

OPINION

How China's regime is meddling in American higher education



More than 100 American colleges and universities have Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes, which, in practice, spread the regime's whitewashed version of its history and policies. *(AP Photo/Andy Wong, File)*

In early March, after China's National People's Congress abolished presidential term limits and paved the way for Xi Jinping to become president for life, Chinese censors online kicked into overdrive.

They [banned](#) the terms "personality cult," "Brave New World," images and mentions of Winnie the Pooh (a popular meme for President Xi), and even the letter "N." Also on the banned list was the expression "I disagree."

Chinese citizens and residents were blocked from expressing disagreement with Xi's consolidation of power. Nor could they express disagreement with a host of other policies, such as the Chinese government's [dynamiting of Protestant churches](#) or its [persecution of Uighur Muslims](#). They couldn't say they disagreed with the government's practice of [harvesting organs from prisoners of conscience](#), or with China's aggression toward Tibet.

Freedom of speech — and especially the freedom to disagree — is a cornerstone of liberty and human rights. It's also the bedrock of colleges and universities, the institutions whose special place in society is to pursue the truth and inculcate intellectual freedom.

The U.S. prides itself on serving as a beacon of this freedom. But a piece of Xi-like censorship has crept into more than 100 American colleges and universities in the form of Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes.

These institutes have nothing to do with Confucius and everything to do with exporting the mainland Chinese regime's preferred, whitewashed version of its history and policies.

Ostensibly, Confucius Institutes are apolitical partnerships between American and Chinese universities, giving American students opportunities to learn to speak Chinese or study abroad. But in practice, they serve as an ["important part of China's overseas propaganda,"](#) as Li Changchun, then head of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department, put it in 2009.

They may also serve as outposts of China's intelligence and surveillance operations, as FBI Director Christopher Wray [testified to the U.S. Senate](#) in February. Wray noted that the FBI is "watching warily" and "taking investigative steps" at Confucius Institutes, which fit with China's use of "nontraditional collectors" of sensitive information.

China's investment in the project is mammoth. In addition to the 100-plus Confucius Institutes in the U.S., China runs about 500 "Confucius Classrooms" at American K-12 schools. The U.S. is home to more Confucius Institutes and Classrooms than any other country (about 40 percent of the total), but China funds another 1,000 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in other countries.

One of us (Rachelle Peterson) spent a year and a half [studying Confucius Institutes](#), finding that the Chinese government's fingerprints are everywhere. China hires, trains, and pays the teachers. It chooses and buys the textbooks. It provides most of the funding. It requires host universities to clear all programming and course materials with the Hanban, the Chinese government agency tasked with overseeing all Confucius Institutes.

The Hanban itself is overseen by a governing council comprising representatives of twelve ministries of the Chinese government — including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Press and Publications Department, which handles propaganda.

The Hanban asks colleges and universities to sign agreements that frequently contain troubling clauses, such as requirements to ["not contravene concerning the laws and regulations of China."](#) Many warn of legal action against universities that "tarnish the reputation" of the Confucius Institute, perhaps by failing to mute criticism of the Chinese government.

The result is that American students get a remarkably one-sided view of China. Peterson asked Confucius Institute staff what they would say to students who asked about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. None gave a straightforward historical answer, and one said she would "show a picture and point out the beautiful architecture" of the square.

Another result is that American scholars face pressure to self-censor. Multiple professors reported concern that Confucius Institute staff were watching them, reporting back to China on potential critics who should be refused visas for research work. They also felt pressure from within their own university administrations, who feared offending China's regime and losing access to its largesse.

A growing bipartisan coalition in Congress is taking a close look at Confucius Institutes. Republican [Sens. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Tom Cotton, R-Ark., and Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C.](#), have introduced the Foreign Influence Transparency Act, which would require organizations like Confucius Institutes to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. The legislation also amends the Higher Education Act to require universities to disclose donations, contracts, or the fair market value of in-kind gifts, from any foreign source if the amount is \$50,000 or greater.

[Democrat Rep. Seth Moulton](#) has written to colleges and universities in his state of Massachusetts, urging them to close existing Confucius Institutes and to avoid opening new ones. At this time, six universities (the University of Chicago, Penn State University, the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, the University of West Florida, Texas A&M University, and Prairie View A&M University) have closed or are in the process of closing their Confucius Institutes.

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Congress and both federal and state agencies must continue to examine and take steps to address Confucius Institutes. We need better forms of engagement with China, in a manner that does not compromise national security or undermine intellectual freedom. It is time for America to say of China's meddling in American higher education, "We disagree."

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