering negative portrayals of Chinese political suppression in Tibet. As Sahlins reports, Yan Li,

rallied students of the Waterloo Confucius Institute to "work together to fight with Canadian media," which was reporting the regime's heavy-handed action. Yan Li took class time to recount her version of Tibetan history and the current situation, using a map that showed Tibet clearly inside China. Thereupon the students launched a campaign against the Canadian media, protesting against newspapers, TV stations and online coverage they claimed was biased in favor of the Tibetans. The campaign succeeded to the extent that one TV station publicly apologized for its presentation of the conflict.²³

²² The Maryland CI website specifically notes that it offers "non-credit" courses. <https://www.international.umd.edu/cim/>.

²³ Sahlins, p. 40.

If the details of this incident are accurate as reported, it would be important to know the kind of class where this incident took place. It certainly might be inappropriate if the time “taken” occurred in a language class. In most cases, though, such situations could be handled administratively by advising the teacher about keeping course content relevant to the nature of the class. What is more troubling in an article supposedly written in the defense of the freedom of speech is the implication that some views, such as support for the Chinese position on Tibet, should not be allowed in our classrooms.

Perhaps in the interest of full disclosure I should acknowledge my own view, which I present in my Chinese history classes, that Tibetan independence advocates have a strong argument that Tibet’s connection to China was broken by the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 (since Tibet’s allegiance was to the Manchu emperors of this dynasty not to the Chinese nation). Unfortunately for the Tibetans, they found no international support for their declaration of independence in 1912 (unlike Mongolia which also declared independence in 1912 and eventually received recognition from the Soviet Union). Thus the P.R.C. was able to carry out the military re-occupation of Tibet in the 1950s without international opposition. While Western sympathy for the plight of the Tibetans under Chinese rule is widespread, no country (the U.S. and Canada included) contests China’s claim to Tibet. There are, of course, many competing academic and political arguments about Tibet’s status, but given this diversity of opinion presenting the Chinese side on the dispute hardly rises to the level of Holocaust or Global Warming denial that one might justifiably argue should be kept out of the classroom. Sahlins’ account of this incident actually devolves into the ridiculous by its apparent concern over a map that “showed Tibet clearly inside China.” In fact it would be hard to find an objective textbook used today in any country, including the United States, that does not show Tibet as inside China.

One of the uncomfortable principles of academic freedom is the autonomy of professors over the content of their own classes. Is this principle to be withdrawn in the case of visiting Chinese professors? Or only when their views happen to coincide with the official line of the Chinese government? Our willingness to allow a range of views to be expressed in the classroom is ultimately connected to a belief that our students will have multiple sources of information that will allow them to draw their own conclusions. Should we think that the students in the Waterloo case were simply dupes to one charismatic professor’s militant view? Or might some of these students actually have agreed with the professor’s opinion that the media’s coverage was too skewed toward the Tibetan side? Is it possible that the TV station actually apologized because they agreed that their reportage was biased? It is hard to believe that they were simply cowed by a student protest.

But Sahlins doesn’t actually center his exposé of “questionable practices of academic discourse” on cases found in actual Confucius Institute classrooms. Rather he circles back to Hanban policies or positions that he implies will affect the teaching in these classrooms. Thus he cites one early Hanban policy that many universities, quite rightly, found unacceptable: the inclusion of a clause expressing acceptance of China’s “one China principle” (supporting the P.R.C. claim that Taiwan is part of China) within CI agreement. As Sahlins notes, though, this requirement was soon dropped due to objections raised by CI

partners. Instead of seeing this as a positive concession to academic freedom, he cites it as an example of “the subterfuges practiced by Hanban to conceal policies that are objectionable by the common standards of scholarly knowledge and academic freedom in American universities and most others worldwide.” He proceeds to note that the Hanban website still contains a “description of Taiwan as “China’s largest island.”²⁴ At this point, though, he slips over from condemnation of an clearly unacceptable attempt, now abandoned, to force recognition of the “one China policy” on American institutions accepting CIs to opposition to any reflection of the “one China policy” in Hanban materials—as if agreeing not to demand acquiescence of this policy by foreign CI partners also required Hanban to abandon its own support for the official Chinese policy.

