THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

Faculty

October 17, 2010

At U.S. Colleges, Chinese-Financed Centers Prompt Worries About Academic Freedom

Professors keep watch for political interference at 61 Confucius Institutes, but there is scant evidence of meddling from China

By Peter Schmidt

College Park, Md.

A little bit of China can be found on the University of Maryland's main campus here, tucked away in the basement of Holzapfel Hall. There, in Room 0134, sits the university's Confucius Institute, where the walls are draped with Chinese etchings and calligraphy, scenes from the Beijing Opera play out on a large computer screen, and people sit around a table learning Mandarin.

The institute focuses on teaching Chinese language and culture. But it also wants students to feel good about China as a nation.

Like the 60 other Confucius Institutes that have cropped up at colleges around the United States since 2004, the Maryland facility was established with the blessing, and the money, of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese government continues to give it about $100,000 in financial support annually, and to pay the instructors from China who teach there. Such arrangements allow colleges to provide a lot more instruction and programming related to China.

Some faculty members and experts on Chinese politics worry, however, that the rapid proliferation of the institutes poses a threat to academic freedom and shared governance because of the way they involve the Chinese government in colleges' affairs. Professors at the University of Chicago protested its decision to open an institute there, and University of Pennsylvania faculty members cited concerns about Chinese-government involvement in opting not to seek to establish one.

The institutes "perform a propaganda function," says June Teufel Dreyer, a professor of political science at the University of Miami and a former member of the Congressionally established U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which monitors the implications of trade agreements between the two countries.

"It would be stupid," Ms. Dreyer says, "for the Chinese government to spend money on something that did not further its interests."

David Prager Branner, an adjunct associate professor of East Asian languages and culture at Columbia University who has studied the Confucius Institutes, says he fears that colleges with the institutes can become dependent on Chinese funds and thus susceptible to pressure from the Chinese government to stifle speech it opposes, such as expressions of support for Tibetan or Taiwanese independence. Foreign-language programs at American colleges, he says, are often so starved for resources that "they are not in a position to reject money, no matter where it comes from, or with what strings."

Risks and Restraint

The only place where such fears have been realized is Israel, one of nearly 90 nations around the world that are now home to Confucius Institutes. There, a court held last year that Tel Aviv University, which houses a Confucius Institute, had violated freedom of expression by succumbing to pressure from the Chinese Embassy to cut short an art exhibition depicting Chinese-government oppression of the Falun Gong movement. The judge in the case concluded that the university's dean of students, Yoav Ariel, had feared that the art exhibit would jeopardize Chinese support for its Confucius Institute and other educational activities on the campus, according to reports in the Israeli newspapers *Haaretz* and *The Jerusalem Post*.

In the United States, Chinese diplomats have at times made their displeasure known when colleges have invited speakers that China strongly opposes. In January, for example, the University of Oregon came under—and resisted—pressure from the Chinese consul general in San Francisco to cancel a lecture by Peng Ming-Min, an advocate of Taiwanese independence.

Other colleges have heard protests from Chinese officials over plans to let the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual and cultural leader, speak on their campuses. Although the University of Washington played host to the Dalai Lama over Chinese objections in 2008, it came under fire for taking steps to ensure that he would not be asked questions dealing with the autonomy of Tibet or China's crackdown on unrest there. In Canada, the University of Calgary's decision to award an honorary degree to the Dalai Lama last year was followed by its removal from the Chinese government's list of universities it classifies as accredited.

Since the first Confucius Institute in the United States was established here at Maryland, in late 2004, however, there have been no complaints of the institutes' getting in the way of academic freedom on American campuses or of Chinese officials' using their government's financial support for the institutes as leverage to get American colleges to squelch speech they oppose.

The Maryland institute has encountered "no interference and no pressure at all" from the Chinese government or from China's Nankai University, which sponsors the institute, says Chuan Sheng Liu, a professor of physics who has served as director of Maryland's Confucius Institute since 2006.

"We are an American university, and the most important value is academic freedom," Mr. Liu says. "We don't want anything to interfere with that, and we stand very firm on that ground."

Mary E. Gallagher, an associate professor of political science and director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, says the Confucius Institute there has been free to cover some topics "that are controversial and sensitive in China," such as how its Uighur minority—members of which violently clashed with government forces last year—are depicted in the performing arts.

Although the Confucius Institutes "are not going to exist in a political vacuum," being influenced by political considerations "is a far cry from trying to infringe on free speech," says Robert A. Saunders, an assistant professor of history and politics at the State University of New York's Farmingdale State College, who has researched China's efforts to promote its culture. The Chinese government has probably concluded that it reaps so much benefit from the Confucius Institutes, he says, that doing anything that might jeopardize their image and their acceptance by foreign governments and institutions "is just not worth it."

'Soft Power'

So far, China's effort to promote itself through Confucius Institutes has met with remarkable success. Since the first one opened in Seoul, South Korea, in late 2004, more than 280 have been established around the world, according to the Beijing-based agency that oversees them, the Office of Chinese Language Council International, more commonly known by its colloquial name, Hanban. Antarctica is the only continent without one.

