A Rejoinder to Marshall Sahlins

Recently I wrote a critique of an article written by the University of Chicago’s Marshall Sahlins (“China U”, published in The Nation, November 2013) where he raised objections to the establishment of Confucius Institutes in American Universities. Sahlins has now written a response to my critique, which can be found at: http://savageminds.org/2014/03/25/on-the-defense-of-confucius-institutes-at-the-university-of-chicago-for-example/
This is my rejoinder to Sahlins’ response.

On Governance of the Confucius Institute

Sahlins begins his response to my critique by doubling down on what he still apparently thinks as a startling revelation that the Chinese organization that oversees the Confucius Institute (CI) program, abbreviated as Hanban, is “an instrument of the Party State.” (I would note in passing his prejudicial choice of such phrasing to create a biased impression of China. In an objective discussion, would we ever denigrate an agency of the U.S. government by calling it an “instrument of the State”?) His argument remains that the frequent referral to the standard description of Hanban (as stated on its official English website) “as a public institution affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education” is a deliberate effort by the Chinese to hide the state presence behind this organization. Disregarding the actual meaning of the word “affiliated,” Sahlins argues that it is a “self-representation that has resulted in a near-universal presumption that Hanban is under the control of the Chinese Ministry of Education, and accordingly that it is fundamentally a pedagogical initiative, engaged generously (as a “non-profit organization”) in meeting the great demand abroad for Chinese language instruction.” As in his original article he then goes on to reveal that Hanban is actually overseen by a council appointed by the Chinese State Council.

I do not disagree with the fact that official descriptions of Hanban often note its affiliation with the Ministry of Education, nor that Hanban is directly overseen by a State Council-appointed committee. I do take issue with the argument that just because many people have misread the word “affiliated” to mean more direct control by the Ministry of Education this proves some kind of Chinese plot to deceive. First, I have the unfortunate habit of thinking that words (like “affiliated”) should be taken to mean what they mean. Second, it seems peculiar that the Chinese would use the word affiliation if they meant to imply something more. Finally, as I noted in my original response, and which Sahlins acknowledges, his evidence that the ultimate governing body for Hanban is a council appointed by the State Council is openly presented on the same Hanban website. In other words there is no attempt to hide the actual governing structure from anyone who wants to see it. So where is the deception? I cannot speak to how Professor Sahlins may have felt misled by members of his own institution in the way they may (or may not) have presented the Hanban governance structure. But at least he should put the blame where it belongs—which is clearly not the Chinese government. And his persistence in trying to argue that “affiliated” means something other than “affiliated” suggests some blame on his own part in this misunderstanding.

In the end, there is in fact nothing incorrect with the statement that Hanban is a “non-profit organization affiliated with the Ministry of Education.” It is affiliated with the Ministry of
Education. And it is a non-profit organization (Sahlins may be viewing this thru American eyes with an expectation that non-profits must be non-governmental organizations, even though in China all non-profits are under strict state control and regulation). At the same time, there is no contradiction between this affiliation with the Ministry of Education and oversight by a separate governing council appointed by the State Council. Such overlapping affiliations and even multiple chains of authority are not uncommon in Chinese organizations. My own impression, which is also supported by organizational charts on the Hanban website, is that the role of the Ministry of Education might actually be even stronger than “affiliation.” (So maybe there is some truth to the way that some people have interpreted the word “affiliation”—though this would of course undermine Sahlins’ argument since he seeks to show that this suggested connection is merely a ruse). The central relationship in the establishment of all CIs is a partnership between specific Chinese universities and a foreign hosting institution. In China, all educational institutions, including all these CI partner universities, come under the direct control of the Ministry of Education. Strong support and oversight by the Ministry of Education is therefore essential to insure cooperation by individual universities in the CI program. For those who understand how the Chinese bureaucracy operates, the prominent mention of this affiliation with the Ministry of Education is not meant to fool people into thinking Hanban is an educational institution when it is not but to reassure potential partners that the CIs have complete support of the nation’s educational officials.

This also explains the unabashed prominence given to the membership of the governing council on the Hanban website, with, as Sahlins notes, descriptions of the various government affiliations, and a picture, of each council member. The composition of supervisory committees of this nature are a Chinese way of signaling the level of government support. In his short term of office, the new Chinese President Xi Jinping has established, and has appointed himself to the leadership of, a succession of new committees or commissions dealing with a range of pressing issues. In Chinese practice, this does not mean that Xi spends his time running from committee to committee as they pursue their tasks. Rather his leadership is used to signal the importance placed on the issues these committees address. The Hanban supervisory council is also a collection of powerful officials who, given their other duties, no doubt have little time to intervene in the actual management or operation of Confucius Institutes. But the organization of Confucius Institutes represents a very large commitment of effort and resources by the Chinese government, which as such also requires the active cooperation of various branches of the government. The make-up of the council, with its prominent members, is therefore both meant to signal the commitment of the government at very high levels to this project and to provide a vehicle for coordination among concerned agencies. It is an interesting lesson in cross cultural misperceptions that the Chinese desire to show the Hanban’s official connections is exactly what fills people such as Sahlins with less understanding of China with alarm.

In the end, the main point of Sahlins’ emphasis on revealing governing oversight by a State Council appointed committee seems to be to question the nature of the Confucius Institutes as a primarily pedagogical initiative. So, first he suggests that the statement of the Ministry of Education affiliation is meant to deceive people into thinking the CIs are mainly educational; second, suggests that an oversight role by the State Council proves that education can’t be their main purpose. Thus he states with confidence that contrary to the stated educational goals of Hanban and the Confucius Institutes, “The functions and interests of the Chinese State Council
and the Politburo are not the creation through education of a harmonious multicultural world in partnership with all the other peoples.” It is hard to understand the basis for this assertion except that he is leaping to the conclusion that as a “state” organization the State Council could not possibly take a serious interest in education. This is a peculiar and jaundiced misunderstanding of the Chinese government, or for that matter any government. The State Council is China’s highest executive body—led by the Premier and including ministers from all administrative ministries (including, as a matter of fact, the Ministry of Education) as well as leaders from other top non-ministerial organizations. The nearest equivalent in the American system would be the President’s Cabinet. While I accept that executive coordinating bodies such as the State Council (or the U.S. Cabinet) may have their own specific interests, these interests in no way void the various goals and objectives of the various Ministries and/or Departments that come under their purview. If the State Council gives Hanban an educational mission, then there is no reason to suspect that Hanban is not, fundamentally, an educational organization. Sahlins may suspect that Hanban’s stated mission is not its “real” mission, but citing ultimate State Council control as if to prove this point is ridiculous.

