

# Confucius Institute - a Trojan horse

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## Contents

- [Propaganda machine](#)
- [Threat to academic independence](#)
- [The Confucius Institute in \(...\)](#)

*Parasitising universities and institutions, the Confucius Institute (CI) is a threat to academic freedom, not to mention its role as a propaganda machine. It is not just an innocent place for learning Chinese, but an attempt to establish itself as the sole authority on Chinese studies.*

The CI was founded in 2004 as a cultural and academic organisation for the promotion of the Chinese language and culture. The Institute saw a rapid expansion over the years, with 541 branches around the world ([http://english.hanban.org/node\\_10971.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm)). In order to foster academic exchanges, the Institute is usually attached to universities and also takes part in researches related to classical sinology and, more controversially, modern China studies.

Technically, each CI is independent and the plural form should be used to refer to the entire programme. However, on closer inspection, they are all administered by the CI Headquarters, a.k.a. the Hanban, which is in turn an “NGO” under the direct control of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Given this strict hierarchy, this article considers them all to be the same and refers to them collectively by the single form — the CI.

## Propaganda machine

There are numerous critical articles about different aspects of the CI, for example, its finance, its organisations and its political influence. This section focuses on how the CI attempts to censor academic content around the world.

Amongst the scandals surrounding the CI, the most infamous one was arguably the Braga incident (<http://chinesestudies.eu/?p=584>). The Director-General of the CI headquarters ordered a removal of pages with content about Taiwan in an academic conference programme. In total, four pages were torn off the publication.

Tearing pages right off a brochure as a form of censorship is childish as it only attracts more attention from the public who would otherwise not have been aware of the existence of « sensitive » materials. It also shows that the director-general of the CI, representing the entire structure, does not respect and literally undermines freedom of speech.

## Threat to academic independence

Normally, language-learning centres founded by other countries and governments are not attached to universities. For instance, the Alliance Française, British Council and Goethe Institute are all

independent organisations. On the contrary, whilst providing similar linguistic, cultural and academic education, the CI funds and cooperates with universities. Why does the CI take a different approach than their western counterparts for achieving the supposedly same cultural and academic goals?

At first, the offer seems generous, with large sums of money flowing into the university — more research funding, increased headcount, new faculty building etc. In exchange, the Institute has to be headed by a director handpicked by the CI Headquarters. Back then, the universities agreed with this concession — “With all this generous investment, they basically own the institute and it is reasonable to let them manage it on their own.” Eventually, when there are conflicts regarding personnel management and research funding, the director, serving one and only one master, naturally sides with the CI Headquarters. In the worst-case scenario, the HQ can manipulate its sharp power and threaten the hosting university with a funding withdrawal, thus indirectly mobilising the workers in the CI (and the university board) to confront the university management.

In other words, the CI participates in academic activities under the name of its hosting institutions, whilst being an independent structure out of the hierarchy of the hosting institutions. This problem might sound bureaucratic to our readers, but bureaucracy is part of the politics of accountability. Currently, the hosting universities cannot hold the CI accountable for any of its actions. On the contrary, the CI responds solely to the commands of its own HQ, which is a political organisation.

The administrative structure of the CI is a threat to the academic independence. If a researcher publishes anything critical of China, there might be serious consequences. Therefore, everyone in the CI has to beware, censor themselves, and only say things that conform to the official opinion. Worse still, the homogeneity of the CI (controlled by one single HQ) undermines diversity in academia. If the CI continues to grow and dominate China studies, there will be less room for critical academic debate. In other words, the CI will be able control the authority of discourse and become the unique voice on the subject.

If a university really wants to establish a solid Chinese department, it should let it grow organically, find its own strengths, and build its own capital, just as other departments do. It should not fall into the trap of consumerism and take the pre-packaged happy meal offered by a political organisation whose real agenda is not even academic.

## **The Confucius Institute in France**

Despite the closure of the CI in Lyon, Toulouse and Paris Nanterre, there are still 23 branches in France. We urge French universities to refrain from compromising their priceless academic freedom and political independence for a small endowment and a mediocre department. We demand that the following branches be closed and be replaced with professors nominated by the universities themselves:

Institut Confucius Clermont-Ferrand Auvergne  
Institut Confucius de Strasbourg  
Néoma Confucius Institute for Business (Campus de Rouen)  
Institut Confucius Pau Pyrénées  
Institut Confucius de Bretagne  
Institut Confucius de La Rochelle  
Institut Confucius de l'Université de Lorraine  
Institut Confucius de Montpellier  
Institut Confucius de l'Université Paris 7

Institut Confucius de l'université d'Orléans  
Institut Confucius d'Artois  
Institut Confucius de Poitiers  
Institut Confucius de l'Université de la Polynésie française  
Institut Confucius des Pays de la Loire  
Institut Confucius de La Réunion  
European Business Confucius Institute at ESCP  
Institut Confucius de Liège  
Institut Confucius Côte d'Azur

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<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/comite-pour-la-liberte-hong-kong/blog/111120/confucius-institute-trojan-horse>