

HOSTING A DRAGON

CONFUCIUS CLASSROOMS IN UK SCHOOLS



Launched in 2004, the Chinese government's Confucius Institute programme now has 443 institutes (based in universities) and 648 Classrooms (based in schools) worldwide. In the UK, there are currently 92 hubs and classrooms in primary and secondary schools¹.

In facilitating Chinese-language teaching, Confucius Classrooms offer an opportunity for UK schools to provide a valuable service to their students and to society. However, Confucius Classrooms are also a project initiated, financed and controlled by an authoritarian regime which explicitly declares its opposition to Western constitutional democracy and the promotion of "universal values" of human rights².

The People's Republic of China denies freedom of expression to its citizens and is responsible for gross, widespread and systematic human rights abuses. Its aims for the Confucius Classrooms include "securing a *major expansion* in teaching and learning about China [emphasis added]"³, strengthening "cooperation between China and other countries" and "deepening friendly relationships with other nations"⁴. In 2009, a senior Chinese official described the Confucius programme in more direct terms as "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up"⁵.

Head teachers and governors providing a platform within their school for an unelected and authoritarian government to pursue these political aims need to carefully consider the risks posed by such a project.

1. RELATIONSHIP WITH AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

Institutional links with repressive regimes are potentially ethically questionable and carry significant reputational risks. In 2011, the London School of Economics suffered severe criticism over its relationship with the Libyan Gaddafi regime, leading to the resignation of its director⁶.

Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), which runs the international programme from Beijing, is affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education⁷ and enjoys political support at the highest level. Chair of Hanban's council Liu Yandong is currently serving as Vice Premier of China and is a member of the Communist Party Politburo. Hanban's director, Xu Li, is a Counsellor of the Chinese State Council. A number of individuals holding positions within the Confucius Institute system are reported to have backgrounds in Chinese security agencies⁸.

The People's Republic of China is a Communist dictatorship identified as a Country of Concern in the UK Foreign Office's most recent Human Rights Report⁹, rated 175 out of 180 on the Press Freedom Index¹⁰ and given the lowest possible rating for political freedom by US think tank Freedom House¹¹. The US State Department's 2013 Human Rights report identified "repression and coercion" inside China as "routine". It describes "severe" repression of freedoms of speech, religion, association and movement within Tibet and Xinjiang and other abuses across China such as "extrajudicial killings, including executions without due process; enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention . . . torture and coerced confessions of prisoners . . . and discrimination against women, minorities, and persons with disabilities"¹².

While China seeks to promote an exclusively positive view of its culture abroad – partly through Confucius Classrooms – the reality for Chinese citizens is life under dictatorship.

1 Hanban website http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm
2 *New York Times* August 19 2013 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/asia/chinas-new-leadership-takes-hard-line-in-secret-memo.html?_r=1&
3 Partnership Agreement 2012/13 – IOE Confucius Classrooms (copies available from Free Tibet)
4 Hanban website http://english.hanban.org/node_7880.htm
5 *The Economist* 22 October 2009 <http://www.economist.com/node/14678507>
6 *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/mar/03/ise-director-resigns-gaddafi-scandal?guni=Article:in%20body%20link>
7 Hanban website http://english.hanban.org/node_7719.htm
8 Population Research Institute http://pop.org/content/confucius-institutes-trojan-horses-chinese-characteristics#endnote_anchor-6
9 UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/china-country-of-concern/china-country-of-concern>
10 Reporters Without Borders <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>
11 Freedom House https://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world#_VMEIVeEsVQF
12 US State Department <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>

2. TREATMENT OF CHINESE EMPLOYEES

The Confucius Classroom programme offers UK schools “Hanban teachers”¹³, Chinese citizens who are vetted, sponsored by, and answerable to, Hanban¹⁴. These teachers do not enjoy the same employment protections as UK employees, including those established by the Equalities Act 2010 and Employment Rights Act 1996. In 2011, the criteria publicly established by Hanban for its teachers included the requirement that they have “no record of participation in Falun Gong and other illegal organizations, and no criminal record”¹⁵ - Falun Gong (see below) is a religious movement, banned in China, whose members are subject to severe persecution there. Following controversy, the reference to Falun Gong was removed but the existing requirement is that “He/she shall be decent and well-behaved, and have no criminal negligence record”¹⁶.

