



# The rise of Confucius Institutes

A report on Chinese influence in universities

September 2021

#BannedbyBeijing

**INDEX**  
ON  
**CENSORSHIP**  
A VOICE FOR THE PERSECUTED

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# Introduction

“FIRST, WE STOOD up, then we got rich, and now we got strong.” Chinese officials are repeating this slogan over and over, China analyst Mareike Ohlberg recently told the audience at an Index on Censorship event.<sup>01</sup> “Part of being a strong country means being able to influence or determine what people talk about, not just in China but globally.”

Confucius Institutes were established in 2004 with the stated mission of teaching Chinese language and culture abroad and are widely acknowledged as one of the ways China exerts its influence around the world. In 2010, the Confucius Institute headquarters (known as Hanban) received the ‘Chinese Influence the World Award’. “People often ask me about the Confucius Institute’s role in soft power,” said its founder, Xu Lin, at the award ceremony. “We are indeed trying to expand our influence.”<sup>02</sup>

Confucius was a sixth-century philosopher, educator, and quasi-religious figure, who has since come to symbolise peace and harmony. By promoting this image and avoiding any reference to Marxist ideology, a Chinese state institution has made its way onto more 550 university and college campuses, and into 1,172 primary and secondary school classrooms around the world. According to the New York Times, “The carefully selected label [of Confucius Institutes] speaks volumes about the country’s soft-power ambitions.”<sup>03</sup>

In the West, the largest number of Confucius Institutes are found in English-speaking countries.<sup>04</sup> Why? “The Chinese government is minimalist,” Ohlberg replied. “If you have the government in your pocket, why do you need a Confucius Institute?” The UK has approximately 30 Confucius Institutes, five in

Scotland. France has 21, Germany has 19, and Italy has 16.<sup>05</sup> There are 103 in the EU.<sup>06</sup>

By operating primarily on campuses, Confucius Institutes are unlike other countries’ cultural organisations, like the British Council, Alliance Française, or Goethe Institutes. Tao Zhang of Nottingham Trent University believes this enables the Chinese authorities “to gain a foot-hold for the exercise of control over the study of China and the Chinese language.”<sup>07</sup>

Confucius Institutes are also unlike European institutes in that they are directly managed by the Chinese government. According to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, “[t]his offers Confucius Institutes the possibility to unilaterally promote Chinese policy and ideas in a one-sided way, to commit censorship, or to stimulate self-censorship about China among students, pupils and the wider public”.<sup>08</sup> ✕



01: Index on Censorship (15 July 2021) Banned by Beijing: Is China Censoring Europe? YouTube [online]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wicBuN5Fqt4>> [Accessed 23/07/2021].

02: De Vries, A., and Sys, M. (2021) Good relationship with China more important to the University of Groningen than academic freedom, FTM [online]. Available at: <<https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/university-groningen-confucius-institute>> [Accessed 23/07/2021].

03: French, Howard W. (2006) China’s Latest Export: Language, NYT [online]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/11/world/asia/11iht-china.html?searchResultPosition=2>> [Accessed 24/07/2021]

04: Hamilton, C., and Ohlberg, M. (2020) Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World, s.l., Simon and Schuster: 229.

05: Dams, T., et.al. (2021) China’s Soft Power in Europe Falling on Hard Times, European Think-tank Network on China: pg10 [online]. Available at: <[https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc\\_2021\\_-\\_chinas\\_soft\\_power\\_in\\_europe\\_-\\_falling\\_on\\_hard\\_times.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_2021_-_chinas_soft_power_in_europe_-_falling_on_hard_times.pdf)> [Accessed 26/08/2021].

06: Ibid., 103 [Accessed 26/08/2021].8/2021].

07: The Conservative Party Human Rights Commission. (2019) China’s Confucius Institutes [online], CPHRC. Available at: <[https://conservativepartyhumanrightscommission.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CPHRC\\_Confucius\\_Institutes\\_report\\_FEBRUARY\\_2019-1.pdf](https://conservativepartyhumanrightscommission.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CPHRC_Confucius_Institutes_report_FEBRUARY_2019-1.pdf)> [Accessed 18/08/2021].

08: Decker, B., and D’Hooghe, I. (2020) China’s Invloed op Onderwijs in Nederland [online], Clingendael Magazine. Available at: <<https://www.clingendael.org/nl/node/11574>> [Accessed 20/08/2021].

# Centres of censorship?

IN APRIL 2021, following the publication of his report<sup>09</sup> China's Inroads into Slovak Universities, Matej Šimalčík, director of Slovakia's Central European Institute of Asian Studies, received an email: "Good morning, are you sleeping well? You should be in a very big stress, when you are walking through the street." The email was sent to Šimalčík and his colleagues by the Slovak director of the University of Bratislava's Confucius Institute. "Common you cannot take it seriously... 'several Chinese corporations that are involved in the surveillance and repression of Muslim minorities in China.' Who is the donator of these bullshits? Please take us out of the this garbage!! [sic]" the email continued, referring to the report.<sup>10</sup> "Be Patient. Big Brother is watching you," read a second email sent the following day. "What is troubling me the most," Šimalčík wrote on Twitter, "[is] that this

comes at a time when European researchers engaging in critical discussion of Chinese policy are increasingly pressured by Beijing into self-censorship."<sup>11</sup> The Slovak director was subsequently dismissed from his position at the Confucius Institute.

In an interview with Index, a former director of Tallinn University's Confucius Institute said that one morning she received a call from the Chinese co-director of the Confucius Institute. "He called me because he had heard that the university was organising an open discussion on Liu Xiabo and he wanted to ask me 'who is behind this?'" they explained, referring to an event that was organised in honour of the Nobel-prize winning dissident that was persecuted by the Chinese authorities. "He called me in order to ask in Chinese 'What's happening?' 'How can you do this?'. I told him we are living in a free country, and we can have

any free conversation about anyone you like or you don't like," she said. "What he told me on the phone was 'We don't like it'. Not 'I' but 'we' don't like it".

