

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Academic Freedom Under Attack: Loosening the CCP's Grip on America's Classrooms

**Testimony before the
Committee on Education and the Workforce,
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary,
and Secondary Education,
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My name is Mike Gonzalez. I am the Angeles T. Arredondo *E Pluribus Unum* Senior Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

I have lived in Hong Kong for eight years of my life, working there as a journalist both under British rule and then, after the 1997 handover, under China's increasingly harsh control over the former colony. For five of those years, I was a writer for The Wall Street Journal's editorial page based in that city, spending my last two years there, 2004 and 2005, as the editor of the overseas edition's editorial page,

from where I directed the page's coverage of Asian issues, including the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). I have also reported from China itself at times, and, between 1989 and 1991, I spent two years as a foreign correspondent of the news agency Agence France-Presse based in Seoul, South Korea, also traveling occasionally to China from there. Additionally, I am on the advisory board of Parents Defending Education (PDE), the non-profit whose

revealing July study, “Little Red Classrooms,” has led to this hearing.¹

The classrooms in question refer to “Confucius Classrooms,” which are the primary and secondary school equivalents of the Confucius Institutes. The Institutes are Chinese government–sponsored centers that are set up at universities here in the United States and around the world. They ostensibly teach Mandarin and Chinese culture but also fund China research. The Classrooms, according to a report by the Congressional Research Service earlier this year, “typically are affiliated with Institutes at nearby colleges.”² The presence of Classrooms in our elementary, middle and high schools, where they can influence the youngest Americans, is not new. The PDE study said that the “People’s Republic of China fostered relationships with American K-12 schools through grants, sister school partnerships, and other programming since at least 2009.”³

In the words of a comprehensive Heritage study released in March, the Institutes, and the Classrooms “give CCP agents a foothold” in the United States.⁴ In exchange for the funding, the schools where the Confucius Classrooms are hosted self-censor themselves about the reality of the PRC and the CCP and even allow the spread of PRC propaganda. This goes to the heart of the subject of this subcommittee’s hearing today. In 2020, in response to criticism, the PRC government renamed Hanban, the agency that used to run the Institutes and the Classrooms, as the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC). CLEC is affiliated with China’s Ministry of Education.

Since my departure from journalism in 2005, I have authored papers and op-eds that deal with the PRC and the CCP, especially in my last 14 and a half years with The Heritage Foundation. In 2015, I authored one of the first papers on the Confucius

Institutes. One of my recommendations was for the Congress to explore,

Whether the PRC’s efforts to influence Americans through academia and Hollywood represent an attempt by a foreign government to manipulate a democratic population whose opinions, translated through the ballot box, will inform public policy.⁵

Today, eight years later, this question remains at the heart of our government involvement with the PRC, as this manipulation continues. The PDE paper, which built on also stellar research by the National Association of Scholars, exposed that Confucius Institutes and the related Confucius Classrooms continue to operate in the United States. PDE was able to uncover contracts showing that “Confucius Classrooms, or other Chinese government backed programing, are still in operation” at at least seven schools around the country.⁶

There is less known about the Classrooms than about the Institutes, because their model is less standardized. Last week I spoke with Ian Oxnevad, a researcher at the NAS working on yet another study, and he told me that there are a lot more Confucius Classrooms than Institutes. “Just because they are not called Confucius Classrooms does not mean they are not,” he told me. A 2019 Senate report quotes Hanban as saying that it had 519 Confucius Classrooms operating in the United States in 2017.⁷ Based on his own research, which includes looking at government sources, Oxnevad estimates that there remain around 500 Classrooms around the country. “They are basically a turn-key program for Mandarin that is all expenses paid,” he said. Paid by whom? The CCP. What they do is indoctrinate students “on how China is perceived,” Oxnevad told me.

¹ Little Red Classrooms, Parents Defending Education, July 26, 2023.