This requirement discriminates against a large number of Chinese citizens because the exercise of many human and civil rights recognised in the UK is criminalised in China. For instance, pro-democracy activists, supporters of Tibetan independence, human rights defenders and peaceful political protesters face conviction and criminal records in China.

Suitably-qualified Taiwanese students at Chinese universities report that they are banned from working as Hanban teachers¹⁷ - employment discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and other factors is widespread within China¹⁸.

CASE STUDY

In 2012, Hanban-employed Chinese teacher Sonia Zhao quit her teaching position at McMaster University’s Confucius Institute in Hamilton, Ontario, and sought political asylum in Canada. In a complaint submitted to the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, Ms. Zhao stated she was forced to hide her support for Falun Gong and argued that McMaster “is giving legitimisation to discrimination.”¹⁹

In 2013, McMaster University announced it would close its Confucius Institute and subsequently stated on its website that the institute’s hiring process “excluded certain classes of applicants, which is not consistent with the university’s values of equality and inclusivity, nor with McMaster’s anti-discrimination policy”²⁰.

Once appointed, Hanban’s teachers are subjected to evaluation and assessment by Hanban and the consequent political control. As Chinese citizens they cannot engage in free political discussions and students raising sensitive issues such as Tibet and Hong Kong may put their teachers at risk. In a 2014 interview, Hanban head Xu Lin told the BBC that “all teachers have to write a report at the end of their postings and are questioned on their return about whether they faced politically sensitive questions from students”²¹.

Governors and head teachers must consider whether the presence in their school of, effectively, contractors whose recruitment and conditions of employment are not consistent with UK standards is acceptable.

3. POTENTIAL INACCURACY, OMISSIONS AND BIAS IN STUDY OF CHINA

Schools have a responsibility to maintain a curriculum which “promotes the spiritual, moral, [and] cultural . . . development of pupils at the school and of society”²². The Chinese government’s objectives for Confucius Classrooms include promoting “understanding of China”²³, supporting the “development of teaching about China”²⁴ and “a major expansion in teaching and learning about China”²⁵ and Confucius Classrooms also seek to develop Chinese teaching in other subject areas²⁶. Allowing any of the content of the curriculum to be shaped and potentially restricted by an undemocratic regime is inconsistent with schools’ responsibilities regarding moral education and threatens the factual accuracy and objectivity of what students are taught.

13 Institute of Education Confucius Institute for Schools <https://ciforschools.wordpress.com/about-us/confucius-classroom/hanban-teachers/ioe-hanban-teacher-2014-15/>

14 Hanban website http://english.hanban.org/node_7973.htm

15 *Epoch Times* 23 August 2011 <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/united-states/at-us-universities-confucius-institutes-import-discrimination-60714.html>; Website <http://www.webcitation.org/64a6u7UuU>

16 Hanban http://english.hanban.org/node_7973.htm

17 *Want China Times* 2 February 2015 <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20150202000061&cid=1104>

18 Congressional Executive Committee on China <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/job-discrimination-against-ethnic-minorities-continues-in-xinjiang>; IZA journal of migration <http://www.izajom.com/content/1/1/12> See also US State Department (ref 12)

19 *Globe and Mail* 19 June 2012 (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadian-universities-colleges-confront-questions-about-chinese-ties/article4353705>)

20 McMaster University <http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/worth-mentioning/update-confucius-institute>

21 BBC News 22 December 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-30567743>

22 UK Government <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/section/78>

23 For example, Wigan & Leigh College Confucius institute <https://www.wigan-leigh.ac.uk/confucius-classroom>

24 Institute of Education Confucius Institute for Schools <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/66810.html>

25 Partnership Agreement 2012/13 – IOE Confucius Classrooms (copies available from Free Tibet)

26 Cardiff University <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/learn/2013/08/confucius-classroom-launched-at-cathays-high-school/>