Does this example rise to the level of a questionable practice of academic discourse? As a matter of fact, the Hanban description of Taiwan on its website, while clearly not the phrasing preferred by Taiwan independence advocates, is not that controversial. Although I am myself a strong supporter of the right of the people of Taiwan to self-determination, it should be noted that the United States still adheres to a “one China policy” established in 1972 that “acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.”²⁵ The current government of Taiwan likewise negotiates with the P.R.C. under an implicit “consensus” that Taiwan is part of China (though disagreeing on what this means). To imply that the mere expression of the position that Taiwan is part of China on the Hanban website is unacceptable—when it is no longer attached to any pressure to force others to accept this view—seems more a breach than a defense of the concept of academic freedom.

Ultimately, I don’t believe we have much to fear in allowing Chinese scholars or teachers in our country to express their own strongly held views—even if they conflict with our own. Indeed, one purpose of all international academic exchanges is to encourage the expression of alternate views—not just to enrich intellectual debate but also to promote better understanding of international policies and attitudes that differ from our own. Even as the Chinese government may hope that greater familiarity with Chinese language and culture will reap soft power benefits for their country, the U.S. has traditionally promoted international exchanges (e.g. Fulbright programs) with a confidence that greater understanding of the U.S. through such exchanges will also deliver soft power benefits. One might argue that the ability to bring so many Chinese teachers into our communities through Confucius Institutes, where they may observe U.S. society first hand, may ultimately serve U.S. interests more than the Chinese.

In the end, there is very little evidence that CI instructors have turned their classrooms into platforms for the promotion of official Chinese political views. The likelihood for this is of course sharply reduced since they largely teach language classes that have little place for political exposition. CI detractors such as Sahlins have however found a different kind of

²⁴ Sahlins, p. 38.

²⁵ “Joint Communique of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China” (Shanghai Communique), February 28, 1972.

insidious political influence in the CI requirement that all instruction be offered in Mandarin and use “Standard” (that is, simplified rather than more complicated “traditional”) Chinese characters.²⁶

Although largely interpreted by Sahlins as an effort by the current P.R.C. regime to limit access to (and hence censor) “dissident and popular literature” produced by other Chinese societies (in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan) where traditional Chinese characters are still employed and other Chinese dialects are commonly spoken, debates over both the standardization of the spoken language (for reasons of national unity) and the simplification of the written language (to increase literacy) have been going on for nearly a 100 years. The P.R.C. decision to switch to simplified characters for pedagogical reasons in the 1950s became politicized as the rival Nationalist regime on Taiwan (which like the P.R.C., however, also strongly promoted the standardization of Mandarin for the spoken language) decided to show its devotion to traditional culture by the retention of traditional characters. Since that time, American language programs have been forced to take sides, with most originally deciding to stay with traditional characters but with a major shift toward simplified characters in later years. This shift has occurred not only for pedagogical reasons but also from a sense that today’s students—who look more toward career opportunities involving the P.R.C. than students in the past who were directed more toward the classical studies of traditional Sinology—would be better served by instruction in simplified characters. That many Chinese language departments made this decision of their own volition blunts the ominous insinuation that the use of simplified characters in CI classes is at its heart mainly an attempt at political control.

At the same time, the main argument against the teaching of simplified characters is based on an exaggeration of the difficulty of moving from one system to the other. Again in the interest of full disclosure, I should note that as a historian I would personally prefer that all students begin their Chinese language study with traditional characters. Nonetheless, despite student complaints, anyone trained in one system can with a little effort shift to the other. It is simply not true that instruction in simplified characters will create “a global distribution of scholars only semi-literate in Chinese” because of the difficulty of deciphering traditional characters in materials printed before the 1950s or outside mainland China.²⁷ Indeed, if the distinction between the two systems was so insurmountable, then one might also argue that learning Chinese in traditional characters would also produce a semi-literate population unable to access the literature of mainland China. Of course, those who seek to study China’s classic literature, or do business in Taiwan or Hong Kong, will obviously want to learn traditional characters at some point (just as I needed to learn simplified character to read works by P.R.C. historians). Although it is unlikely that CIs will lead the way in providing such instruction, nothing prevents a

²⁶ The fuller piece by Michael Churchman on which this argument is based can be found at: http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=026_confucius.inc&issue=026

²⁷ Sahlins, p. 37.

University with a CI from teaching traditional characters, or providing instruction in non-standard Chinese dialects, with its own resources.