Overall, though, I still remain confused by Sahlins’ continued effort to distinguish between Ministry of Education or State Council control (particularly since administratively the Ministry of Education also comes under the State Council)—a point I try to make in my earlier piece. But Sahlins states that in that case I argued “sophistically” (as is my wont, he notes), in saying that the Ministry of Education is also “an instrument of the Party State.” This is not a sophistical “argument;” it is a statement of fact. All education in China comes under centralized governmental control, and the Ministry of Education is the state agency that exerts this control. So my point was that it doesn’t really matter who directs, or controls, or is affiliated with Hanban; Hanban is still controlled by the Chinese state. This then returns to the question I raised in my previous paper, to which Sahlins does not respond: If one believes there should be NO collaboration by American universities with any Chinese educational organizations because they are all controlled by the state, then this is certainly an issue that can be discussed. But this discussion should involve not just the Confucius Institutes but also the thousands of other educational collaborations already underway between Chinese and American universities and colleges. In turn, though, I think the experience of these widespread joint Chinese-American collaborations shows that the dangers seen by CI detractors, based mainly on the concerns over connections to the Chinese state, are wildly exaggerated.

This broader context aside, Sahlins does indeed have a specific concern, noted in his original article, that Confucius Institutes are actually “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda set-up,” as noted in a commonly cites statement by a leading Chinese official. In my previous response, I argued that if examined in context, this official was referring to soft power influence, not to direct propaganda. Offering his own evidence to support this view of the propaganda purposes of the CIs, however, Sahlins cited an article in the People’s Daily, which he claimed “declared as much.” Closely examined, however, the passage cited made no such declaration (not even “as much”). Failing to make this case, Sahlins shifts his conclusion he draws from the article in his newer piece to claim that the Confucian Institutes as discussed in the article “appeared as an integral part of Chinese global-political competition.” I have less problem with this reading, but Sahlins still takes me to task for observing that I saw the causality in this article as the other way around—that the spread of Confucius Institutes in the article is represented as a
reflection of China’s rising power not as a factor contributing to it. I therefore saw, and continue to see the mention of CIs in this article (even with a longer citation provided by Sahlins in his second piece), as an expression of Chinese pride. Sahlins responds to this now by saying, “Maybe, but this article was published in the overseas edition of the People’s Daily, thus for English speakers, to whom it is defiantly presented as a challenge.” If this was meant to be a devastating rejoinder, I fail to see its logic. Initially I thought Sahlins was maybe arguing that it was unlikely for the Chinese to publish an expression of national pride in a paper directed at foreigners; but if true this should say even more about making a defiant challenge. I actually see no reason why a publication directed at English speakers should avoid expressions of national pride, which is what I see in the passage: “Why is China receiving so much attention now? It is because of its ever-increasing power. … Today, we have a different relationship with the world and the West: we are no longer left to their tender mercies. Instead we have slowly risen and are becoming their equal.” I don’t actually see Chinese aspirations for equality in this statement as inappropriate, or even as a defiant challenge.

Sahlins then asserts his anthropological authority to question my naïve (the text writes “native” but I assume he meant naïve) general inability to see the relationship between politics and culture—bolstered by his understanding that cultural transformation was always related to political domination for the Chinese state (as seen in historical examples of the cultural assimilation of conquered peoples). His assumption of my naiveté seems to be a response to my assertion that in the end we have little to fear from the type of language classes or cultural programming offered by CIs. I did not think that taking this position suggested that I was oblivious to any possible connection between culture and power. But my understanding of Chinese history makes me reluctant to accept the simplistic lesson Sahlins draws from the Chinese case that “to distinguish cultural transformation from political domination would be . . . a category mistake.” For most of history, the “Chinese” state was an empire that was in fact multi-ethnic and multi-cultural (as is the modern Chinese state). I put “Chinese” in quotes here because the concept of “China” as a way of identifying these earlier empires is relatively modern (that is, a projection of a modern concept of the Chinese nation-state back to early states). The idea of “Chinese” expansion by cultural assimilation is also based on the now largely discredited essentialist idea of a dominant and unchanging “Chinese” culture replacing other cultures with the expansion of the Chinese state. In fact, this “assimilation” involved the integration of many different cultural elements from within (and sometimes from without) the borders of the imperial state. This is not to say that the imperial state did not pursue some cultural policies it saw as beneficial in consolidating its power (for example, promoting Confucian-based education directed at increasing participation in state civil service examinations as a way of attaching local elites from all ethnicities to the imperium). And it is certainly true that in modern China, as in most other modern nation-states, the unification of language has been an important policy in the creation of national identity. But to see culture merely as a tool for the extension of political power seems excessive. Of course, I can hardly claim be up on most current anthropological understandings of “culture,” but I can’t imagine the discourse on this subject has resulted the simplistic reduction that culture is power and power is culture, as suggested by Sahlins when he notes, “Where there is Chinese culture, there is Chinese power—inasmuch as the culture is an emanation of the power.” My own sense is that Sahlins takes the not-contested concept that culture and power are often connected to posit an absolutist relationship between culture and power in the Chinese case, the purpose of which mainly seems to present Chinese culture itself
as a danger to our society. Is Sahlins really suggesting that the spread of Chinese language classes in the U.S. is the first step in a process of political assimilation? If this is true shouldn’t we also be afraid of all Chinese language and culture classes, even when not taught by CI instructors? Should we consider purging our museums of Chinese art to eliminate these emanations of Chinese power from our midst? This seems to be the logical conclusion of Sahlins’ formulation of the culture-power relationship. I don’t believe the arguments Sahlins wants to make against Confucius Institutes actually require such a broad theoretical justification, but it may serve his purpose mainly as a way to insert more fear of China into the discussion.