西藏

Confucius Classrooms do not exist to provide an objective view of China. In reference to the status of Taiwan, which China considers part of the Chinese state, Hanban director Xu Lin told the BBC, “every mainland teacher we send - all of them will say Taiwan belongs to China. We should have one China. No hesitation.”²⁷ In an interview, Sonia Zhao, the Canadian Hanban teacher, reported that during her training in Beijing, she was told that if students asked about Tibet or other sensitive topics, she shouldn’t talk about them – “if the student insists, you just try to change the topic, or say something the Chinese Communist Party would prefer.”²⁸ According to *The Economist*, Confucius Institutes themselves have written of their “active efforts” in opposing “independence for Tibet and Xinjiang, pro-democracy activism and . . . Falun Gong.”²⁹

In July 2014, Madam Xu personally demanded and oversaw the physical removal of four pages from the already-printed programme of a partially Hanban-sponsored conference in Lisbon because they contained publicity for a Taiwanese educational organisation. She subsequently demanded that the BBC delete sections of a TV interview in which she was questioned about the incident³⁰.

Within the Classroom, teaching resources provided by, or under the recommendation of, Hanban will not address (or address objectively) issues the Chinese government considers controversial or off-limits, such as democracy, human rights abuses and its disputed claims to sovereignty over Tibet, Taiwan and East Turkestan (Xinjiang). Chinese state-controlled news media is used in language teaching, while online and offline censorship in China mean that any resource originating inside its borders will provide only a state-approved perspective. Materials about Chinese life will inevitably feature stories that do not reflect the reality of life under authoritarian rule.

English-language materials for Mandarin teaching and other subjects may also fail to accurately reflect or portray the complexities and negative aspects of China³¹. For instance, classroom resources available through UK Confucius Institute websites include:

- a seven-page “China Today” factsheet with no reference to China’s political system or human rights record³²;
- a list of regions of the People’s Republic of China which includes Taiwan³³;
- a reference to the Tibetan language as a Chinese “dialect” although it is an entirely separate language³⁴.

Hanban also subsidises and facilitates visits to China for students and staff³⁵. In addition to being a goodwill-generating treat, such visits feature itineraries designed to foster a good impression of China and interaction with Chinese citizens who are not free to speak about the political situation or human rights.

Balance *may* be provided if teaching about governance and human rights in China and geopolitical questions such as Tibet and Taiwan is provided under other curriculums, such as Citizenship, History and Geography. However, not all pupils studying in Confucius Classrooms may take these subjects. There is a strong risk that the effect of a Confucius Classroom will be incomplete, unbalanced and inaccurate teaching regarding China, leading to a failure in schools’ responsibilities regarding moral, social and cultural education.

4. CONTROVERSY, NEGATIVE PUBLICITY AND DISRUPTION

In October 2014, all the concerns outlined above led the Toronto District School Board to vote against a planned relationship with the Confucius programme. Trustee Pamela Gough told the press:

“My concern is that the Confucius Institute is directly controlled by the Communist Party of China, and there is irrefutable evidence that the party exerts its influence through (the institute), for example in restricting freedom of speech on the part of (its) teachers hired in China”³⁶.

International controversy has accompanied universities’ Confucius Institutes which are similarly financed by Hanban, jointly managed by the university and Hanban and also employ Hanban-appointed staff. Confucius Institutes have come under severe criticism in recent years from academics, professional associations, students and others. A number of universities have recently terminated their agreements with Hanban and closed their Confucius Institutes, including:

27 BBC News 22 December 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-30567743>

28 *Globe and Mail* 19 June 2012 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadian-universities-colleges-confront-questions-about-chinese-ties/article4353705>

29 *The Economist* 20 Jan 2011 http://www.economist.com/blogs/asiaview/2011/01/china%E2%80%99s_confucius_institutes

30 BBC News 22 December 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-30567743>

31 Institute of Education Confucius Institute for Schools <https://ciforschools.wordpress.com/jin-bu-1/> 1.5 – China, zhōng guó Lessons China Places & Chapter 1 Revision Lesson