<https://defendinged.org/investigations/little-red-classrooms-china-infiltration-of-american-k-12-schools/>

² Confucius Institutes in the United States, Selected Issues, Congressional Research Service, May 2, 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11180>

³ Little Red Classrooms

⁴ James J. Carafano, Michael Pillsbury, Jeff M. Smith and Andrew Harding, “Winning the New Cold War: A

Plan for Countering China.” Special Report No. 270. March 28, 2023. P. 6

<https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/SR270.pdf>

⁵ Mike Gonzalez, China’s Public Opinion Warfare. Backgrounder No. 2986, February 5, 2015

http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2015/pdf/BG2986.pdf

⁶ Little Red Classrooms.

⁷ China’s Impact on the U.S. Educational System, U.S. Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

Just last week, after filing a public records request with Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, PDE unearthed additional details of PRC funding for Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, which is located in Alexandria. The details revealed that officials from Tsinghua University High School in Beijing, some of whom were CCP members, toured Thomas Jefferson High in 2017.⁸ This comes on top of a PDE expose in March that revealed that Fairfax Public Schools' Partnership Fund has received more than \$1 million in donations from PRC interests since 2014.

As PDE points out, this ties Thomas Jefferson High with Chinese military and energy operations. Tsinghua University High School "is connected to Tsinghua University, a Chinese military school that is "supervised" by the Chinese defense industry, according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute."⁹

All this comes despite the fact that many of these institutes and classrooms were supposed to have been closed after many scholars started writing about them, which led to subsequent congressional action. In March 2021, the U.S. Senate voted to prohibit Department of Education funding for universities that hosted the institutes, unless the contracts had "clear provisions" that protected academic freedom and gave the university full managerial control of the institutes.¹⁰ The absence of transparency in the contracts between the schools and Hanban has been a big part of the problem, as there is no way of knowing if self-censorship is one of the stipulations.

As the NAS noted earlier this year, "Confucius Institutes began closing in the wake of state and federal policies that targeted Confucius Institutes for their risks to U.S. national security. But in June 2022, NAS found that many once-defunct

Confucius Institutes had reopened under new names."¹¹ NAS adds that of 111 institutes that have closed or are in the process of closing, "at least 28 have replaced their Confucius Institute with a similar program, and at least 58 have maintained close relationships with their former Confucius Institute partner."

This duplicity only reinforces the view that I have, and that of the institution I work for, The Heritage Foundation, that the executive branch of our government must ban, at the federal level, all the institutes and classrooms, "as they are sponsored by the CCP."¹² The President of the United States and the Congress must also end "all collaborations between U.S. institutions and Chinese entities affiliated with China's Ministry of State Security or other security and intelligence agencies."¹³ By allowing the institutes and the classrooms to continue, the U.S. government is allowing not only a foreign government, but a communist party, to dictate what our children learn about an adversary.

As I wrote in my 2015 study, "Communist Party officials admit in their most candid moments what the institutes really are about. As the Politburo's top propaganda official, Li Changchun, boasted in 2009, the Confucius Institutes 'are an important part of China's overseas propaganda setup'."¹⁴ Indeed, Hanban reported directly to the CCP. As I explained,

"Hanban is governed by a council that is chaired by a member of the Chinese Communist Party's ruling Politburo, Vice Premier Liu Yandong. The party's highest ranked female member, Madame Liu is a former head of the United Front Works Department, which conducts 'covert action by attempting to influence organizations in other countries in support of

⁸ FOIAs Reveal Additional Details on TJ's Foreign Partnerships. September 12, 2023. <https://defendinged.org/investigations/foias-reveal-additional-details-on-tjs-foreign-partnerships/>

⁹ Little Red Classrooms

¹⁰ S.590 Confucius Act. March 8, 2021. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/590/text>

¹¹ How Many Confucius institutes Are There in the United States? National Association of Scholars, June 20, 2023. https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/how_many_confucius_institutes_are_in_the_united_states