In 2019, it was suggested that a convention centre in Ireland had turned down the Shen Yun Performing Arts (which has the tagline "China Before Communism") at the behest of the Chinese authorities.<sup>12</sup> Despite the group having performed at the centre on two previous occasions, they were rejected in 2018 and a Confucius Institute and Chinese embassy were subsequently allowed to host events at the centre instead.<sup>13</sup> "The group applied in March 2018 to have a repeat performance at the Convention Centre but was turned down. Yet, in February last year [2018] the Confucius Institute held a cultural event in the centre," politician Maureen O'Sullivan told the Irish parliament.<sup>14</sup>

The Shen Yun Performing Arts are operated by Falun Gong, a quasi-religious movement that is outlawed in China, and described by the Chinese authorities as an "anti-society cult" that leads its followers to "self-mutilation or suicide".<sup>15</sup> The Chinese Embassy in Ireland had published so-called "facts" about Shen Yun on its website when they performed in Dublin in 2014.<sup>16</sup>

The Chinese authorities are known for their efforts to censor events or discussions about the "three Ts": the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the sovereignty of Tibet, and the status of Taiwan. In 2015, the Chinese director of the University of Hamburg's Confucius Institute was recalled, after the institute there held an event related to the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>17</sup>

But, as evidenced by the apparent opposition to research relating to the Uighurs, an event →

09: Šimalčík, M., and Kalivoda, A. (2021) China's Inroads into Slovak Universities [online], Central European Institute of Asian Studies. Available at: <<https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/universities-paper.pdf>> [Accessed 01/09/2021].

10: Yang, W. (2021) Slovak director of a Confucius Institute has been fired after sending threatening emails to local academics [online], William Yang. Available at: <<https://williamyang-35700.medium.com/slovak-director-of-a-confucius-institute-has-been-fired-after-sending-threatening-emails-to-local-819603878a3c>> [Accessed 10/09/2021].

11: Šimalčík, M. "What is troubling me most..." [online], Twitter. Available at: <<https://twitter.com/MatejSimalcik/status/1385224918523129858?s=20>> [Accessed 23/07/2021].

12: Shen Yun Performance Arts [online]. Available at: <<https://www.shenyunperformingarts.org/>> [Accessed 23/07/2021].

13: O'Sullivan, M. (2019) Dáil Éireann Debate - Tuesday [online], Oireachtas. Available at: <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2019-10-01/22/?highlight%5B0%5D=confucius#s27>> [Accessed 17/09/2021].

14: Ibid. [Accessed 17/09/2021].

15: Chinese Embassy (n.d.) Facts about the So-called "Shen Yun" Performance by the "Falun Gong" [online], Embassy of the PRC in the US. Available at: <<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/xglj/flgzx/>> [Accessed 12/09/2021].

16: Chinese Embassy (n.d.) Facts about "Shen Yun" and "Falun Gong" [online], Embassy of the PRC in Ireland. Available at: <<http://ie.china-embassy.org/eng/zlt/FalunGongCult/t1126680.htm>> [Accessed 12/09/2021].

17: Klovert, H. (2019) Kultur aus Peking - unter Aufsicht der Partei [online], Der Spiegel. Available at: <<https://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/uni/konfuzius-institute-an-deutschen-unis-kultur-aus-pekings-a-1298843.html>> [Accessed 13/08/2021].

→ commemorating Liu Xiabo, and performances by Shen Yun Performing Arts, the Chinese authorities are keen to censor an increasing array of issues - and they are using Confucius Institutes to help do so. China expert Torbjörn Lodén, former director of the Confucius Institute in Stockholm, said Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012 was "a turning point".<sup>18</sup>

One of the most egregious examples of Confucius Institute censorship in Europe relates to one of the Ts: Taiwan. In Portugal in 2014, the printed programmes for a Chinese studies conference, organised by the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS), were confiscated and defaced at the behest of Xu Lin, the director-general of the Confucius Institute headquarters (Hanban).

According to an account of the incident that was subsequently published by EACS, Xu Lin was "annoyed at what she considered to be the limited extent of the Confucius Institute publicity, and disliked the [Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation] self-presentation".<sup>19</sup> Chiang

Ching-kuo Foundation is a Taiwan-based organisation, named after a former president of Taiwan. "Censorship of conference materials cannot and will never be tolerated by the EACS," the account of the incident concluded.<sup>20</sup>

If the primary purpose of Confucius Institutes is in fact to enhance China's image, then such incidents are entirely counterproductive. In order to avoid contentious topics altogether, Hanban have been putting (or trying to put) restrictive clauses into their contracts with European universities, including by stipulating that institutes may not engage in activities that might violate Chinese law or smear China's image.<sup>21</sup>

In February 2020, it emerged that the Free University of Berlin had signed a contract with Hanban to establish a Chinese teacher training programme, which stipulated that the university was obligated to ensure that the programme abided by Chinese law. "[C]ausing disputes or causing problems' is recorded as a 'crime' in China," the German newspaper Der →

18: Koskinen, P., and Parkkari, J. (2020) "Bränditahra" – Kiina-tuntijoiden mielestä Helsingin yliopiston sisällä toimiva Konfutse-instituutti on mainehaitta, eikä sen toiminta kuulu enää huippuyliopistoon [online], Uutiset. Available at: <<https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11249399>> [Accessed 10/08/2021].

19: EACS. (2014) The Deletion of Pages from EACS Conference materials in Braga [online]. Available at: <<http://chinesestudies.eu/?p=584>> [Accessed 16/07/2021].

