

Are Chinese language centres in Canada culture clubs or spy outposts?



The very quiet lobby of the BCIT Confucius Institute

Ian Smith/Canwest New

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Before McMaster University art history professor Angela Sheng leads a journalist on a tour of the year-old school of Chinese language and culture within the Hamilton, Ont., university, she invites him to sit for a cup of Kuan Yin tea, a Fujian Province specialty. After the tour, she suggests, they should catch lunch at one of her favourite local Chinese restaurants; in the meantime would he like a Chinese calendar, or a VIP pass to the Institute's spring gala? Between her chummy demeanour and the shock of fuschia through her hair, the director of the Confucius Institute at McMaster is more outgoing (and probably hipper) than the visiting-from-China faculty who work for her, but all are unfailingly polite and gracious.

Officially, Confucius Institutes are the Chinese equivalent of the Alliance Française or Goethe-Institut — the flourishing power's catch-up response to European countries' subsidized overseas language schools. At McMaster, students take courses in Chinese language and culture for credit; the Institute also organizes cultural events.

Last month, Brock University, based in St. Catharines, Ont., announced that this fall it will establish the third Confucius Institute Ontario and the seventh in Canada, all established in the last five years. To China observers and counter-intelligence agents, the runaway expansion of Confucius Institutes represents a threat, both as an arm of Chinese "soft power" abroad and as a potential vehicle for intelligence gathering.

"I think there's a concern from an intelligence point of view, definitely," says Michel Juneau-Katsuya, a retired CSIS agent who served as Asia bureau chief during the 1990s and published a book last fall about foreign espionage in Canada.

Mr. Juneau-Katsuya, who last year co-authored *Nest of Spies* with Fabrice de Pierrebourg (which discusses the Confucius Institute) says he suspects the schools may have been in the mind of CSIS head Richard Fadden when he warned television viewers last month of the need to be wary of foreign agents cozying up to Canadians with an interest in China.

"These Confucius organizations have not come out of philanthropic ideals," Mr. Juneau-Katsuya said in an interview. "They are of a strategy. And they are funded and run by organizations that are linked to Chinese intelligence services."

Confucius Institutes have spread spectacularly, with hundreds sprouting around the world since the program began in 2004. In

interview with the state-run newspaper *People's Daily* in March 2009, worldwide Confucius Institute chief Xu Lin said he expects the 500th centre to open this year. Even the governing Office of Chinese Language Council International, also known as Hanban, seems taken aback by its own success.

The typical arrangement works like this: Hanban provides the funding, primarily in the form of sending Chinese nationals qualified as language teachers. Demand for Mandarin instruction at all education levels far exceeds what Canadian schools and universities can provide, making the instructors the keystone of the equation.

The Chinese government agency may also furnish the program with textbooks and online versions of courses for distance learning. Some Confucius Institutes organize educational trips to China. For its part, the host institution provides facilities, Canadian students eager to learn Mandarin, and the institute director — Ms. Sheng, for example, remains a McMaster professor. Ordinarily, the host institution is a college or university, but there are exceptions: In Edmonton, the program has partnered with the public school board to offer Mandarin lessons for elementary and high school students.

Unlike some other Confucius Institutes, the program at McMaster is integrated with the host university such that students receive credit for courses taken.

“The Confucius Institute at McMaster is like other Confucius Institutes worldwide. The number one objective is to provide instruction in Chinese language as a second or foreign language. And, concurrent with this program, to help students understand better absorb the language, [we] provide cultural activities,” Ms. Sheng says. (She shares the Chinese government’s habit of referring to Mandarin, China’s majority dialect as “Chinese.”)

Ms. Sheng is grateful to senior administrators at McMaster for plugging the Confucius courses into the degree-granting system. “The CI at Mac to be here, at an academic university, offering for-credit courses, is an enviable position,” she says.

Although the specifics of arrangements between China and host institutions are often not revealed, Brock disclosed that Hanban provides US\$150,000 in startup cash and up to US\$100,000 in annual project funds to support the Institute there. It will focus on allowing teachers to certify as Mandarin instructors in Ontario schools, thus establishing a qualification program where none existed previously. Like many such documents, the Brock University press release portrays the arrangement as a prestigious coup for the Canadian institution.

Greg Finn, a Brock vice-provost and associate vice-president who was involved in bringing the Institute and the university together, recalls the suggestion coming both from a faculty member and the head of a visiting delegation from Brock’s Chinese partner, Minjiang University.

“They both happened fairly close to each other, actually, in terms of the suggestions coming forward both from the Chinese government official and the faculty member here at the university — independently of each other,” he says.