Teaching

A central part of Sahlins criticism of the CIs is related to the provision of teachers and teaching materials from China to the CIs for Chinese language instruction. He makes this ominous by restating the scope of activities and the various responsibilities set down in CI agreements for respective parties as “rights” and “stipulations” that give Hanban authority over the curriculum of CI host institutions. He acknowledges that in many cases the CIs don’t actually operate according to what he thinks these “stipulations” require, but in his mind this just proves the academic and ethical dishonesty of the administrators involved rather than raising questions as to whether his interpretation of these “stipulations” is correct.

So what are the conditions in CI agreements on which Sahlins bases his claims? Sahlins points to six main articles in Chicago’s CI agreement. First he pulls out two clauses under the “Scope of Activities” section that define the CIs agreed upon function, which include:

1. Teaching Chinese language and providing Chinese language teaching resources;
2. Training Chinese language instructors…

Second, he cites four articles under the section on the Hanban’s “Obligations” to the CI:

2. Upon launch of the [Chicago] Institute to provide the Institute 3000 volumes of Chinese books, teaching materials, and audio-visual materials on a one-time basis.
3. To provide teaching materials, courseware, and other books, and to authorize the use by the Institute of online courses depending on need and upon mutual consultation.
3 [sic]. To provide $200,000 in start-up funds to the University of Chicago …
4. To send sufficient numbers of qualified instructors based on the Institute’s requirements of teaching and pay for their air fares and salaries.”

(Note that while this is obviously based on the University of Chicago agreement, the main categories are similar to the model CI agreement provided by Hanban).

I would repeat my original charge that Sahlins claim, which he still tries to defend, that these articles gives Hanban “the right to supply the teachers, textbooks, and curriculum of the courses in its charge” is a deliberate and inflammatory misrepresentation of the above clauses intended to suggest that the university has given control of its classes over to a propaganda arm of the Chinese state. I think anyone reading the passages he supplies would be hard-pressed to draw the same conclusions as he does.
Certainly the main activity, almost a requirement, for all CIs is “teaching Chinese language.” But there is no “stipulation” as to how this is to be done; and in fact, given the lack of further explanation, how this objective is met varies from one CI to the next. In most cases, the Hanban supplied teachers (actually Hanban arranges for the CIs specific Chinese university partner to provide these teachers from their faculty) are engaged in non-credit “outreach” language courses to the general community. In some CIs, such as the University of Maryland’s, the CI teachers have never been involved in offering for-credit classes in the regular university curriculum. In the case of Chicago, though, it seems that its teachers are lent out to teach regular for-credit language classes in the University’s Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations. Given this situation, Sahlins may be forgiven for thinking that CIs are “an academic unit that provides accredited instruction in Chinese language and culture.” In the case of his university, though, Sahlins is simply wrong to claim that the CI offers these classes as an “academic unit,” since they are clearly being offered through the EALL Department.

This situation also seems to demolish Sahlins’ argument that approval of the CI violated University rules requiring “any entity with teaching responsibilities” be approved by their faculty senate. While I can hardly claim to be an expert on the possible intricacies of the Chicago’s statutes, such rules no doubt relate to academic units that actually offer their own classes, not to the provision of visiting lecturers for courses offered by an already approved department. Perhaps finding no traction on this issue, Sahlins turns to attack the reputations of Chinese studies faculty who unanimously approved the CI with what seems a nearly libelous charge that they sold their votes in order to gain research funds from the CI. While in his conclusion Sahlins expresses his concern that acceptance of the CI has harmed Chicago’s reputation, I would think that such casual and unsubstantiated charges against these faculty members presents more harm to the University’s reputation than joining nearly 100 other schools in establishing a CI.

It is certainly true that Hanban supplies, and the CI makes available, a large amount of teaching materials. But again, a reading of the agreement clauses that Sahlins supplies provides no support for his assertion that the agreement gives Hanban the right to supply textbooks or set the curriculum for Chicago’s classes. Nonetheless he dismisses the assurances he received from University administrators that “the courses taught by teachers provided by Hanban, as included in the regular offerings of the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, conform to the standards of the department in matters of textbooks, curriculum, courseware, and all else.” His peculiar objection is that by maintaining this control, which he approves of, the University ignores the clauses of the CI agreement, making in effect the agreement “null from the get go,” which shows a lack of ethical integrity. The problem again is that the specific stipulations he mysteriously reads into the CI agreement simply do not exist. In the end, he seems mainly frustrated that the University has failed to behave in a way that would confirm his own suspicions.

There a certainly misdirection in his argumentation though that suggests that the real issue is not Hanban’s specified “rights” but a broader concern that Chinese teachers would be teaching in our (or any) classrooms with Chinese materials at all. Thus he notes,
Professor McCord apparently objects that this [Hanban’s supply of teachers and textbooks]
doesn’t mean these teachers need teach Chinese language and culture in the way they were
trained or use the texts provided for their courses. The host institutions are at liberty to defy
in practice the stipulations and intentions on these matters in the agreements they sign with
Hanban. Fair enough, although the possibilities and inclinations for doing so must decline
precipitously in the smaller universities and colleges that are largely or wholly dependent
Confucius Institutes for their Chinese language offerings, let alone the numerous “Confucius
Classrooms” in secondary and primary schools—even in the US, not to mention what goes
on in Tanzania and other countries.

The way he restates my argument suggests his discomfort not just with “rights” but whether CI
teachers might still teach “the way they were trained or use the texts provided,” reinforced by his
altruistic concern that smaller or foreign schools would be able to resist the “possibilities and
inclinations” to do so. Sahlins language here is admittedly imprecise, but the tenor of his
objection seems to go deeper than just a matter of curricular authority. A simple question I
would have for Professor Sahlins, then, is whether he actually finds something objectionable to
these materials themselves. Is he suggesting that they are filled with inappropriate propaganda?