20: Ibid. [Accessed 16/07/2021].

21: Hamilton, C. (2020: 231) (footnote 04).



→ Tagesspiegel, which broke the story, told its readers.<sup>22</sup> Some critics also reportedly expressed concern about the language that the university used to defend the agreement. According to Der Tagesspiegel, the university said that forbidden topics in China, such as the “incidents of 1989,” would still be included in teaching.<sup>23</sup>

One year later, in February 2021, it emerged that a professor of Chinese language and culture at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands was contractually obliged to respect Chinese law and uphold China’s good image. “Hanban reserves the right to end the agreement [...] when the Chair’s research and teaching activities seriously violate Chinese law or badly damage China’s image,” the contract states.<sup>24</sup>

On 25 March 2021, students submitted a petition with 700 signatures to the University of Groningen’s board, appealing to them to sever ties with the Confucius Institute and


protect academic freedom.<sup>25</sup> The following day the university released a statement confirming that it is “continuing to collaborate with the Groningen Confucius Institute”, but that it did not intend to renew the agreement between the university and Hanban on the professor of Chinese language and culture.<sup>26</sup>

“China can easily use the clause on reputational damage as a stick to beat. More and more subjects are becoming taboo in the eyes of China,” Ingrid d’Hooghe, senior researcher at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, told the Dutch news outlet NOS. “That applies not only to Tibet and the Uyghurs, but also to topics such as the origin of the coronavirus, China cartoons, or Chinese artists who have fallen from grace”.<sup>27</sup>

After a year-long struggle between the French and Chinese sides, a Confucius Institute in Lyon (France) closed its doors in 2013 due to

alleged risks to academic freedom. “Tolerated until 2012, it seemed that our institutional and intellectual independence became unacceptable to Beijing,” a communiqué issued about the closure said.<sup>28</sup>

According to Nathan Hill, former director of the Confucius Institute at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Confucius Institutes will try to focus on non-controversial issues, which can seem superficial and cartoon-like. They often revolve around pandas and Chinese lanterns and calligraphy, he told Index. During his time as director between 2018 and 2020, he would sometimes propose events that encompassed a different - although not necessarily critical - angle of Chinese culture, such as an exhibition of posters from Chinese tea rooms in the 20th century, for example, it seemed as though the Chinese director didn’t quite know how to respond. Despite these exhibitions being



China can easily use the clause on reputational damage as a stick to beat. More and more subjects are becoming taboo

innocuous and academically valuable, Hill believes that the Confucius Institute was concerned about some hidden political agenda. He says the exhibitions he proposed never happened, as the excuse was always “administrative reasons”. ✕

- 22: Feldwisch-Drentrup, H. (2020) Wie sich die FU an chinesische Gesetze bindet [online], Der Tagesspiegel. Available at: <<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/umstrittene-finanzierung-einer-china-professur-wie-sich-die-fu-an-chinesische-gesetze-bindet/25484672.html>> [Accessed 4/09/2021].
- 23: Matthews, D. (2020) Chinese Contract with German University Criticised [online], Inside Hired.. Available at: <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/02/07/questions-raised-about-chinese-contract-german-university>> [Accessed 28/08/2021].
- 24: Global Influence Operations Report (2021) Dutch Professor Barred From “Damaging The Image Of China”- His Salary Partly Paid By Chinese Confucius Institute [online]. Available at: <<https://www.global-influence-ops.com/dutch-professor-barred-from-damaging-the-image-of-china-his-salary-partly-paid-by-chinese-confucius-institute/>> [Accessed 29/07/2021].
- 25: GCI Petition (2021) Who are we? [online]. Available at: <<https://gcipetition.nl/>> [Accessed 5/09/2021].
- 26: Lee, G. (2021) The Groningen Confucius Institute [online], University of Groningen. Available at: <<https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/latest-news/news/archief2021/nieuwsberichten/confucius-instituut-groningen>> [Accessed 13/07/2021].
- 27: NOS News, (2021) Zorgen om banden RUG en China: hoogleraar mag imago China niet beschadigen [online]. Available at: <<https://nos.nl/artikel/2369095-zorgen-om-banden-rug-en-china-hoogleraar-mag-imago-china-niet-beschadigen>> [Accessed 21/07/2021].
- 28: Lee, G. (2013) Closure of the Lyon Confucius Institute [online], SCRIBD. Available at: <<https://gregorybarrylee.weebly.com/lyon-confucius-institute-closure.html>> [Accessed 24/08/2021].

# Propaganda

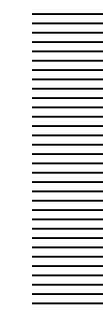
“THE ICE-COLD PROPAGANDA of an authoritarian regime is hidden behind apparently harmless tea ceremonies and language courses,” said Jens Brandenburg of Germany’s Free Democratic Party in November 2019.<sup>29</sup> Similar concerns have been raised across Europe, especially since 2019.

“These institutes are perceived as a credible source of information on China. But it’s quite often not trustworthy,” China analyst Marcin Przychodniak, of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, told Index. The idea that Confucius Institutes use their host universities’ good name to give credibility to their propaganda is exemplified in the anecdote of a former staff member of Tallinn University. She says that in September 2016, Tallinn’s Confucius Institute logo was used for a Chinese embassy event about Tibet. “The logo was not just the Confucius Institute logo but the Tallinn University Confucius Institute so indirectly

it was like Tallinn University would be a co-organiser of a Chinese Embassy event on Tibet”.