Given the central charge of the Sahlins's article that the CIs "censor political discussions and restrain the free exchange of ideas," he strangely admits that, "direct evidence of restraints on academic discourse is not easy to come by."²⁸ His main argument for the violation of academic freedom by CIs, shared by many CI detractors, turns then not so much on what the CIs do but what they don't do. Thus Sahlins begins his article with a question to his Chicago source, Ted Foss (associate director of Chicago's Center for East Asian Studies), about whether the "CI had ever organized lectures or conferences on issues controversial in China, such as Tibetan independence or the political status of Taiwan"—which it has not. The ominous implication is that CIs censor the full range of expression by not actively offering programming on such topics.²⁹

But is the *lack* of such programming by Confucius Institutes really censorship? There is of course a simpler explanation. As noted above, the whole CI system has been established with the precisely defined mandate of promoting Chinese language and culture. One advantage of this restricted purpose is to allay foreign concerns that the CIs could serve as platforms for political propaganda. Under the very conditions that establish the CIs, then, it would be inappropriate for them to engage in public programming focusing on contemporary political issues. Yet the failure to offer such programs is taken as an example of censorship!

The vision of academic freedom supposedly promoted by Sahlins is, in the end, hardly very supportive of actual academic freedom. Any statement of support by CI teachers as individuals for causes, policies, or positions at odds with the sympathies of the CI detractors on topics such as Tibetan or Taiwan independence is somehow taken to be a threat to free expression. At the same time, censorship is defined as the failure of CIs to engage in political discussions and offer political events on topics outside their narrow educational mandate. And here detractors like Sahlins seem to be laying a trap: CIs are expected to offer events on Tibetan and Taiwan independence to prove they are not censoring such issues; but to offer counter perspectives supporting the P.R.C. view on these issues would be denounced as inappropriate propaganda. This is clearly a no-win situation intended to argue for the banning of CI no matter what they do (or don't do).

In his overview of Confucius Institutes in his recent book, *China Goes Global*, David Shambaugh concludes that, "Hanban has been quire careful *not* to advocate Beijing's political agenda."³⁰ Testimony by Americans involved in the operation of CIs reinforces the same point. Thus, the former director of the University of Maryland CI notes that they

²⁸ Sahlins, p. 38.

²⁹ Sahlins, p. 36.

³⁰ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford Univesity Press, 2013), p. 246.

encountered “no interference and no pressure at all.”³¹ It is perhaps not surprising then that CI detractors have found little proof of a direct *quid pro quo*—that is, an actual threat from Hanban conveyed through the CI that the university ban certain activities or face losing financial support for its CI. In the absence of such proof, the fallback position is a conspiratorial logic, or illogic, presented by Sahlins, who, after noting that “direct evidence of restraints on academic discourse is not easy to come by,” concludes that, “What little that is publicly known must be a small fraction of what is actually practiced.”³²

But should the absence of any expression of Chinese positions be a requirement for acceptance of CIs in our universities. It is easy to see circumstances where Chinese CI directors or other CI staff might express their disapproval of certain events such as an invitation for the Dalai Lama to speak on campus. But should their right to freedom of expression be denied? As many involved in programming public events about China know, Chinese embassies and Chinese consulates have also often contacted universities to express their disapproval of events being hosted on their campuses. The presentation of the Chinese position on such matters is their job—and they do this whether or not the university has a CI. What matters, in the end, is how the university responds to such protests.

For all my disagreement with Sahlins’ major arguments and approach, he raises one important and legitimate concern—the problem of self-censorship. Chinese studies instruction and China-focused programming is not, and should not be, limited to CIs. The full freedom of expression on American campuses is and should remain the best inoculation against Chinese “propaganda.” There is, however, growing anecdotal evidence, some cited in the Sahlins article, that some universities that have established CIs have decided not to hold events on topics seen as possibly offending the Chinese. While perhaps acting out of a misguided desire maintain Chinese financial support for their CIs, this kind of self-censorship actual endanger the entire CI program by giving credence to detractors’ claims that the very existence of CIs will ultimately undermine academic freedom.