David Matas, a Winnipeg-based human rights lawyer who was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize this year for his work investigating abuses in China, cautions that universities may get more than they bargain for after partnering with Hanban, suggesting Chinese consular officials lean on the universities to silence speakers whom that government considers nuisances.

“The Confucius Institutes are a problem of course because of money. The money becomes a dependency and the dependency is for leverage in trying to get what [China] wants,” he says.

Mr. Matas says that when he and co-author David Kilgour travel for speaking engagements, “more or less wherever we go, the Chinese government tries to shut us up in various ways.”

He suspects universities with Confucius Institutes are especially susceptible to pressure. “In some places where we’ve gone, we’ve had last-minute cancellations at universities where they have Confucius Institutes ... with no plausible explanation,” he says.

Last year, an Israeli judge found that a Tel Aviv University administrator had cancelled a show of artwork by Falun Gong members after the Chinese embassy asked him. The ruling said the administrator feared losing Confucius Institute classes, travel scholars and conferences.

China has another stick to shake at Canadian universities, namely the threat of delisting them as recommended institutions for Chinese students heading abroad. In February, a few months after the University of Calgary awarded the Dalai Lama an honorary degree, the Chinese Ministry of Education started warning Chinese degree-seekers they could “face risks” if they decided to study there.

It is not known how many universities and educational bodies have been approached by Hanban and declined the opportunity to host a Confucius Institute. The University of British Columbia turned down an offer. Somewhat conspicuously, there is no Institute in Toronto, which has more residents of Chinese background than any other Canadian city.

Meanwhile, CSIS intelligence briefs on the Confucius Institute, produced between 2006 and 2009, obtained by the *National Post* through an Access to Information request (and arriving in a heavily redacted form), are short on specifics. But they exhibit the agency's concern for the growth of China's "soft power" and prestige among Canadians, and observe that "for China to achieve its goals, people must admire China to some degree."

Mr. Juneau-Katsuya, the former CSIS agent, says the Chinese government's espionage efforts abroad rely on citizens of the target country who are, in Lenin's words, "useful idiots."

"The useful idiots are people who are so in love with China and so taken with Chinese culture, and so hungry to make friends, that they're ready to do almost anything. And they will close their eyes to so many different things," he says.

He says Chinese visitors will often not be enlisted as spies *per se*. They're just people who might feed useful information to the government back home on occasion. Mr. Juneau-Katsuya imagines lucrative information as a beach's worth of sand. Other intelligence services — the Russians, say — send around a man with a shovel under cover of night to dig up as much as he can.

The Chinese intelligence services, by contrast, "They will be sending 1,000 people to sunbathe all day. They're going to play and fun. At the end of the day, everybody will bring their towel back and shake off the sand in the same corner. It's a very different way to collect information."

Except instead of grains of sand, the retired spy says, China is interested in industrial information and intellectual property, and the identities of expatriates involved in the Falun Gong and other activities the Chinese government regards as "poisonous."

According to the 2008 testimony of Chinese defector Chen Yonglin in a Vancouver courtroom, Chinese missions abroad can expend half their energy reporting back to the mother country about who among expats is involved with the Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa) spiritual movement. A Falun Dafa Canada spokesman tells the *Post* his organization has nothing to report about the Confucius Institute.

McMaster's Ms. Sheng, whose program comes across as anything but a den of spies, says she is aware that CSIS has monitored Confucius Institutes in Canada.

"Well, why not? If they want to, what's the problem? This is a free country. If they want to keep a file, that's up to them," she says.

She says Canadian counter-intelligence officials will not uncover anything of interest. Indeed, there is no documented evidence that shows that Confucius Institutes are anything other than what they appear and claim to be.

"The CI is in an academic institution. What we do is teach the Chinese language, Chinese culture. We're not doing espionage. We're not touching politics." She refers to an introductory language class in which this reporter was allowed to sit in: "In that class today they were teaching about renting an apartment, right?"

Asked if she has concerns about China's human rights record, Ms. Sheng deflects the conversation back to Canada: What about child labor? What about prisons? What about treatment of aboriginal Canadians?

"There are problems in every society. Just pointing a finger is very easy. But it doesn't really help to move forward. If we want to move forward, it requires engagement and better education. And it requires an open mind," she says.

"I can imagine for people who don't speak the language, who don't have the background, are not open-minded, as soon as they see the red [Chinese] flag, they're going to react reflexively. That doesn't help."

Mr. Juneau-Katsuya says he understands why Canadians want to learn Mandarin and get more familiar with China.

"I'm the first one to say that Chinese culture is fascinating. We're talking thousands of years of phenomenal philosophy, art, music, you name it. I myself got seduced by Asia," says Mr. Juneau-Katsuya. "What I'm saying is people should be aware. In the field of intelligence and espionage, the name of the game is the human being."

National Post, with files from Canwest News Service