Similarly in 2017, a Confucius Institute in Slovakia organised the exhibition “Chinese story – Chinese Tibet”, in cooperation with the Chinese embassy, which claimed that Tibet has been an inseparable part of China since the 13th century. Although China experts say that this amounts to propaganda, the exhibition was nonetheless held at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University, the Slovak Agricultural University, and the Gallery of Miloš Alexander Bazovský in the city of Trenčín.<sup>30</sup>

In 2021, the Scottish Green Party’s election manifesto committed to taking action against Confucius Institutes, referring to them as “a propaganda tool of a state responsible for widespread and grievous human rights abuse”.<sup>31</sup> This is likely to have been provoked by a Chinese whistleblower’s revelations, which included claims that Confucius Institute



## These institutes are perceived as a credible source of information on China. But it’s quite often not trustworthy

students in the UK had been taught to sing the praises of President Xi Jinping. “They sang a song called ‘Gratitude’ to express gratitude to Xi Jinping,” the former diplomat told Scottish investigative outlet The Ferret.<sup>32</sup>

“In China, the educational and propaganda missions merge,” Mareike Ohlberg wrote recently.<sup>33</sup> “The Confucius Institutes are naturally understood in China as offshoots of the propaganda apparatus. They are intended to improve the country’s image and increase its discourse power.”<sup>34</sup> In fact there is evidence that, not only are Confucius Institutes disseminating propaganda, but they are doing so successfully.

In 2019 research carried out at University College Dublin found that regions that host Confucius Institutes display a “significant” and “substantial” improvement in the tone of media coverage of events relating to China.<sup>35</sup>

Confucius Institutes have repeatedly tried to push back against allegations that they are a vehicle for propaganda. “The direct control of the teaching content as well as the orientation and nature of the events at the Confucius Institute at the University of Vienna are the responsibility of the Austrian management of the institute. Hanban does not have a say in the content,” the Austrian Confucius Institute →

29: Anon. (2019) FDP warnt vor Konfuzius-Instituten an deutschen Unis [online], Der Tagesspiegel. Available at: <<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/eiskalte-propaganda-statt-harmloser-teezeremonien-fdp-warnt-vor-konfuzius-instituten-an-deutschen-unis/25282426.html>> [Accessed 12/09/2021].

30: Šimalčík (2021) (footnote 9)

31: Scottish Greens (2021) OUR COMMON FUTURE SCOTTISH GREENS MANIFESTO 2021 [online]. Available at: <[https://greens.scot/sites/default/files/ScottishGreens\\_2021Manifesto\\_Full\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://greens.scot/sites/default/files/ScottishGreens_2021Manifesto_Full_web_version.pdf)> [Accessed 20/09/2021].

32: Conway, M. (2021) Diplomat turned Whistleblower Claims China Controls Students at Scot Universities [online], The Ferret. Available at: <<https://theferret.scot/whistleblower-china-controls-students-universities/>> [Accessed 15/08/2021].

33: Ohlberg, M. (n.d.) Importierte Intransparenz [Imported Intransparency] [online], Kultur. Available at: <<https://liberal.freiheit.org/liberal-042020/konfuzius/>> [Accessed 17/08/2021].

34: Ibid. [Accessed 17/08/2021].

35: Shortall, E. (2019) Confucius Institutes sway news coverage on China, says UCD analysis [online], The Times. Available at: <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/confucius-institutes-sway-news-coverage-on-china-says-ucd-analysis-5rng3bj03>> (Accessed 19/07/2021).

## The idea that Confucius Institutes are data-gathering is not very surprising if you know them

told the newspaper Der Standard in 2019.<sup>36</sup>

In an interview with the University Times student newspaper, the director of University College Dublin's Confucius Institute, Liming Wang, also refuted claims that they are used to spread propaganda. He said that Hanban is nothing more than a founding body that the Confucius Institute can apply to for funding for projects, just as it would from the EU.<sup>37</sup> But unlike most other local Confucius Institute directors, Wang is Chinese and worked directly

for the Chinese government for more than six years, including as deputy director for the Ministry of Commerce.<sup>38</sup> "Usually a local director is someone from the local community. I [have] never heard of a local director who is Chinese," said the former director of Tallinn University's Confucius Institute, who stressed the importance of having a local director who can protect academic freedom.

Seemingly in an effort to allay concerns about Confucius Institutes as propaganda machines, it was announced in July 2020 that the institutes would henceforth be subordinate to the Chinese Foundation for International Chinese Language Education, a charitable institution founded by universities and companies. "It would be welcomed if that meant a step away from party control. But that is unlikely," China analyst Mareike Olhberg wrote. "The change seems cosmetic: an attempt to respond to international criticism by obscuring the party's role".<sup>39</sup> ✕

36: Anon. (2019) Wiener Konfuzius-Institut beteuert Unabhängigkeit von China [Vienna Confucius Institute Declares Independence from China] [online], Der Standard. Available at: <<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000111943704/wiener-konfuzius-institut-beteuert-unabhaengigkeit-von-china>> [Accessed 17/08/2021].

37: Kahn, C. (2019) Do Irish Confucius Institutes Threaten Academic Freedom? [online], UT. Available at: <<http://www.universitytimes.ie/2019/04/do-irish-confucius-institutes-threaten-academic-freedom/>> [Accessed 10/09/2021].

38: UCD Irish Institute for Chinese Studies (n.d.) Professor Liming Wang [online] Available at: <<https://www.ucd.ie/china/about/professorlimingwang/>> [Accessed 07/08/2021].

39: Olhberg, M. (n.d.) (footnote 33)



# Spying

“WHEN ABROAD, CHINESE intelligence traditionally operates under diplomatic cover, uses state-funded Confucius Institutes, Chinese companies and news agencies, use Chinese students studying abroad,” warned Lithuania’s 2019 National Threat Assessment.<sup>40</sup> “Primarily, China’s domestic policy issues drive Chinese intelligence activities in Lithuania. For example, it seeks that Lithuania would not support independence of Tibet and Taiwan and would not address these issues at the international level.”