Since the decision to promote Confucius Institutes around the world, production of Chinese
language teaching material in China has exploded exponentially. As part of my own university’s
investigation into the possibility of establishing a CI, I had the opportunity to spend a good
amount of time at Hanban headquarters examining their extensive collection of teaching
materials and toured one of their language material production centers affiliated with Wuhan
University. I have to admit that there was some inconsistency in the pedagogical quality of the
materials I examined—some were very good, and some were rather weak. But these materials
bore no similarity to the heavily politicized materials found, for example, in the Cultural
Revolution era. I have some familiarity with such materials since we actually used them in
Chinese classes when I studied Chinese language in the Cold War era with the goal of improving
our ability to understand and analyze the Communist jargon of that era. So I think I could
recognize propaganda when I see it. Even if Sahlins won’t trust my testimony on the innocuous
nature of most Chinese instructional materials, after the establishment of nearly 100 CIs over 20
years, there should be a considerable amount of evidence if Hanban supplied materials contained
a significant amount of “objectionable” content. Where is this evidence? Try as he may, Sahlins
in both articles combined he only cites several examples of what he clearly sees as objectionable
content. Thus he notes a mention of Taiwan as part of China on the Hanban website, the
inclusion of Tibet in a map of China used by a Chinese teacher, and several instances in Hanban
materials where the U.S. the Korean War is described as the “War of U.S. Aggression.” In my
previous piece I explained why his Taiwan and Tibet examples hardly pass as egregious
violations. I will not try to justify the Chinese interpretation of the Korean War, except to note
that it is based on a commonly shared view in China that America intervened in what they see
not as an invasion of one country by another but an internal civil war. One of the problems of
making any mention of the Korean War in Chinese materials though is that the official Chinese
name for the war is precisely this: “The War of U.S. Aggression in Korea,” which makes it
rather hard to refer to the war in neutral terms. Perhaps these few examples, out of the thousands
of volumes supplied to each CI as part of Hanban’s “obligation,” are sufficient enough for
Sahlins to argue that all Chinese language materials need to be kept out of American classrooms.
But his concern that teachers in CI host institutions *may* choose to use these materials, even if they are not forced to use them, seems to suggest that it is simply the use of Chinese materials not the content in them that bothers him. For Sahlins, the defense of academic freedom in the U.S. seems to require the banning not only of materials he finds objectionable but any materials produced in Communist China.

But Sahlins concerns do not end with the materials provided but with the teachers supplied. Sahlins seems to find the fact that Hanban pledges to provide “trained” teachers particularly ominous. What is the training referred to here that makes it so dangerous? We should not forget that the teachers being supplied are predominantly language instructors. The insistence that Hanban supply qualified teachers clearly arose from the concerns of host institutions to make sure that the teachers provided would have the proper credentials or experience to be effective language instructors. Sahlins notes that my response to his concern about the supply of teachers is apparently “that this doesn’t mean these teachers need to teach Chinese language and culture in the way they were trained.” This is certainly not my suggestion, but it shows his state of mind. Does he actually think there is something dangerous about the pedagogical training of Chinese language teachers that is different from language teachers elsewhere? As a matter of fact he does, in the sense that he thinks they have been trained to avoid discussion of controversial contemporary political issues in their language classes. Before examining this issue though it is important to look at the other issues Sahlins raises about the supply of these teachers and their relationship to and status in American host institutions.

Sahlins seems much provoked by how these teachers are supplied, and the role American institutions play in this process. He is particularly upset by what he sees as incorrect descriptions of this process by various Chicago administrators, including a statement by Dali Yang, head of the Chicago CI, that “The University is fully engaged in the hiring process for Chinese teachers.” He learned through a CI teacher, that the American role is in fact largely limited to the right of rejection of teachers they see as unsuitable, but that even this right is rarely asserted. Given the CI teachers I have known, I think this situation is largely explained by the quality of the instructors proffered that makes rejection rare. Sahlins clearly doesn’t accept my argument that under these conditions, the Chicago process might still be considered “full engagement.” But I guess my rebuttal would then be that as long as the teachers are of high quality what difference does it make?

There are however other issues arising from the position of CI teachers in American institutions that concern CI detractors such as Sahlins. In this regard, though, Sahlins remains largely ignorant of the actual status of CI teachers on American campuses, including his own.

In my last piece I argued that some of the confusion about the status of these teachers has been created by the inappropriate use of the word “hiring” in describing the way these teachers are supplied, as seen in Dali Yang’s statement. (To be fair, Yang was no doubt using this term in a casual instead of a legal sense, since the purpose of the sentence was to talk about university engagement not legal statuses). Sahlins, however, dismisses outright my “assertion” that “Hanban-supplied teachers are not actually “hired” by their host schools but continue to be members of faculty in their own Chinese universities” by the circular argument that “Chicago administrators” in effect dismissed this claim by their use of the word “hiring” in this same
statement. So the use of the word “hiring” cannot have been wrong because this is the word that was used.

Rather than continuing with such contorted argumentation, Sahlins could solve the entire issue by asking his University’s lawyers to respond directly to my “assertion” and to clarify the actual status of the CI teachers. Instead, Sahlins makes his own slapdash assertion that, “Chinese instructors are given standard lectureship titles together with all the privileges thereof, not to mention additions to their Hanban salaries and the usual faculty perquisites.” Is this true? Are CI instructors “hired” with all the perquisites of “standard” faculty. Sahlins (purposely?) neglects to provide the actual titles assigned to these teachers, which can be easily found on the University website to be “visiting lecturer.” Is this a standard faculty title? The University’s “Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws” state that, “The Members of the University Faculties are classified as follows: Professor, Associate Professor, Collegiate Assistant Professor, and Instructor. Every person holding one of these titles with status as defined in 11.1 shall be a member of the Faculty” (Statute 11.1). So clearly we are dealing with a special sub-category of “visiting” instructors, whom I suspect receive some but no all of the privileges accorded to regular full-time faculty.

