

OREGON ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

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The Government of China's Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in Oregon



The Issue

The Government of the People's Republic of China has created institutions called "Confucius Institutes" at universities across the world since 2004, including in Oregon, which influence teaching about China and monitor Chinese student groups. Confucius Institutes exist at the University of Oregon and at Portland State University. In addition, under an extraordinary piece of state legislation in 2010 declaring a Mandarin teaching "emergency" in the state (Oregon House Bill 3628A and a related Senate Resolution 50), the Government of China was invited to establish similar "Confucius Classrooms" at many K to 12 schools in Oregon. These now exist at St. Mary's School of Medford, Oregon Trail Primary Academy in Boring, the International Schools in Portland and Beaverton, Franklin and Cleveland High Schools in Portland, and Hosford Middle School in Portland.

While ostensibly devoted to cultural exchange and language teaching, these Confucius Institutes and Classrooms have been shown in several studies to have a wider purpose of mainstreaming the communist government of China's official views of history and the contemporary world (see references below). Since this communist regime violates the most basic human rights of its citizens, this makes the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms singularly different than other initiatives by liberal democratic states, such as Spain, Japan, and Mexico which were referenced in the 2010 Oregon legislation. In the World Bank's widely-used Voice & Accountability governance indicator for 2016, for instance, China ranks in the 7th percentile (on a scale of 0 to 100 for all countries) compared to Mexico (44th), Japan (78th), Spain (81st), and the United State (84th). This represents a qualitatively different sort of "international partner".

Reference is often made to international partnerships with Saudi Arabia (4th) as a comparison. Yet that country does not seek through its cooperation to influence the academic environment of its host partners. The concern about Confucius Institutes is not about academic exchanges

with China *per se* but with a specific and intrusive form of exchange that has been structured by the communist government in China in order to influence teaching and scholarship in host countries. The Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in Oregon are intended to advance the interests of the People's Republic of China and to monitor the activities of students and teachers from China.

In 2014, the American Association of University Professors' Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure issued a statement recommending that U.S. universities sever their ties with Confucius Institutes unless the agreements are renegotiated to protect academic freedom and faculty governance. Many universities in many countries have closed their Confucius Institutes because of concerns about their effects on higher education. In the U.S. these include Texas A&M, the University of Chicago, and Pennsylvania State University. Oregon is particularly vulnerable to the intrusions of the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms because of a relatively dispersed and inactive Chinese community in the state. By contrast, the relatively concentrated and active Chinese community in Seattle has prevented the establishment of a Confucius Institute at the University of Washington.

There has been significant debate on the Confucius Institute at Portland State University. A Chinese language instructor at PSU commented in public remarks to the university's faculty senate that "After CI appeared, some PSU Chinese language students showed an uptick in homework essays containing wholesale phrases characteristic of party bureaucrats, veering sometimes into full plagiarism." In a faculty resolution pointedly dated June 4 (the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre in China) in 2018, the Portland State University faculty senate urged (by a vote of 23 to 18 with 3 abstentions) the university not to renew its Confucius Institute agreement without major changes. In response, the PSU administration rejected the resolution, noting that "the vote was split, with a narrow majority voting in favor", but stated that it "remains very open to further discussions about how [faculty] oversight and engagement can be enhanced in the future." The University of Oregon's faculty senate, meanwhile, has had little or no debate on its Confucius Institute.

Recommended Action: Confucius Institutes

The Oregon Association of Scholars believes that both Confucius Institutes in Oregon should be closed. They represent a threat to the integrity of higher education in the state. Attempts to shape them through faculty oversight are unlikely to work for two reasons: one is that they are established precisely to challenge academic freedom and faculty governance in matters concerning teaching related to China. Secondly, many faculty do not see any problem with state-sponsored propaganda from China being institutionalized on American college campuses, asserting a moral equivalence between such institutions and the work of American philanthropic foundations and even private corporations. In the PSU debate, for instance, one PSU faculty member who appears frequently on Russian state television wrote that the resolution "supports Trump's chauvinistic 'America First' policy agenda." Another PSU faculty member submitted that "it smacks of a smug imperialistic attitude that everyone we have relationships with has to subscribe to exactly the same values we do." This widespread moral

relativism concerning the values and institutions of a liberal society and those of an illiberal one-party regime means that “faculty oversight” is a weak reed on which to hang fidelity to core liberal values. There is a further reason to close the Confucius Institutes: as leading universities steer clear of them, the presence of a Confucius Institute has become an indicator of a university’s sub-standard status. Oregon’s universities should aspire to teaching and research excellence and the presence of a Confucius Institute signals an abandonment of that ideal.

Recommended Action: Confucius Classrooms

The pernicious effects of Confucius Classrooms are less well-documented. Comparison is often made between them and the “Cultural Revolution” Chinese language teaching materials that Western students of Chinese used during the Maoist era, in which example sentences and phrases were loaded with communist terminology. Given the lack of research into their effects, the Confucius Classrooms in Oregon should be closely monitored and evaluated. Parents and teachers at K-12 schools with Confucius Classrooms should vigorously limit any attempts to use the classrooms to control Oregon’s public education about issues in China. They should make use of the toolkit developed by the National Association of Scholars to ensure greater transparency and scrutiny of Confucius Classrooms.

Further Information

- *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* (National Association of Scholars, 2017)
- *On Partnerships with Foreign Governments: The Case of Confucius Institutes* (American Association of University Professors, 2014)
- “Confucius Institutes and China’s Soft Power” (*Compare: A Journal of Comparative & International Education*, 2016)
- “Confucius Institutes and China's Strategic Narratives” (*Politics*, 2015)
- "Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware" (*The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 2014)

The Oregon Association of Scholars is the Oregon affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. Membership in NAS is open to all who share a commitment to these broad principles. NAS publishes a journal and has state and regional affiliates. Visit NAS at www.nas.org, and OAS at www.oregonscholars.org. Contact: Dr. Bruce Gilley, OAS President, brucegilley@yahoo.com