“The Chinese Communist Party should worry about those Lithuanians,” intelligence and cyber-security expert Edward Lucas wrote in The Times recently, but Lithuania is not the only European country that has cause for concern about Chinese surveillance.<sup>41</sup>

In 2019, it emerged that the Chinese director of the Confucius Institute of the Free University of Brussels, Xinning Song, had an eight-year ban on re-entering the Schengen area imposed →

40: State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, National Threat Assessment 2019, Vilnius, SSD. Available at: <<https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-Gresmes-internetui-EN.pdf>> [Accessed 13/09/2021].

41: Lucas, E. (2021) Lithuania leads the way in standing up to China [online], The Times. Available at: <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lithuania-leads-way-in-standing-up-to-china-39xq9cwsr>> [Accessed 03/09/2021].



→ on him due to allegations that he had been involved in “espionage and interference”. According to the Belgian newspaper, *De Morgen*, “Song is not known for copying Chinese propaganda, but as an open networker. He maintains excellent contacts with think tanks and educational institutions”.<sup>42</sup> Free University of Brussels had reportedly ignored a previous memorandum from the State Security about its Confucius Institute.<sup>43</sup>

“The idea that Institutes are data-gathering is not very surprising if you know them,” Marcin Przychodniak told Index. “They observe the situation at the university and what issues connected to China are discussed.”

But what kind of data are they collecting? The former director of Tallinn’s Confucius Institute says she was made aware that Hanban wanted to make a database of people who studied Chinese in Estonia or have some link

to China. She said that her Chinese co-director asked if she could help providing information for the database. “I told her that, firstly, this is not my job and, secondly, I don’t know what information you want to collect but if it involves any personal information then it’s prohibited,” she told Index. “And then she said ‘but they could pay you separately for that’. And I said ‘but that doesn’t change the law!’”

In 2019, three students of the Confucius Institute at the University of Latvia told investigative outlet *Re:Baltica* that teachers often took pictures of them in class, saying it was necessary for their reports.<sup>44</sup> Index contacted Institute directors in Greece, Slovakia, Ireland, Poland, and Germany to ask about their policies on this but received no response.

Were photographs of students among the data that Hanban wanted to include in the database? “I don’t know exactly,” the former

director of Tallinn’s institute told Index. “But I told everybody - all the Chinese teachers - you’re not supposed to take pictures first [before asking students]. And if you do, you are not supposed to publish those pictures or send [them] to Hanban.”

Stewart McDonald MP has repeatedly expressed concern about the influence of Confucius Institutes in Scotland, which has more Confucius Institutes per capita than any other country in the world. “Certainly yes, there are issues around surveilling the activities of students,” McDonald told Index. “I can’t say for certain that it comes from the Confucius Institute. Students believe that this is coordinated by the embassy. What that then goes on to look like is anyone’s guess - it might be [through] Confucius Institutes.”

McDonald says he previously met with students at a Scottish university, who have had

their families contacted in China for exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly in the UK. “When they [held] protests in Edinburgh or in Glasgow, they’ve had their families contacted back in China with photos of them in George Square or outside the Scottish Parliament,” McDonald said. Last summer, Hong Kong students studying in Scotland told *The Times* newspaper that they fear the influence of institutes on campuses.<sup>45</sup>

Chinese students in England are similarly fearful. “The Confucius Institute functions like CCTV and has the potential to scare away my critical thinking by constantly reminding me: ‘we are watching you, behave yourself,’” one student told Christopher Hughes of the London School of Economics.<sup>46</sup> “Why have you got a Confucius institute here? I have come from China. I don’t feel that I am in the UK. I don’t feel secure in this place,” another student said.<sup>47</sup> ✕

- 42: Sturys, B. (2019) *Waarom de Chinese directeur van het Confuciusinstituut aan de VUB ons land niet meer binnen mag* [Why the Chinese director of the Confucius Institute at the VUB is no longer allowed to enter our country] [online], *DeMorgen*. Available at: <<https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/waarom-de-chinese-directeur-van-het-confuciusinstituut-aan-de-vub-ons-land-niet-meer-binnen-mag~bd74f87e/>> [Accessed 18/07/2021].
- 43: Lippens, J (2018) *Big Brothertechnologie: rector Pauwels onderzoekt samenwerking VUB-prof en China* [ Big Brother technology: Rector Pauwels investigates collaboration between VUB professor and China] [online], *Knack*. Available at: <<https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/big-brothertechnologie-rector-pauwels-onderzoekt-samenwerking-vub-prof-en-china/article-longread-1171655.html>> [Accessed 07/09/2021].
- 44: Anon. (2019) *The Rough Face of China’s Soft Power* [online], *Re:Baltica*. Available at: <<https://en.rebaltica.lv/2019/09/the-rough-face-of-chinas-soft-power/>> [Accessed 14/09/2021].
- 45: Leask, D. (2020) *Hong Kong security law: Students demand closure of Confucius Institutes*, *The Times*. Available at: <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hong-kong-security-law-students-demand-closure-of-confucius-institutes-n6fk5k07z>> [Accessed 17/07/2021].
- 46: Hughes, C.R. (2014) *Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural*, LSE Research Online. Available at: <[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60790/1/\\_lse.ac.uk\\_storage\\_LIBRARY\\_Secondary\\_libfile\\_shared\\_repository\\_Content\\_Hughes%2CC\\_Confucius%20Institutes\\_Hughes\\_Confucius%20Institutes\\_2015.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60790/1/_lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_Hughes%2CC_Confucius%20Institutes_Hughes_Confucius%20Institutes_2015.pdf)> [Accessed on 12/08/2021].
- 47: Foreign Affairs Committee (2019) *Oral evidence: Autocracies and UK Foreign Policy, HC 1948* [online], House of Commons. Available at: <<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/autocracies-and-uk-foreign-policy/oral/105583.html>> [Accessed 16/08/2021].