Many experts on China characterize its campaign to set up Confucius Institutes as an exercise in "soft power," saying that the country sees the promotion of its culture and its chief language, standard Mandarin, as a means of expanding its economic, cultural, and diplomatic reach.

The idea of gaining more power internationally through the promotion of one's language and culture is hardly new. Leading French thinkers created the Alliances Françaises to promote their language and culture back in 1883. Germany has long advanced its interests through Goethe Institutes. Many other countries have set up similar organizations to expand their influence.

The Confucius Institutes are distinct, however, both in their tendency to be housed within universities and in the degree to which they are financed and managed by a foreign government. Hanban is overseen by officials of a long list of national ministries, including those of education, culture, commerce, and foreign affairs.

A college wishing to have a Confucius Institute must submit to Hanban an application describing the facility where the institute will be housed, plans to help manage and finance it, and projections of demand for its offerings. Hanban generally provides its U.S. institutes with about $100,000 annually, which must be matched by the host institution, as well as with instructors supplied by a partner university in China.

An English-speaking press officer for Hanban did not answer e-mailed questions about the agency's views on academic freedom and its long-term plans for Confucius Institutes in the United States.

Imported and Tailored

The Confucius Institute at Maryland has four teachers from China who are paid by Hanban and provide classes to students, people from the area who wish to learn Mandarin, and teachers undergoing training to offer Mandarin instruction in local schools. In addition, two interns—both recent graduates of Nankai University—teach a weekend Mandarin class to parents who have adopted children from China. Since its establishment, the number of students served annually by the institute has risen from about 20 to about 200. Full-time staff members, provided by Maryland, recruit distinguished scholars and organize lectures, seminars, and other activities.

Other Confucius Institutes at U.S. colleges operate in a similar manner, although they generally tailor their offerings and activities to local needs. The institute at the University of Kansas, for example, uses distance education to provide Mandarin instruction to rural schools throughout that state. The institute at the Community College of Denver operates a "Chinese Cultural

Exploratorium" with interactive exhibits about Chinese culture. Western Kentucky University's newly established Confucius Institute counts businesses in that state among the constituencies it seeks to serve by offering language classes.

The Confucius Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles takes a different tack. Instead of focusing on providing Mandarin instruction—which was already widely offered on that campus—the UCLA institute has directed its energies elsewhere. Among its activities, it has brought American and Chinese scholars together to develop methods for translating the social sciences, offered a summer course introducing undergraduates to Eastern medical practices, and helped train local schoolteachers to work with the local Mandarin-speaking population.

In dealing with Hanban officials, "we are pushing it a little bit," says Susan Pertel Jain, executive director of the institute. "We are sort of making them think."

She adds, however, that there are limits to how far she is willing to test her university's relationship with Hanban, especially when it comes to dealing with matters that are politically touchy. "We are not going to create programming that is going to stir things up," she says.

Faculty Fears

Other U.S. colleges have resisted entering into such relationships. Among them, the University of Pennsylvania chose not to apply for a Confucius Institute, partly because it was uncomfortable with the Chinese government's involvement, says G. Cameron Hurst III, a former director of the university's Center for East Asian Studies.

At other colleges where Confucius Institutes have been established, faculty members have sought some say in the institutes' affairs and have complained when they did not get it. At Michigan, for example, faculty members expressed concern about academic freedom in the months before an institute opened there last year. "There was a pretty fair and open airing of concerns," says Ms. Gallagher, of Michigan's Chinese-studies center, and the university responded by establishing a faculty advisory committee to oversee the institute's programming and university financing.

In 2006 the Faculty Senate at the University of Hawaii-Manoa formally complained to the administration about not being adequately consulted about the establishment of a Confucius Institute there. Last spring, more than 170 faculty members at the University of Chicago signed a letter citing the university's establishment of a Confucius Institute without Faculty Senate approval as one of the reasons they believed its president, Robert J. Zimmer, was trampling upon their shared-governance rights.

The letter called the institute "an academically and politically ambiguous initiative sponsored by the government of the People's Republic of China." It said the university had proceeded "without due care to ensure the institute's academic integrity" and had risked having its own reputation used to "legitimate the spread of such Confucius Institutes in this country and beyond."

Mr. Branner, of Columbia University, who was an associate professor at Maryland when it established its Confucius Institute, says he worries that the institutes impose Hanban's teaching methods and materials upon Chinese-language classrooms and give the Chinese government an opportunity to collect information on American students of Chinese descent, some of whom will go into politically sensitive work. Other experts on China and Chinese-language instruction have expressed concern about whether Confucius Institutes are proliferating too quickly for Hanban to ensure high-quality instruction.

For the most part, however, such institutes are widely viewed by the colleges that have them as meeting an educational need that was unlikely to be filled any other way.

The six adults who took instruction at Maryland's Confucius Institute one recent night, learning how to write and speak basic phrases like "Good evening" in Mandarin, were simply happy to have found access to such classes after school or work. Among them, Susan Bresee, a graduate student of education at Maryland, said she was there because she hoped to teach English in China someday and thought learning Mandarin would, in general, make her a better language instructor. "It gets you to move your mouth in different ways," she said. "I love the sound of it. It is like music."