Even accepting CI instructors as visiting faculty, Sahlins argues that my description of CI instructors as following the normal practice of instructional visitors in faculty exchange programs is “off-target” because, “visiting professors in American universities are uniquely selected and hired by these universities, not by institutions in their countries of origin (as in the CI case).” But here Sahlins makes the mistake of using one category of visiting professor to fit them all. What he describes is a common practice of short-term hires of “visiting” instructors (under a range of specific titles), often hired to teach the classes of regular faculty who are on leave. Except in cases where a scholar of some renown might be borrowed from another university for a temporary stay, most of these visiting instructors indeed have no other university affiliation. My reference was to visitors who come as part of faculty exchange programs. Because the scholars are not U.S. citizens, the procedures followed for the more common “hiring” of replacement faculty cannot be used. These visitors enter the U.S. under specific visas issued by the Department of State under its “Exchange Visitor Program,” which allows faculty from foreign universities to engage in research, teaching, lecturing, observing and consulting. Foreign scholars or teachers who enter the U.S. under such exchange programs remain attached to institutions in their home countries; they are not “hired” by the American “host” university (indeed they cannot be “hired” into regular faculty positions at the host university under these visas). Confucius Institutes are recognized as bona fide exchange visitor programs by the Department of State, and CI instructors enter the U.S. under the provisions and restrictions of this program. That means that they are indeed selected from among the faculty of the partner Chinese universities, where they retain their original faculty affiliations. One way to understand the “normalcy” of this arrangement is to consider the Fulbright program, which selects faculty from American universities to teach or do research in foreign universities. In these cases as well, the American faculty retain their faculty status at their home universities no matter what privileges they may enjoy at their host universities.

The status of CI “visiting lecturers” is important because of the issues that have been raised in an oft-cited case of a CI teacher in Canada who claimed that her host institution by accepting her through the CI program was complicit in discriminatory hiring practices in China, which forced
her to hide her Falun Gong beliefs. It is true that faculty in Chinese universities are forced to swear that they are not members of illegal organizations, which in China includes the Falun Gong. Sahlins rejects my argument that host institutions are in fact not complicit in this discriminatory hiring because no actual hiring takes place by simply reasserting his own misguided understanding of the status of CI teachers based on the use of the term “hiring” in the Dali Yang statement. Furthermore, in his view, to the extent that the CI faculty are held to what we see as discriminatory requirements, American universities in “hiring” these faculty must be doing do in accordance with Chinese law and in violation of American law. Since he does not understand the actual process by which visiting foreign scholars come to American universities, he also dismisses my assertion that all such exchange programs would be threatened by an insistence that the universities where these faculty come from follow American hiring standards. In my own experience I have known of faculty who have come to my university under the same exchange visitor program from universities in Morocco, Taiwan, Turkey, and Singapore. I suspect that none of these universities would have been able to show that their faculty hiring practice fulfilled D.C.’s fairly extensive anti-discriminatory requirements. I suppose that American Universities could make a political statement by rejecting any visiting faculty or visiting scholars from China until the Chinese conform to our values in the hiring of university faculty. But if adherence to U.S. anti-discriminatory values and practices in exchange visitor programs is a principle Americans such as Sahlins want to stand on, then it should not be applied in a biased fashion only in the case of China.

These concerns about complicity in hiring practices in China that would be illegal in the U.S. are connected by Sahlins to a condition he sees in CI agreements that both parties respect and act in accord with the laws of both countries, which in his view makes U.S. partners liable to follow Chinese law in the operation of CIs in the United States. Sahlins simply rejects my argument that the actual conflict in this statement (since you can’t operate under two legal systems), means that the Chinese government has no legal standing to enforce its laws on American CIs in the United States. I am of course not a lawyer, but if Sahlins doesn’t believe me, I would advise again that he simply take his questions to his own University lawyers rather than speculating on the legal peril he thinks this clause might represent.

In any case, the Chinese government has not in fact attempted to enforce its laws in regard to CIs in the U.S. under the provisions of these agreements. This is also probably proof that they have no legal standing. Although Sahlins may not care, I think it is also useful to understand that the origin of this clause derives not from the Chinese desire to find a way to place American universities under Chinese law, but a nationalist reaction against the ways in which foreign powers imposed their own laws on China in the past. The foreign treaties forced on China beginning in the mid-19th century (and lasting until the mid-20th century) insisted on the principle of extraterritoriality, which meant that foreigners living, trading, or even visiting in China could not be held subject to Chinese law. Foreigners who committed crimes in China could not be arrested by Chinese police, foreigners buying property in China could not be taxed by the Chinese state. As a matter of principle, then, the Chinese now insist that there should be mutual respect for the laws of both countries in any agreement. What this means in practice is that the laws of each country are applicable in the country where a legal issue arises. To make this clearer, most University lawyers will insist on adding a clause assuring the adjudication of legal disputes over CIs from activities in the U.S. will take place in the U.S. courts under U.S.
law. The Chinese assume in turn, though they don’t insist on any specific legal language to this effect, that violations of Chinese law that occurs with any CI sponsored activity in China will be dealt with by Chinese law.

Censorship

As I noted in my previous piece, despite “the central charge of the Sahlins’ 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.’” So instead his original article focused to a great extent not on what the CIs have done but what they don’t do. He now doubles down on this point as well to argue even more strongly that the failure of the CIs to cover some topics in their classes or in their programming is a form of censorship. In other words, it is not a censorship that involves the suppression of free speech of others but the demand that teachers or other individuals associated with the CI are engaged in censorship if they are unwilling to speak out themselves on topics that puts China in a bad light (focusing mainly on the three T’s: Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen). This is a peculiar definition of censorship to say the least.