# Funding

THE PROBLEM IS about much more than what is being taught in the Confucius Institutes themselves. The line between censorship and self-censorship is blurry, especially in universities that heavily rely on Chinese funds in order to maintain language classes. But there are concerns about staff self-censoring (or being censored by management) to avoid funding being withdrawn.

In 2020, the rector of Czechia's Palacky University admitted that human rights are not discussed in any classes funded by Beijing.<sup>48</sup> "It's totally unacceptable the Confucius Institute and the embassy often fund different events, seminars, conferences," a former student at the University of Latvia's Confucius Institute, who wished to remain anonymous, told Index via email. "That means that they can set a tone for these events and in a way impose a self-censorship. Nobody would dare to read [their] paper on Tiananmen, Uighurs or social credit

scoring in a conference funded by the embassy."

Universities say they need the financial support from Hanban to provide services that are not being funded by their own governments. Confucius Institutes offer extra staff, who can teach Chinese, at little or no (financial) cost to the host institution: universities and colleges only have to supply classrooms and second a part-time director.<sup>49</sup> "We have a crucial need for China experts in Estonia," the former director of the Tallinn Confucius Institute told Index. "But the only Chinese studies we have is in Tallinn University and at the same time, our government is not financing this."

According to Mareike Ohlberg, more prestigious and better funded universities have more bargaining power than smaller or less influential ones. Her book gives the example of Stanford University, who forced Hanban to back down after they tried to exclude the discussion of sensitive issues from

the agreement.<sup>50</sup> "You can't fix this problem without fixing the funding issue," she said.

But inspecting the annual accounts and contracts of Institutes is easier said than done. While Dutch investigative outlet Follow the Money succeeded in inspecting the accounts and contracts of the Confucius Institute in Maastricht and Groningen earlier this year, they were unable to access the financial records of the former Confucius Institute in Leiden.<sup>51</sup> "Leiden University refused to answer questions on the former financial flows at the Leiden Confucius Institute," they wrote, "and the municipality of The Hague 'cannot find anything' on structural funding of that institute".<sup>52</sup>

Researchers at the Central European Institute of Asian Studies in Slovakia faced a similar issue when looked into Institute funding at the Slovak University of Technology and the Comenius University in Bratislava. "Comenius University did not disclose any funding

from the Confucius Institute, replying to our FOIA request that the 'Confucius Institute is not obliged to provide [the university] any pecuniary consideration,'" the report said.<sup>53</sup>

Calls for transparency about funding have been increasing. In June 2021, members of Scotland's biggest teaching union demanded an investigation into Chinese government funding for the Institutes. "[We are] concerned at the use of funding from the Chinese government for the provision of Mandarin to be taught in Scottish schools and sees such funding as inappropriate given the human rights record of the Chinese government," the Educational Institute of Scotland said.<sup>54</sup>

In the meantime, Chinese money is - seemingly unscrutinised - flowing into European schools and campuses. More than £1.5 million (nearly €2 million) was put toward a new building at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, which opened in 2019. The building →

48: Zelenka, J. (2020) O lidských právech se v Pekíně placených hodinách nemluví. „Havlistická univerzita“ řeší, co s čínským institutem [Human rights are not talked about in Beijing-paid hours. The "Havlist University" deals with what to do with the Chinese Institute] [online], DENIK. Available at: <<https://denikn.cz/400090/o-lidskych-pravech-se-v-pekine-placenych-hodinach-nemluvi-havlisticka-univerzita-resi-co-s-cinskym-institutem/>> [Accessed 26/08/2021].

49: De Vries, A., and Sys, M. (2021) (footnote 02).

50: Hamilton, C., and Ohlberg, M. (2020:231) (footnote 04).

51: Leiden Universiteit (2019) Leiden University to End Agreement with Confucius Institute [online]. Available at: <<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2019/02/confucius-instituut-en>>.

52: De Vries, A., and Sys, M. (2021) (footnote 02).

53: Šimalčík (2021) (footnote 09)

54: EIS (2021) Motions and Amendments - 175th AGM 2021 [online]. Available at: <<https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/AGM/06.%20Motions%20and%20Amendments.pdf>> [Accessed on 21/08/2021].

→ houses not only the Confucius Institute but the university's Institute of the Middle and Far East as well.<sup>55</sup> The funding seems to have been provided in the context of the institute having been given the title of “Model Institute” (全球示范孔院). “Model Institutes are role models for institutes around the world,” Poland's *Gazeta Wyborcza* reported at the time. “Out of 548 institutes operating in 154 countries, only 50 have been awarded this honorable title”.<sup>56</sup>

It is unclear how many Model Confucius Institutes there are in Europe or what a Confucius Institute must achieve to be deemed worthy of being a “model”. Several sources say that model status recognises the quality of an institute's work.<sup>57</sup> When Index enquired by phone with a Model Confucius Institute in Germany, they replied: “We're very skeptical of anyone calling to ask questions.” Tallinn

University's Confucius Institute is not a “model”, but Index asked its former director what criteria might be used to appraise its performance. She said that she wasn't sure but that their Institute was sometimes criticised for not involving local businesses or getting sponsorship for joint events. “We were just doing compulsory events because I didn't want to lobby for the headquarters,” she said.

What does seem clear is that the designation comes with extra funding. According to the website of the Model Confucius Institute at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland, “[t]he additional funding and resources this new status brings, as well as the subsequent facilities of a new headquarters, will enable the Confucius Institute for Scotland's Schools to deepen the quality of existing work and develop exciting new projects that will benefit young

people in Scotland and China”<sup>58</sup>.

