

## **It's Time for Western Universities to Cut Their Ties to China**

**In their crass hunger for Chinese money, universities have become China's fifth column in the West.**

By Salvatore Babones

It's time for Western universities to close their Confucius Institutes and end their academic cooperation with China. In the three decades following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, one of the ways China sought to rebuild its image abroad was by systematically forging partnerships with Western universities. At first, these partnerships mainly focused on research collaboration. Later, they grew to include the Confucius Institutes for language education, generous funding for various joint projects, and the establishment of Western universities' branch campuses in China.

At a time when China was undemocratic but liberalizing, such engagement seemed like a sensible strategy. There have always been uneasy moments in Western universities' relationships with China, whether prompted by tensions over hosting the Dalai Lama or controversies over university self-censorship on China-related topics. But these might have been dismissed as growing pains on China's learning curve toward a more enlightened regime. It seemed that everyone—even Beijing—shared the same ultimate goal of a more liberal, more democratic China.

Now that China has tilted toward full-blown totalitarianism at home and military expansionism abroad, the "values transfer" rationale for engagement with China has evaporated. It has become crystal clear that Chinese President Xi Jinping has no intention of leading China toward convergence with the West. As a result, Western universities can no longer argue that they are pursuing a larger civilizing mission in their dealings with China. All that is left is the pure, crass hunger for Chinese money.

Money, of course, is where it all began. In the 1990s, Western universities started developing a cottage industry in offering bespoke short courses to teams of visiting Chinese officials. By the turn of the millennium, their large-scale recruitment of Chinese students had begun. Then, in 2004, China issued a bold invitation to the world's universities: If you host a center for the study of Chinese language and culture, the People's Republic of China will pick up the tab. That was the birth of the Confucius Institutes.

Billed as China's answer to the British Council and the Alliance Française, China's 541 Confucius Institutes are housed at universities abroad, not run as independent outlets for public diplomacy like their European competitors. Critics worry that Confucius Institutes promote Chinese government propaganda, but these concerns are probably overblown. The reality is that Confucius Institutes are not so much designed to indoctrinate the students who take their courses as to influence the administrators of the universities that host them.

China provides the start-up funds, the salaries, the teaching materials, and sometimes even the buildings for Confucius Institutes. Perhaps just as important, China supplies the teachers. It's no easy task to find qualified Chinese teachers in Conway, Arkansas, or Las Cruces, New Mexico, to say nothing of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, or N'Djamena, Chad. In an era of strained university budgets, it must be very attractive when a foreign government offers to fund and staff a revenue-generating language learning center. Confucius Institutes at most Western universities focus on offering noncredit classes to the public, while ordinary faculty teach for-credit classes to degree students.

That at least some university administrators have been compromised seems likely. In the United Kingdom, Parliament has held hearings on the potential of Confucius Institute funding to influence university policies. The University of Queensland in Australia has experienced a governance crisis over its moves to expel a student activist who has been highly critical of the university's Confucius Institute ties. And, of course, in the United States, the umbrella organization coordinating Confucius Institutes has recently been designated as a foreign mission by the State Department.

But this debate misses the main point. For three decades, universities have attempted to play a pivotal role in Western public diplomacy toward China. They have collaborated with Chinese institutions, opened campuses in China, and educated hundreds of thousands of Chinese students. Along the way, they generated millions of dollars in revenues, but always with the promise that the money ultimately supported progress toward the larger goal of a more liberal China. Collaboration would help professionalize Chinese institutions; overseas campuses would be island outposts of academic freedom; Chinese students would internalize Western values and take them back to China.

Perhaps through no fault of the universities, those public diplomacy missions have failed. Chinese universities have been forced to abandon "freedom of thought" pledges in favor of "Xi Jinping Thought." Chinese campuses of Western universities such as New York University Shanghai have been forced to add compulsory classes in "patriotic education." And many (though by no means all) Chinese students abroad increasingly exhibit an extreme nationalism that severely undermines the notion that the mere experience of life in a democratic country will temper students' susceptibility to party-state indoctrination.

Rising totalitarianism in China has turned the tables on Western universities: Instead of spearheading the liberalization of China, they are uncomfortably vulnerable to Chinese pressure in the opposite direction. Their partnerships with Chinese universities have turned into potential liabilities as professors come under fire for not properly declaring Chinese funding, research grants are linked to human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and universities' technology breakthroughs are being used to improve China's system of mass surveillance. Embarrassing, immoral, and potentially criminal associations are inevitable when universities are so deeply engaged with such a dangerous regime.

Similarly, if Western universities are operating branch campuses in China and educating Chinese international students on their home campuses purely for profit, do they have a sufficient motive to operate in the public interest, as they are supposed to do? Critics legitimately ask whether universities will compromise their values in order to keep the tuition dollars flowing. If China were steadily liberalizing, these concerns would quietly dissipate over time. But with China steadily becoming more militant and repressive, these concerns can only grow.

As difficult and dismaying it may be for everyone involved to admit it, it's time to cut the cord. As an evil regime gets even worse, at some point engagement becomes no longer acceptable. We have in China today a government that monitors and censors all internal communications, prohibits access to external sources of news and information, arbitrarily detains not only its own citizens but increasingly foreigners as well, severely represses minority cultures in Tibet and Xinjiang, prohibits the free exercise of religion, and routinely threatens its neighbors with military force. Each of these individually would be cause for concern. Collectively, their weight is overwhelming. And all of them are trending in the wrong direction.

Western universities are no longer participating in the reform of a liberalizing China. On balance—despite individual exceptions—they are now more likely to act as apologists for an illiberal China. To escape from that untenable position, they should scale back their engagement with China by reducing Chinese student numbers to levels that do not compromise their autonomy, discourage research collaboration with Chinese universities, and close their Confucius Institutes. China is clearly moving in the wrong direction. Western universities should be careful to ensure that they are not dragged along with it. They should be absolutely determined not to follow voluntarily.

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