32 http://www.rgs.org/NR/rdonlyres/DB3D4EBF-5C95-470B-8D07-27E57B494B4F/0/KS3_Factsheet_China.pdf directed from university of Wales Confucius Institute <http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/confucius-institute/>

33 <http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/confucius-institute/mandarin-in-schools/online-resources-for-teaching-chinese-culture/>

34 <http://hua.umf.maine.edu/Chinese/maps/provincestable.html> directed from University of Wales Confucius Institute <http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/confucius-institute/mandarin-in-schools/online-resources-for-teaching-chinese-culture/>

35 Institute of Education Confucius Institute for Schools Chapter 1 Unit 5 – Quiz about China (PPT) (slide 11)

36 Institute of Education CIS <https://ciforschools.wordpress.com/8th-annual-student-camps-in-china-2014/>

37 *CBC News* 27 October 2014 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/tdsb-votes-to-end-confucius-institute-partnership-1.2817805>

- Stockholm University (2014)
- University of Chicago (2014)
- Pennsylvania State University (2014)
- McMaster University (2013)
- Université de Sherbrooke, Ontario (2013)
- University of Lyons (2013)

In December 2013, the Canadian Association of University Teachers called on all universities currently hosting Confucius Institutes to cease doing so³⁷. In June 2014, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) called on US universities to terminate their agreements with Hanban unless significant changes were made to their terms. Confucius Institutes, the AAUP statement said, “function as an arm of the Chinese state and are allowed to ignore academic freedom”, and, “advance a state agenda in the recruitment and control of academic staff, the choice of curriculum, and in the restriction of debate”³⁸.

In addition to resources, advantages to schools such as cash investment and subsidised trips may influence Confucius Classroom schools to avoid actions that displease their Chinese partners and threaten the continued relationship – a concern repeatedly raised regarding Confucius Institutes. A planned visit by the Dalai Lama – Tibet’s former leader, who is vilified by the Chinese state – to the North Carolina State University in 2009 was cancelled after its Confucius Institute raised concerns³⁹. In 2013, Sydney University, host to a Confucius Institute, generated controversy when it tried to prevent a visit by the Dalai Lama. It was widely believed that the university’s position was influenced by the Chinese government’s hostility and under public pressure, the university changed its mind⁴⁰. All these controversies and events have been widely reported in mainstream national and international media⁴¹.

CONCLUSION

Confucius Classrooms do not represent a win-win solution for schools looking to develop teaching of Mandarin. The decision to establish a relationship with an authoritarian regime without respect for British values has significant ethical implications in itself. As a consequence of that relationship, schools must also

- run a strong risk of failing to deliver on their responsibilities regarding the education of their pupils
- risk negative publicity and reputational damage
- potentially accept the presence of Chinese teachers whose recruitment and employment conditions are inconsistent with UK standards.

Many of the benefits provided to schools by the Confucius programme – enhanced status, income and the attractive opportunities for subsidised trips to China – represent incentives to open Confucius Classrooms which are unconnected with the educational value of Chinese-language teaching. Such incentives represent a potential conflict of interest and schools opening Classrooms must be highly sensitive to the ethical and reputational risks of engagement with China’s authoritarian regime under such circumstances.



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³⁷ <http://www.caut.ca/news/2013/12/17/universities-and-colleges-urged-to-end-ties-with-confucius-institutes>

³⁸ http://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/sinosphere/2014/06/17/u-s-professors-call-on-colleges-to-re-evaluate-confucius-institutes/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

³⁹ *Bloomberg* 2 November 2009 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-11-01/china-says-no-talking-tibet-as-confucius-funds-u-s-universities>

⁴⁰ *The Guardian* 18 April 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/18/sydney-university-dalai-lama>

⁴¹ *New York Times* June 17 2014 http://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/sinosphere/2014/06/17/u-s-professors-call-on-colleges-to-re-evaluate-confucius-institutes/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0; *The Herald* 3 January 2015 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/scottish-universities-urged-to-sever-links-with-confucius-institutes.115189627> *The Times* 23 December 2014 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/article4305155.ece>