In Ireland, University College Dublin's Confucius Institute was billed a “model” when it opened its “state-of-the-art” Confucius Institute in 2019.<sup>59</sup> In an agreement signed by the university in 2014, the Chinese and Irish governments agreed to pay €3 million each towards the cost of the building, with UCD agreeing to pay the remainder. That was initially expected to be €1.4 million but due to repeated budget overruns, had increased to €6.2 million by 2017.<sup>60</sup> Under the agreement, if the university decides to close its Confucius Institute before 2066, they are contractually obliged to pay Hanban approximately £52,000 (€60,000) a year in compensation.<sup>61</sup>

Not everyone was happy with the arrangement. “One must also ask whether our Government is well-advised to be subsidising the



Confucius Institute, an organ of the Chinese state propaganda machine, to the tune of €3 million,” one *Irish Times* reader wrote.<sup>62</sup> “It is significant that UCD's Confucius Institute was inaugurated last year by Liu Yunshan, who succeeded Li Changchun as Beijing's head of propaganda. He is one of the top five members of China's secretive inner politburo and is instrumental in propagating Xi Jinping's hard line on media control and internet censorship.”<sup>63</sup> ✕

55: Bochenek, A. (2019) Instytut Konfucjusza w nowej siedzibie. Budynek przy ul. Oleandry otwarty [Confucius Institute in its new headquarters. The building at ul. Oleanders open] [online], *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Available at: <<https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,24788174,instytut-konfucjusza-w-nowej-siedzibie-budynek-przy-ul-oleandry.html>> [Accessed 18/08/2021].

56: Ibid. [Accessed 18/08/2021].

57: Konfuzius-Institut Nürnberg-Erlangen (2015) Konfuzius-Institut Nürnberg-Erlangen zum “Modell-Konfuzius-Institut” ausgezeichnet [Confucius Institute Nuremberg-Erlangen awarded as “Model Confucius Institute”] [online]. Available at: <<https://www.konfuzius-institut.de/veranstaltungsprogramm/veranstaltungsueckblick/2015/event/610.html>> [Accessed 3/09/2021].

58: University of Strathclyde Glasgow (n.b.) Confucius Institutes for Scotland's Schools [online]. Available at: <<https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/confuciusinstituteforscotlandsschools/>> [Accessed 19/08/2021].

59: Khan, C. (2019) Do Irish Confucius Institutes Threaten Academic Freedom? [online], *ut*. Available at: <<http://www.universitytimes.ie/2019/04/do-irish-confucius-institutes-threaten-academic-freedom/>> [Accessed 20/08/2021].

60: Power, J. (2017) UCD Confucius centre project runs another €2m over budget [online], *The Irish Times*. Available at: <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/ucd-confucius-centre-project-runs-another-2m-over-budget-1.3289387>> [Accessed 14/08/2021]

61: Humphreys, J. (2015) UCD Agrees 50 year ‘free’ Lease for Confucius Institute [online], *The Irish Times*. Available at: <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/ucd-agrees-50-year-free-lease-for-confucius-institute-1.2178901>> [Accessed 15/08/2021].

62: Humphreys, J. (2015) (footnote 61); O'Brein, A., and Galvin, M. (2015) UCD, China and the Confucius Institute, *The Irish Times*. Available at: <<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/ucd-china-and-the-confucius-institute-1.2182647>> [Accessed 20/07/2021].

63: O'Brein, A., and Galvin, M. (2015) (footnote 62).

# How can we challenge Confucius Institutes' influence?

IN THE LAST five years, China has moved from so-called 'Keep-a-low-profile' diplomacy to what has become known as 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. In that time, the mood music that surrounds Confucius Institutes has changed. Petitions calling for Institutes to be closed have been raised in several countries, including Spain, Austria, the Netherlands, and the UK.

"Why do we keep [the Confucius Institute] in place when we have already seen the drawbacks?" academic and former director of the University of Helsinki's Confucius Institute, Anja Lahtinen, told the Finnish broadcaster Yle last year. "[It] has become a stain on the reputation of a top university."<sup>64</sup>