In my piece, I did point to what I considered a troubling tendency of some schools hosting CIs to engage in self-censorship. In other words, while there is no evidence that China makes demands that the universities censor certain types or speech or coverage of certain topics within the university in order to receive or maintain their CIs, some university administrators seem to be deciding to censor such activities anyway in order to avoid offending the Chinese. While this may indeed please their Chinese partners, the blame for such self-censorship goes to weak-willed American administrators not to the Chinese themselves. Sahlins now extends this concept of self-censorship to the CIs, but in this case it is not the ability of the CIs to ban the discussion of some topics by others on campus but their own unwillingness to speak or offer programming on these topics.

In my first piece, I argued that in determining the mission of the CIs, the Chinese purposely decided to focus specifically on language instruction and cultural programming to avoid topics that Americans might find offensive. Sahlins’ outrage over the case of a CI teacher who dared to challenge, in class, the media portrayal of China’s treatment of Tibet (which Sahlins apparently sees as an example of propaganda rather than a free expression of opinion) shows that this was probably a wise decision. Given that the mission of the CIs as constituted does not cover the discussion or study of contemporary political events, I argue that no fault arises by the CI failure to cover such topics in their programming or in classes taught by their teachers. And I note that the failure of the CIs to cover topics outside its mission in no way prevents the discussion of these topics elsewhere in the University. Sahlins rejects this argument noting, “At the University of Chicago we are told that what is not politically appropriate at the Confucius Institute can always be sponsored by the Center for East Asian Studies. By that reasoning, there could be permissible censorship in every department, institute, and center in the University, so long as there was one where all viewpoints could be freely expressed.” Based on Sahlins’ definition of “censorship” I would say that this is already the norm in most universities—but that we appropriately don’t consider this censorship. For example, I suspect that most Departments of Physics don’t hold events discussing Obamacare, and my own Department of History doesn’t
present lectures on new trends in Biochemistry, but these topics are fully covered by other academic units that see these topics in their purview. Sahlins seems to think that since the CIs cover China they must cover every aspect of China—even if their specific mandate is much more limited to just language and cultural instruction. Nonetheless, to my knowledge the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures in my university also does not offer programming on topics such as political suppression in Tibet—and I suspect this is true for language departments across the country. Does this mean that they are also complicit in imposing censorship in our universities? Or that they are simply asserting their right to determine programming suitable to their specific mission?

In his most recent article, Sahlins shifts his perspective on CI censorship per se to focus much more on what goes on inside CI classrooms. In his earlier article, Sahlins cited the testimony of one former CI teacher, who noted,

“If my students asked me about Tibet or about other sensitive topics, I should have the right to…express my opinion…. During my training in Beijing they do tell us: “Don’t talk about this. If the student insists, you just try to change the topic or say something the Chinese Communist Party would prefer.”

Of course, the speaker in this case was a Falun Gong member who made this statement in the midst of an anti-CI discrimination suit against the university where she was assigned—so there could be some bias in her account. This statement does however seem to be the basis for Sahlins’ broader suspicion of the “training” of CI instructors. Teachers assigned to CIs do seem to receive a short training program in Beijing prior to their departure, but the description by the director of the Chinese language program at Chicago, whom Sahlins interviewed, puts this training in a more benign light. Thus it is noted that selected teachers:

. . . 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.”

Is it possible that part of this training provides suggestions on how to respond to American questions about sensitive political topics? This is not unlikely. Most Chinese are not comfortable talking about political issues, particularly with foreigners, so I would not be at all surprised if this question is addressed in CI departure programs. (When I received a fellowship to do research in China in the early 1980s, I also attended a departure training session in Washington, D.C., where we asked similar questions about how to deal with confrontational questions from Chinese about U.S. policies). In any case, the issue then is whether and how this translates into “censorship” on American campuses. Sahlins’ main charge is that this occurs through the avoidance, based on Hanban training, of controversial political topics (represented mainly again by the three T’s) by CI teachers in their classes.

Sahlins cites an ethnographic study that served as a basis for forthcoming article by Jennifer Hubbert as providing new evidence to support his position. (“Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the American Classroom,” PoLAR: Political and
The subject of this study is actually a college-preparatory school, grades 6-12, rather than a University, but I suspect that many of Hubbert’s results would not differ that much from the experience of college-based CIs. Hubbert reports, and Sahlins cites, incidents at this school where teachers in language classes either remained silent or changed the subject when politically sensitive issues such as Tiananmen protests were raised by students, as well as student complaints about the lack of classroom discussion of such issues. She also notes the absence of any discussion of these issues in Hanban supplied materials. Based on these cases, Sahlins proceeds to conclude that Hubbert’s interviews back up his argument that CI teachers “have been trained by Hanban to divert discussions of sensitive political topics when they arise in the classroom.” The evidence from Hubbert’s article is not, however, so straightforward. She does observe that the CI teachers were fully aware of “Hanban’s pedagogical guidelines and the curriculum designers’ attempts to depoliticize the classroom.” At the same time, she also notes, although this point is ignored by Sahlins, that the CI teachers felt they were free to ignore Hanban’s teaching guidelines, and were able to replace Hanban supplied materials with American produced textbooks that they thought were more effective. Hubbert also reported that one teacher, “insisted to me that Hanban tells teachers to “do whatever you want” in the classroom.” So what are the sources of the classroom silences that Hubbert found? Her interviews suggested that the teachers generally shared broad soft power goals of trying to counter negative impressions that they felt were not a true representation of China. Ironically, Hubbert reports that the reluctance to discuss negative topics were still viewed politically by the students and their parents, and so confirmed rather than challenged their assumptions of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state. Hubbert notes that the teachers recognized this problem, and that in some cases found that opening up more fully to their students had better results. Hubbert’s results thus portray something more complicated than Sahlins’ own conclusion “that censorship with regard to controversial topics potentially embarrassing to the PRC regime is structurally inscribed in the Confucius Institute project, as a matter of teachers’ training and classroom performance.”

The ability of the students Hubbert studied to assess, and draw their own conclusions from, the instruction they received (with “fluffy bunny” content often reinforcing negative impressions of China), also seems to undermine Sahlins argument against my suggestion that (college) students who were mobilized by a Chinese teacher against media bias on China’s Tibetan policies may not have been simple “dupes”. He argues that maybe they weren’t dupes, but “what was the alternative?” Maybe Sahlins simply has less respect for the independent thinking of the students he teaches than I do for mine.

