May 11, 2018

To: Faculty Senate of Portland State University

I am happy to contribute to the PSU Faculty Senate’s debate about the university’s contract with the Confucius Institute at PSU (CIPSU). For most of its existence, I was chair or co-chair of the board, stepping down about two years after retiring from the faculty in 2008. In my view CIPSU has consistently well served the PSU community and the Portland area, never wavering from its mandate and never feeling pressured by Chinese authorities to conform with a politically-driven agenda.

I am concerned about continuing negative stories about CIs around the country that are experiencing interference with their programming by Hanban. These stories are troubling, and where interference has occurred, contracts with Hanban have properly been terminated. But I don’t believe the worst cases are representative. I have visited Confucius Institutes at three or four other universities and have never heard of Chinese government interference with their programming.

CIPSU stands out, I think, for its independence and openness to all points of view. I have spoken on China’s foreign and domestic policies several times at CIPSU’s invitation, and haven’t had to alter my critical views one iota. Nor was I ever asked to submit an outline of my remarks in advance, or otherwise expose them to possible censorship. Other colleagues in the China field have spoken at CIPSU-sponsored campus events, and so far as I’m aware there has never been a problem.

To be sure, institutions established on US campuses by foreign governments can be heavy handed. That is why each situation must be evaluated to insure against prior censorship, efforts to influence the curriculum, and other unacceptable forms of interference with academic freedom. (And let’s be honest: those same concerns apply to US foundations that fund programs in our universities.) But when I put together all the known cases of Chinese interference, I find that they are in a distinct minority. Why that should be is hard to figure, but while it suggests the need for caution in contracting with the Hanban, it also means to me that we should not prejudge outcomes and presume that interference comes with the territory.

Confucius Institutes are properly seen as elements of China’s “soft power.” But then, US-based corporations and institutes operating abroad likewise represent soft power: whether by accident or design, they promote American culture and values. So we should be careful not to regard CIs as novel and dangerous instruments of China’s foreign policy. So long as they stick to their primarily cultural agenda, contributing to
our understanding of China and helping communities with language study, they are playing a positive role, *even if in the process they promote China’s soft power.*

This is a particularly delicate time in US-China relations. We should be crystal clear about the mission of foreign-funded entities at PSU, but we should not presume they are the enemy. CIPSU has rightly been honored by Hanban for its educational achievements, and has forged a mutually respectful relationship with it and our partner institution in Suzhou. When necessary PSU should remind Hanban of our academic values and of the importance we attach to mutual benefit. Neither the Chinese government nor PSU and other US universities would want to see China’s image in the US suffer and add to already plentiful other sources of US-PRC tension.

Respectfully submitted,

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