

# Extract from “China’s Impact on the U.S. Education System”

## Staff Report

United States Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations,  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

### Executive Summary

When China sought to market itself to students around the world, it looked to its past. Confucius, the ancient Chinese philosopher, is synonymous with morality, justice, and honesty. The Chinese government capitalized on this rich legacy and began establishing Confucius Institutes on college campuses around the world in 2004, including the first in the United States at the University of Maryland. Today, there are more than 100 Confucius Institutes in the United States, the most of any country.

The Chinese government funds Confucius Institutes and provides Chinese teachers to teach language classes to students and non-student community members. In addition to Chinese language classes, Confucius Institutes host cultural events, including Chinese New Year celebrations, cooking classes, speakers, and dance and music performances. These selective events depict China as approachable and compassionate; rarely are events critical or controversial. The Chinese government also funds and provides language instructors for Confucius Classrooms, which offer classes for kindergarten through 12th grade students. Confucius Classrooms are currently in 519 elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States. Continued expansion of the program is a priority for China.

Confucius Institute funding comes with strings that can compromise academic freedom. The Chinese government approves all teachers, events, and speakers. Some U.S. schools contractually agree that both Chinese and U.S. laws will apply. The Chinese teachers sign contracts with the Chinese government pledging they will not damage the

national interests of China. Such limitations attempt to export China’s censorship of political debate and prevent discussion of potentially politically sensitive topics. Indeed, U.S. school officials told the Subcommittee that Confucius Institutes were not the place to discuss controversial topics like the independence of Taiwan or the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. As one U.S. school administrator explained to the Subcommittee, when something is “funded by the Chinese government, you know what you’re getting.”

Confucius Institutes exist as one part of China’s broader, long-term strategy. Through Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government is attempting to change the impression in the United States and around the world that China is an economic and security threat. Confucius Institutes’ soft power encourages complacency toward China’s pervasive, long-term initiatives against both government critics at home and businesses and academic institutions abroad. Those long-term initiatives include its Made in China 2025 plan, a push to lead the world in certain advanced technology manufacturing. The Thousand Talents program is another state-run initiative designed to recruit Chinese researchers in the United States to return to China for significant financial gain—bringing with them the knowledge gained at U.S. universities and companies.

*Contracting with the Chinese Government.* The Chinese government runs the Confucius Institute program out of the Ministry of Education’s Office of Chinese Language Council International, known as “Hanban.” Each U.S. school signs a contract with Hanban establishing the terms of hosting a Confucius Institute. Contracts

reviewed by the Subcommittee generally contain provisions that state both Chinese and U.S. laws apply; limit public disclosure of the contract; and terminate the contract if the U.S. school takes actions that “severely harm the image or reputation” of the Confucius Institute.

The Chinese director and teachers at each Confucius Institute also sign contracts with Hanban. The contract with Hanban makes clear a Chinese director or teacher will be terminated if they “violate Chinese laws;” “engage in activities detrimental to national interests;” or “participate in illegal organizations.” In fact, the contract states the Chinese director and teachers must “conscientiously safeguard national interests” and report to the Chinese Embassy within one month of arrival in the United States.

*Resources Provided by Hanban.* U.S. schools that contract with Hanban receive substantial funding and resources to establish the Confucius Institute on campus. At the outset, Hanban typically provides a U.S. school between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in start-up costs, around 3,000 books, and other materials. Hanban also selects and provides a Chinese director and teachers at no cost to the U.S. school. While school officials have the opportunity to interview candidates for these positions, there is little-to-no transparency into how the Chinese government selects the individuals that schools must choose from. Nor did U.S. school officials interviewed by the Subcommittee know if candidates would meet the school’s hiring standards. Hanban requires director and teacher candidates to pass English proficiency tests and undergo a psychological exam to determine adaptability to living and teaching in the United States. Beyond that, U.S. schools’ understanding of the selection process was limited, at best.

*Expansion to Kindergarten through 12th Grade.* China did not stop at expanding at university and college campuses. The next phase of Confucius Institutes involved funding teachers for Confucius Classrooms in K–12 grade school. There are currently 519 Confucius Classrooms operating in the United States with expansion of this program a top priority for China. In the United States, a Confucius Institute receives funding and instructors directly from Hanban and passes it to the K–12 grade school to support affiliated Confucius Classrooms.