Sahlins also seems to think that the fact that the students in the cases cited by Hubbert asked questions on sensitive political topics basically demolishes the “frequently voiced argument, also rehearsed by Professor McCord, that after all a course on Chinese language and culture has little or no place for discussion of the status of Taiwan or the blood spilled at Tiananmen, the errors of the CCP or the jailing of dissident democracy advocates.” I am not yet ready to concede this point, for several reasons. First, in discussing the topics not covered in Hanban supplied materials, Hubbert also notes that, “In fairness, elementary French and Spanish language textbooks used in American schools do not dwell on contentious aspects of their national history, either.” This made me realize that my own feeling that discussions about controversial political issues have no real place in language classes was rooted in my own experience taking classes not
only in Chinese but also in French and Japanese (where issues such as French collaborators in World War II or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor or the rape of Nanjing were never the focus of in-class discussions). And I wonder if the standard demanded by Sahlins is upheld in English classes taught to foreign students and immigrants in the United States? I can imagine the political furor that would occur if it was discovered that English as a Second Language lessons taught to potential new citizens included discussions on the extermination of Native Americans, the horror of American slavery, Jim Crow lynching, and the contemporary problem of gun violence. I suppose that Sahlins might respond that the absence of such topics is no proof of censorship—but this is the very argument he finds so unacceptable in the case of Chinese language classes. Second, Sahlins has a distorted impression of what actually goes on in language classes and how they are taught. In-class “discussions” were hardly a pedagogical technique I remember from my basic language classes. Finally, another qualm arises from the way that Sahlins and other CI detractors seem to think they know what kind of topics must be covered in Chinese language classes. Even if the term Tiananmen comes up, or if lesson actually focuses on the Square itself, is there certain type of information that must be presented as proper context? After all, Tiananmen Square has a rich history. It was the site of the May 4th anti-imperialist demonstrations in 1919, and of anti-warlord protests in the 1920s. It was where Mao announced the founding to the P.R.C. to the Chinese public in 1949. During the Cultural Revolution it was often the site of massive Maoist rallies. Mao’s tomb, which lies at the center of the Square today, is a shrine to his memory that has been visited by millions of Chinese. Of course it was also the site of 1989 protests. But it is also a place where families gather and children fly kites. Who gets to decide which of these topics should be discussed?

Here I think Sahlins challenges one of the most valued academic principles of American universities—the autonomous right of teachers to control the content of their own courses. And this right is, of course, rooted in principles of academic freedom: that a professor’s own freedom of speech should not be restrained by University rules of what she/he may or may not teach. I would have to admit that language classes are perhaps one place where faculty may find this autonomy somewhat more restricted, in the sense that language departments usually set standards as to language proficiency levels that must be achieved and often even agree on cross-department coordination of textbooks to insure that students passing through one level can continue on smoothly to the next. This is no doubt the basis for the claim of Chicago’s EALC Department that classes taught by CI instructors must “conform to standards of that department in matters of textbooks, curriculum, courseware, and all else.” But beyond that, normal academic values assert that it is the instructor’s right to determine what specific topics will be introduced or discussed in her/his class, depending on what the instructor sees as most fitting to the class’ pedagogical goals. Part of the perquisites that Sahlins says the CI instructors enjoy is this right, as all other professors, to determine the content of their classes. It seems to me that just as I may refuse to be pulled into off-topic discussions in my own classes, a language instructor might argue that political discussions have no place in a basic language class. Our academic values trust the instructor to make such determinations. I suppose Sahlins might fall back on his suspicions that CI teachers are not individuals with free will but “trained” Hanban agents, and so undeserving of the freedom enjoyed by other professors in our classrooms? I think Hubbert’s study, however, undermines any suggestion that Hanban teachers are simply Communist automatons.
Going a step further, should a professor’s reluctance to discuss any and all topics raised by students in their classes be considered a form of censorship? The peculiar thing about Sahlins’ argument is that the students cited in Hubbert’s study were not prevented from asking the question, the instructor simply declined to answer. I would suggest that an important element of free speech is also the right to remain silent. In contrast, Sahlins and his ilk actually seem to violating the principles of free speech by suggesting that when one of their areas of concern (the three T’s) is raised by a student, CI instructors are obliged (compelled?) not only to speak but also to rearrange their class around a discussion of the topic.

I have no doubt that Sahlins will say this is just another example of how “Professor McCord, in a veritable tour de force of specious reasoning, manages to legitimate the censorship practices of Confucius Institutes on the grounds of academic freedom.” This particular statement was made, though, not in reference to my defense of the right to be silent, but in regard to criticisms of what CI instructors actually say. What I am arguing, as he notes, is that “critics of CIs would deny the right of visiting Chinese professors to voice their opinions, hence deprive them of the privileges of free expression.” In response he claims that the critics of CIs, “are not objecting to visiting Chinese professors expressing their own views; they are objecting to them preventing the views of others.” Sahlins’ own articles, however, give lie to this claim that CI critics have no problem with free speech by Chinese as seen in his objection to the Chinese teacher who expressed his view of the bias in media coverage of Chinese political suppression in Tibet. What is the point of raising such cases except to provide an example kind of thing CI teachers have said or might say in American classes as a basis on which to argue that the CIs, and their teachers, be banned from our campuses? He avoids answering this charge against CI critics by deflecting attention back to his claim about the “censorship practices of the CIs,” specifically their “preventing the views of others.” This of course is the central flaw in Sahlins’ own specious reasoning. First he defines the unwillingness of CI teachers to speak on certain subjects as censorship, and then uses the more normal definition of censorship to claim the CIs are “preventing the views of others.” But he seems to have a hard time finding cases of the suppression of the views “of others.” Instead he shifts the debate to focus on not on the actual prevention of speech but on calls by CI staff to block speeches by the Dalai Lama.