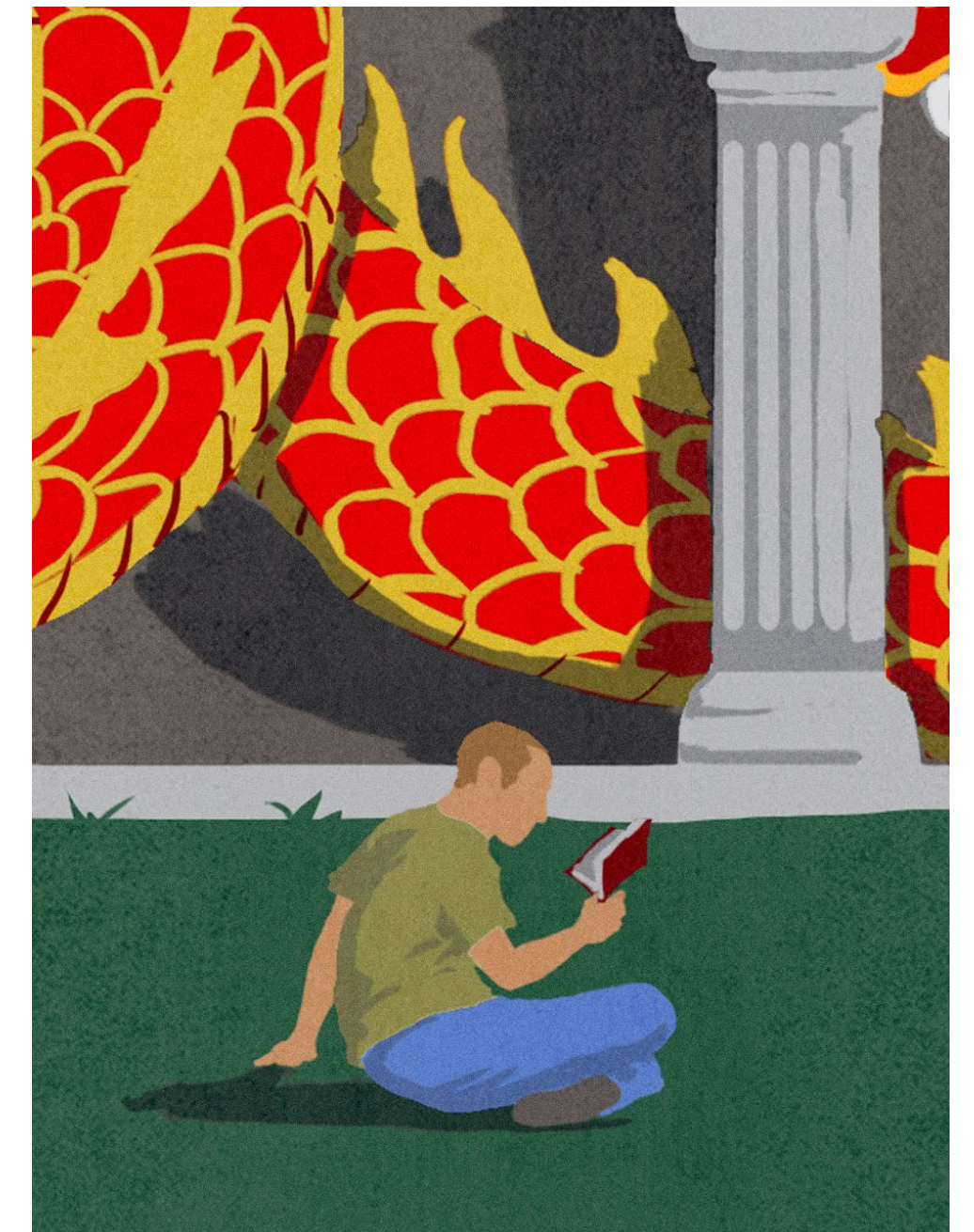
But how can the influence of the Institutes be challenged? One obvious approach is simply closing them. By early 2020, Sweden had closed its last Institute. Institutes have also been closed in Germany: in 2016 the University of Düsseldorf cited "a lack of transparency" and

in 2020 the University of Hamburg referred to "political influence and information leak".<sup>65</sup> The University of Bonn's Institute remains open for now, but was said to have been "under revision" in 2019.<sup>66</sup> Not all European countries are considering shutting their institutes though. In 2019, even as institutes in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden were closing, Poland and Portugal opened their sixth Confucius Institute and Ireland and Greece opened their third.<sup>67</sup>

Scottish MP Stewart McDonald believes that closing them is not the correct approach. "I would naturally wince at that kind of thing," he told Index, even as he compared trying to get a meeting with Scotland's Institutes to "trying to draw blood from a stone". He said there is an urgent need for a transparent and public audit of the Institutes. "We thought about starting an APPG [All Party Parliamentary Group] on Institutes - essentially to do the audit. The only reason it hasn't happened is time," he said.

Limiting branches to language teaching or to keep them entirely separate from their host institutions could be a potential solution, even if this is unlikely to be accepted by Hanban. It was, after all, the insistence that Lyon's Confucius Institute should be academically and institutionally separated from its host universities that led to its closure in 2014.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Mareike Ohlberg said that closing Confucius Institutes without an alternative would not make sense. She believes Chinese funding should be replaced with European funding. "This is the only way we can build up permanent, independent China competence and begin to counteract China's influence," she said.

Regardless of the approaches being taken by different countries, it is important that something is done to challenge the influence of Confucius Institutes. Otherwise, surreptitious Chinese state influence may continue to go unchecked. ✕



64: Koskinen, P., and Parkkari, J. (2020) (footnote 18).

65: Graeff, F. (2020) Hamburger Uni geht auf Abstand zu China: Tschüss, Konfuzius [Hamburg University is distancing itself from China: Goodbye Confucius] [online], Taz. Available at: <<https://taz.de/Hamburger-Uni-geht-auf-Abstand-zu-China/!5705431/>> [Accessed 17/08/2021].

66: Feldwisch-Drentrup, H. (2019) Erste deutsche Unis überdenken umstrittene Konfuzius-Institute [First German universities rethink controversial Confucius institutes] [online], Der Tagesspiegel. Available at: <<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/eine-art-ideen-waesche-erste-deutsche-unis-ueberdenken-umstrittene-konfuzius-institute/25360796.html>> [Accessed 14/09/2021].

67: Fabrizi, G. (2021) Stop Samenwerking met Confucius Instituut [Stop Collaboration with Confucius Institute] [online], Ukrantk.nl. Available at: <<https://ukrant.nl/stop-samenwerking-met-confucius-instituut/>> [Accessed 4/08/21]; PAP (2019) Instytut Konfucjusza otwarto przy Politechnice Warszawskiej [The Confucius Institute was opened at the Warsaw University of Technology] [online], Nauka W Polsce. Available at: <<https://naukawpolsce.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C78694%2Cinstytut-konfucjusza-otwarto-przy-politechnice-warszawskiej.html>>; <<https://www.nuigalway.ie/confucius/>> [Accessed 04/08/2021]; Porto (2019) The University of Porto inaugurated a Confucius Institute and classes start this October [online]. Available at: <<https://www.porto.pt/en/news/the-university-of-porto-inaugurated-a-confucius-institute-and-classes-start-this-october>>; <<http://confucius.uth.gr/>> [Accessed 15/08/2021].

68: Lee, G. (2013) [Accessed 24/08/2021] (footnote 28)



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