*The Cost of Confucius Institutes.* The investment by China in U.S. Confucius Institutes is substantial. Since 2006, the Subcommittee determined China directly provided over \$158 million in funding to U.S. schools for Confucius Institutes. A number of U.S. schools, however, failed to properly report this funding as required by law. The Department of Education requires all postsecondary schools to report foreign gifts of \$250,000 or more from a single source with-

in a calendar year of receiving them. Despite that legal requirement, nearly 70 percent of U.S. schools that received more than \$250,000 from Hanban failed to properly report that amount to the Department of Education.

The Department of Education last issued guidance to U.S. schools on foreign gift reporting requirements in 2004, the same year the first Confucius Institute opened in the United States. As China opened over 100 additional Confucius Institutes in the United States over the last 15 years, the Department of Education remained silent.

*Visa Failures.* The State Department is responsible for issuing visas to any Chinese director or teacher entering the United States to work at a Confucius Institute. Some U.S. schools have struggled to comply with the requirements

of the Exchange Visitor Visa (or “J-1”). In 2018, the State Department revoked 32 J-1 Professor and Research Scholar visas for Confucius Institute teachers who were not conducting research, but instead were teaching at K–12 schools. The State Department also found evidence that one Confucius Institute Chinese director improperly coached the teachers to discuss their research during interviews with State Department investigators.

In 2019, the State Department plans to double the number of Confucius Institutes field reviews it completed in 2018 – from two to four.

*China’s Lack of Reciprocity.* In response to the growing popularity of Confucius Institutes in the United States, the State Department initiated a public diplomacy program in China. Since 2010, the State Department has provided \$5.1 million in grant funding for 29 “American Cultural Centers” or ACCs in China. Through the ACC program, a U.S. school partners with a Chinese school, much like a Confucius Institute. The U.S. school then uses the grant funds to create a space on the campus of the Chinese partner school to “enable Chinese audiences to better understand the United States, its culture, society, government, language, law, economic center, and values.” ACCs are notably different from Confucius Institutes, however, as the State Department does not pay or vet instructors or directors; provide books or materials; or veto proposed events. Even so, the Chinese government stifled the establishment of the ACC program from the start.

In all, the State Department provided 29 U.S. schools with grant funds to establish ACCs with a partner Chinese schools. For some U.S. schools, roadblocks to opening their ACCs appeared immediately. For example, after extensive negotiations, one Chinese school refused to open a proposed ACC, stating it didn’t see a need to move forward. An official from the U.S. school seeking to open the ACC, however, believed China’s Ministry of Education told the partner school not to proceed with the contract. This official wrote in an email to his colleagues, “This is a typical Chinese political euphemism. Obviously, [the Chinese University] was instructed by [the Ministry of Education] not to proceed with our proposal.” The U.S. school returned the grant funds to the State Department.

The ACCs that did open found they needed permission from their Chinese host schools to hold most cultural events. One Chinese host school refused to allow its ACC to host a play about the life of Muhammad Ali. Another denied approval for a lecture series on policy issues facing

Americans. One U.S. school official who staffed an ACC told the Subcommittee that members of the local Communist Party often participated in the approval process. Another U.S. school official left the ACC after two sessions of extensive questioning by Chinese police officers regarding her involvement with the ACC and the State Department. When the U.S. school official returned to the United States, a colleague told her that Chinese police interrogation of school officials was common and that she was now just “part of the club.”

In all, the State Department documented over 80 instances in the past four years where the Chinese government directly interfered with U.S. diplomacy efforts in China. Interference with State Department officials or events took a number of forms. One example involved a Chinese official telling a U.S. official an ACC no longer existed; the U.S. official easily confirmed the continued existence of the ACC through its U.S. partner school. One U.S. official was told she applied too late to attend the opening of an ACC after submitting the request a month before. In other instances, the Chinese school canceled approved events, sometimes as late as the night before.

In December 2017, the State Department Inspector General found the ACC mission was largely ineffective. In October 2018, the State Department ended all ACC program grant funding in order to conduct an internal assessment of the program. There are currently no plans for future ACC grants.

*The Need for Transparency and Reciprocity.* Schools in the United States—from kindergarten to college—have provided a level of access to the Chinese government that the Chinese government has refused to provide to the United States. That level of access can stifle academic freedom and provide students and others exposed to Confucius Institute programming with an incomplete picture of Chinese government actions and policies that run counter to U.S. interests at home and abroad. Absent full transparency regarding how Confucius Institutes operate and full reciprocity for U.S. cultural outreach efforts on college campuses in China, Confucius Institutes should not continue in the United States.

For those interested in the entire report, please visit <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/PSI%20Report%20China's%20Impact%20on%20the%20US%20Education%20System.pdf> or <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/> and follow links to Library > February 2019 > Majority and Minority Staff Report—China’s Impact on the U.S. Education System. ■