The right approach is the one taken by the George Washington University upon the establishment of its CI, where the administration made it very clear in initial planning and in response to faculty inquiries that the University would accept no restriction on academic freedom as a condition for the establishment of a CI on campus. If an occasion ever arises where a direct demand is made for a university to censor some activity or face the loss of its CI, then the obvious choice would be to accept the loss of the CI. The chance of this happening, though, is reduced because the CIs have been created on the foundation of mutual interests that are as important to the Chinese as they are to its foreign partners. The Chinese understand that the issuance of any explicit political demands as a condition for continued CI funding would quickly become public and endanger the entire CI program.

³¹ Peter Schmidt, “At U.S. Colleges, Chinese-Financed Centers Prompt Worries About Academic Freedom,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 22, 2010, p. A8.

³² Sahlins, p. 38

Under these circumstances there is no reason then why continued activity by CIs should threaten the robust atmosphere of academic freedom on our campuses.

Finally, there is one new area in the development of CIs that has raised additional charges of censorship: the effort by some universities, starting with Chicago and continuing with other applicants such as GW, to obtain Hanban funding through their CIs for faculty research. Hanban's condition for such funding has been that it will have the ultimate right to determine which proposals will be funded—raising the specter of Chinese censorship of research based on political criteria. Nonetheless, the one example provided by Sahlins of this Hanban control—questioning projects on tenth-century art as not fitting Chicago's original pitch for research funding as focused on the modern Chinese economy—hardly puts Hanban in a bad light and is actually quite instructive. The scope for such research funding will have to be based on mutually agreed parameters, which will no doubt, just as in the case of other CI activities, place controversial political issues out of bounds. Sahlins is dismissive of a Chicago CI Board member who found no objection to “the required submission of research proposals to Beijing for approval and funding . . . , likening it to the practice of submitting proposals to the US Department of Education.”³³ But this seems an apt comparison. Scholars seeking Department of Education support must tailor their proposals to the specific objectives of the funded program or face rejection. The rejection of proposals outside such parameters, though, is hardly an example of censorship. Likewise, although CI research funding may be restricted to certain areas, this does not prevent scholars from pursuing these topics with other funding sources.

“Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend”

While this phrase seems a perfect expression of the principle of academic freedom, China scholars will recognize it as a slogan proclaimed by Mao Zedong in 1956 that in practice catastrophically failed to live up to its promise. Indeed, some argue that Mao used this slogan in a deliberate plot to entice his political and intellectual enemies out into the open where they could be decisively crushed. One would be foolish to think that Mao's heirs in Beijing today are any more committed to the principle of academic freedom, as we understand it, than was Mao. There is also no question that political censorship *in China* itself does not stop at the campus gate. It is not surprising, then, that many people viewed the appearance of government-funded Confucius Institutes on American campuses with alarm. Will these organizations extend these same restrictions on academic discourse to our universities? These are reasonable concerns that deserve to be debated. But at some point concerns must also go beyond a knee-jerk reaction against any collaboration with the authoritarian Chinese state to an evaluation based on the actual conditions of CI operations.

³³ Sahlins, p. 3.

Regular American academic engagement with the P.R.C. has been going on for nearly five decades, at least since the founding of the Committee for Scholarly Communications with the People's Republic of China in 1966. Today an increasing number of Chinese students are flooding into U.S. universities. In turn, many universities have developed expansive educational exchanges and collaborative research projects with a range of Chinese partners. With this history behind us, there is no lack of expertise at our universities capable of undertaking and evaluating cooperative arrangements such as the Confucius Institutes to identify areas of mutual benefit and to avoid any harm to the principles of academic freedom. The Chinese have also not been unresponsive to American concerns. One reflection of this is the rather cautious limitation of the CIs to the promotion of Chinese language and culture. We should accept this accommodation with good grace, without insisting that the CIs be forced to host events on controversial issues beyond this mandate, confident that there is more than enough space elsewhere on our campuses for the discussion of these issues. Personally, I hope that the collaboration established through the CIs may eventually open up possibilities for broader discourse on other topics. For this to happen, our commitment to academic freedom will have to be inclusive enough to allow our Chinese colleagues to express their opinions—yes, even if these opinions support official Chinese state policies. At the same time, our universities must also remain firm in their own commitment to academic freedom in the avoidance of even the appearance of self-censorship. In the end, China's hopes that the activities of the CIs will bring soft-power benefits in terms of reduced American antagonism to China should be matched by confidence in our own ability, with soft power benefits for the U.S., to show the Chinese, through the existence of CIs on our campuses, that open academic discourse is a positive value.

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