Sahlins seems to be particularly incensed that I would defend the right of CI staff, or other China supporters, to express their opinion on allowing the Dalai Lama to speak at a campus. First, I might remind Sahlins that calls to ban certain speakers on our campuses is a long American tradition, seen almost annually at graduation time. Thus, the faculty at Rutgers University recently voted to demand that the University withdraw its invitation to Condoleezza Rice to speak at their commencement because of her role in the Iraq War. Such demands are not limited to the political left. Equally strong protests were made in 2009 against the selection of President Obama as commencement speaker at Notre Dame because of his policies on abortion and contraception. As a matter of principle, and in defense of academic freedom, I personally oppose all such efforts to ban speakers at our universities, including attempts by China-supporters to block speeches by the Dalai Lama. But my defense of the freedom of speech also extends to the defense of the speech of those calling for such bans. Sahlins argues that the issue in this case is not “denying the right of free speech to the people who want to ban the Dalai Lama from speaking freely” but “whether the right of the Dalai Lama to speak should be denied.” This is of course a classic illiberal rhetorical ploy to tar those who defend the right to speak in favor of
unpopular positions as a defense of that unpopular position. In the end, calls for speaking bans is not the same as an actual ban on free speech; and the involvement of CI personnel in calls to block appearances of the Dalia Lama is not evidence that they are actually “preventing the speech of others.” As in all calls for speech bans, the proper response is not to ban the proponents these bans but to reject their demands.

The Confucius Institute and Academic integrity

Professor Sahlins concludes his piece with a summation of the violations of academic integrity that he finds in the establishment of CIs at American universities, though directed more specifically at how he thinks his own institution was complicit in these violations. In essence he has argued that the University of Chicago entered into an agreement that forced the university to “hire” faculty on the basis Chinese law, with its discriminatory hiring practices, in violation of U.S. laws and regulations. He is clearly unaware, however, about how these teachers are actually provided, congruent with U.S. law, under a regular exchange program for foreign visiting faculty created by the U.S. State Department. He claims that the University also accepted conditions that gave Hanban the “right” determine the “trained teachers,” the teaching materials, and the curriculum of for-credit courses to be taught in the University. But a reading of these conditions shows rather an obligation of Hanban to provide teachers and teaching materials, not that the University is forced to accept these teachers or materials. Amazingly, though, he charges his University with bad faith and hypocrisy for not living up to his made-up stipulations. Sahlins also wants to ignore other measures put into place to protect the actual control of CIs by host institutions. One example is a point I made in my last piece that all Confucius Institutes come under the joint supervision not only of American and Chinese co-directors but also a Board of Directors split evenly between representatives of the American school and their partner Chinese school. Some schools have even negotiated to give precedence to the American director and tie-breaking majority to the American directors; but in either case under these arrangements Hanban can’t simply force its will on American CI hosts. In the absence of actual stipulations giving Hanban full curricular control over American classes, Sahlins fallback position is that his University has rarely rejected the teachers offered (assuming that Hanban is reckless promoting unqualified teachers?) and that teachers may still use Hanban materials even if this use is not required. Here then we get to his real objection—which seems to be that he does not want Chinese professors teaching in our schools or Chinese materials used in our classrooms. In that case, though, I think Professor Sahlins should state explicitly what he finds wrong with these teachers and these materials. He does complain about a smattering of what he sees as inappropriate statements, such as expressing the view that Tibet or Taiwan are part of China. (The Chinese are given no credit for trying as much as possible to keep content out of their materials that Americans might find offensive). But what is his point in raising these cases? Is he suggesting that the teachers and their materials must be closely censored to prevent them from being seen or heard by American students? Or maybe he doesn’t feel he needs to demand specific censorship of teachers or materials because what he is proposing is that the CIs with their teachers and materials be banned altogether. So problem solved. Unable to prove massive doses of actual “propaganda” in CI materials or teaching, Sahlins fall back position is that they are engaged in “censorship” by not expanding the parameters of their clearly stated mission (to teach languages and culture) to include the discussion of contemporary political issues that put China in a bad light. Remember that Sahlins is not saying the CI programs or teachers are able
to “censor” others in the universities where they are located from speaking on these subjects. Rather he complains about their own unwillingness to speak on these issues. For Sahlins, academic freedom requires that they be compelled to speak about topics the might want to avoid.

Professor Sahlins ends on an altruistic by note that although “the Confucius Institute has given broad assurances of academic integrity and freedom to the University of Chicago officials and teachers,” Chicago must be held accountable for the way that such accommodations have encouraged other universities to look into the establishment of their own Confucius Institutes. Sahlins notes that one of these universities was my own (George Washington University). I have to admit that I was originally drawn to Sahlins’ initial critique by the comment he made about how a dean in my university was “fecklessly” encouraged by the Chicago example. (Sahlins misses no opportunity to smear the character of the people he finds associated with Confucius Institutes). I suppose he assumes that on the basis of the reports it had heard about Chicago alone, GW moved ahead recklessly to establish our CI with no effort to protect our own interests or academic integrity? In any case, I think the experience of other institutions should not be irrelevant. My argument remains that the large number of CIs already in place in the U.S. has so far not validated the main fears and suspicions of CI detractors.

What then is Sahlins’ core objection? Here is what he says: “The moral is: no matter how liberal or beneficial the terms of its own participation, the University of Chicago, by hosting a Confucius Institute, becomes involved in a world-political struggle in a way that contradicts the intellectual and ethical values on which it is founded.” Simply put, Sahlins is reacting against China’s rise in neo-Cold War terms, seeing it as part of a global struggle between two societies with vastly different value systems. As such it is clear that no matter how beneficial to the U.S., he opposes any connection or collaboration with any organization in China, apparently since all Chinese organizations have ties to the Chinese state (this seems the basis for his alarm over the discovery that Hanban is ultimately overseen, like all other educational bodies, by the Chinese State Council). If this is his main argument, then this is the argument he should be able to make without promoting misrepresentations or misunderstandings about CIs and how they operate.

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