¹² James J. Carafano, Michael Pillsbury, Jeff M. Smith and Andrew Harding, "Winning the New Cold War: A Plan for Countering China." Special Report No. 270. March 28, 2023. P. 6 <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/SR270.pdf>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Editorial, "Beijing's Propaganda Lessons," The Wall Street Journal, August 7, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/beijings-propaganda-lessons-1407430440>

Chinese foreign policy objectives’ and also ‘conducts clandestine intelligence operations’.”¹⁵

The United States is an open society that enjoys the free exchange of ideas, and whose people, after informing themselves on the issues of the day, form opinions on them, and then vote accordingly. China is none of those things. It is a communist dictatorship where the Chinese Communist Party retains monopoly on power and whose economy continues to be saddled with State Owned Enterprises, despite the gradual introduction of some market mechanisms since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Our two nations face, therefore, asymmetric informational warfare, in which the PRC will do everything within its power to subvert our open system for its own ends. And things have progressively gotten worse. When I wrote those words in my 2015 report, Xi Jinping had been in power just over two years. Since then, under Xi’s tight grip on power, China has regressed both economically and in terms of human freedom.

China’s influence on our schools, both at the primary, secondary, and higher education levels, is therefore aimed at presenting to students a portrayal of the PRC that does not accord with reality. Through the Confucius Institutes in our colleges and universities, and through the so-called Confucius Classrooms in k-12, China seeks to be seen as a normal country, no different from, say, democratic and free Portugal, Chile, or South Korea, only a more important one because of its enormous demographic weight, regional cultural sway, and growing economy.

China is indeed an important country, with a very rich history and many contributions to civilization. But China is not a normal country. Its government represses not only minority populations such as the Tibetans, the Uighurs, and the Mongols, but of course, also the Han majority. All of the country’s 1.4 billion people have their liberties restricted. China has also reneged on its promise to the world that it would respect the freedoms of Hong Kong, which British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher only agreed to hand over in the 1980s after China’s

leader Deng Xiaoping promised “One Country, Two Systems,” for at least 50 years. China’s most famous political prisoner is a publisher by the name of Jimmy Lai, who today, at the age of 75, languishes in solitary confinement in a Hong Kong prison on what our State Department calls trumped-up charges relating to China’s draconian National Security Law. He spoke truth to power, so Xi Jinping put him in prison. On the 26th of this month, Mr. Lai will mark 1,000 days in that prison. I know Jimmy Lai. He is a friend of mine, and I can tell the members of this Congress and the American people that Mr. Lai is an indefatigable fighter for liberty, one whom America should never forget.

The Confucius Institutes and related Confucius Classrooms conceal this sordid record by restricting debate on Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen (the “Three Ts”), as well as Xinjiang, the Muslim region in China’s far west where the government has set up concentration camps, Falun Gong, the suffering of Jimmy Lai, etc. Obviously, Beijing has every interest in preventing our very young from learning the truths about the PRC’s realities, and why the CCP is so determined the indoctrinate American children.

U.S. allies such as Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium all closed Confucius Institutes in universities in their countries for a variety of reasons, including fear of espionage and of China spreading its soft power.¹⁶ You, our political leaders, have the responsibility of stopping this gross interference in how the youngest among us learn about what is likely to be our main adversary in the 21st century.

The PRC, which is controlled by the CCP, represents the greatest existential threat facing the United States today. We are in a new Cold War with the PRC, whether we acknowledge it or not. The Confucius Classrooms only aid our adversary.

Thank you for very much for your time and attention.

¹⁵ Gonzalez. P. 6

¹⁶ Pekka Vanttinen, “Finland Shuts Down Confucius Institute Amid Censorship, Espionage Accusations,”

Euractive, June 21, 2022. [Finland shuts down Confucius Institute amid censorship, espionage accusations – EURACTIV.com](#)

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