I am writing to share my views about the PSU Confucius Institute, since this on the agenda for discussion at the next Faculty Senate meeting. It is my opinion that at this time in which xenophobia is shaping political discourse we need spaces for cross-cultural dialogue, especially with governments with which we may have political disagreements. I also believe that the CI is being singled out for criticism in a manner that is not the case with other international centers and institutes at PSU. The CI is a non-credit program that teaches language and culture classes, from Tai Chi to calligraphy.

I have been taking language classes through the CI for two and a half years. Never once in that time I have ever had a single moment in which I sensed that I was exposed to propaganda. The textbook in my introductory class was written by Meiru, whom as you know is a PSU faculty member, and I believed a tenured AAUP member. I can also say that I have not once seen any of the people who have spoken to criticize the CI at a CI event, so I doubt that they have first-hand knowledge of the institute. My own experience over ten quarters in language courses bears no resemblance to how the CI characterized by those people attacking it.

As the Chair of International and Global Studies, I believe that we must value cross-cultural exchange. The British Council, Alliance Francaise, and similar organizations serve a valuable role. I should note that the CI gave research funds to the Internationalization council last year, which funded some of my own research on avian influenza and public policy in Hong Kong. This issue might perhaps be a politically sensitive topic for the Chinese government. Those funds were disbursed by PSU faculty. These funds help to further the research and careers of PSU faculty, at a time when it can be very challenging to obtain internal grants, particularly for senior scholars. The CI also does important work with public schools and in our communities. Those contributions and voices are being omitted from this discussion.

In sum, I believe that the criticisms of the CI are unwarranted, ill-informed and unfair. I have heard no evidence whatsoever that academic freedom has been harmed or limited, particularly as these are non-credit programs. I also believe that there is a current drive to target the CIs on the part of the radical right wing, and I am disappointed to see PSU faculty supporting this effort, at a moment when xenophobia and racism mar national discourse. We need to build international bridges, not tear them down. I also believe that my feelings are shared by many colleagues who do international work, who are deeply disappointed by these attacks on the CI. Personally, I am concerned that other international partnerships may be next.

I will certainly wish to speak on Monday in defense of the CI, but wanted to share my views before then.

Please feel free to share this email with anyone that you might wish.

[Shawn Smallman]