

JOSH HAWLEY
MISSOURI

KYLE PLOTKIN
CHIEF OF STAFF

212 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
TELEPHONE: (202) 224-6154
FAX: (202) 228-0526
WWW.HAWLEY.SENATE.GOV

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2509

COMMITTEES
JUDICIARY
ARMED SERVICES
HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
SMALL BUSINESS
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AGING

July 24, 2019

Elizabeth J. Stroble
President
Webster University
470 East Lockwood Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63119

CC:

Robert Reeg
Chair of the Board of Trustees
Webster University
470 East Lockwood Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63119

Dear President Stroble:

I write to express my concern over Webster University's continued involvement in China's efforts to spread propaganda, suppress academic freedom, and threaten the national security of the United States.

I am referring to Webster's Confucius Institute. As you know, the People's Republic of China ("PRC") funds Confucius Institutes through the Ministry of Education's Office of Chinese Language Council International, known as Hanban colloquially. Hanban has sponsored more than 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide—including more than 100 at college campuses across the United States—with an enticing proposal for universities.¹ In exchange for being hosted on campus, the Confucius Institute offers funding for international faculty, language instruction, and cultural-exchange programs.

But Confucius Institutes are more than a means of cultural exchange. As Li Changchun, a senior member of the Chinese Communist Party, stated in 2009, the Confucius Institutes are "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up."² Hanban is governed by the leaders of

¹ Ethan Epstein, "How China Infiltrated U.S. Classrooms," *Politico* (Jan. 16, 2018), available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/16/how-china-infiltrated-us-classrooms-216327>.

² "A message from Confucius," *The Economist* (Oct. 22, 2009), available at <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2009/10/22/a-message-from-confucius>.

twelve Chinese ministries, including those handling foreign affairs, state media, and propaganda.³ Partnering universities sign contracts that prohibit them from “tarnishing the reputation” of Hanban, and Hanban sends teachers and textbooks from China that are designed to promote a positive image of the PRC⁴ and suppress any discussion of the “three Ts”: Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen Square.⁵ These Confucius Institutes are, in short, a tool for China to spread influence and exercise soft power in its rivalry with the United States.

Confucius Institutes are also a known threat to academic freedom, which is why the American Association of University Professors has called on all universities to end these arrangements.⁶ As then-Assistant Director of the FBI Counterintelligence Division Bill Priestap testified before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, “there have been instances around the world where [Confucius Institutes] have quashed free speech.”⁷ In 2009, for example, North Carolina State University canceled an event with the Dalai Lama after Confucius Institute leaders pressured university administrators.⁸ Other examples of suppression and censorship abound.

Most troubling of all, Confucius Institutes pose a danger to our national defense and security. Our nation’s top law enforcement and national security officials have been vocal about the threat of Confucius Institutes and other Chinese initiatives as a conduit for espionage and research theft. In February 2018, FBI Director Christopher Wray told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that the FBI was investigating Confucius Institutes for potential espionage activity.⁹ Similarly, then-Assistant Director Priestap observed that China’s Ministry of State Security will use Chinese students on American college campuses as a means to steal university research and technology.¹⁰

FBI Director Wray testified about the dangers of Confucius Institutes on universities once again this week. When I questioned him about the dangers of Chinese espionage and Confucius Institutes, he stated that “there is a fairly significant pattern of espionage” that is occurring at academic institutions. He went on to reiterate that Confucius Institutes are “part of China’s soft power strategy and influence” and that they “offer a platform to disseminate Chinese government

³ Rachele Peterson, “American Universities Are Welcoming China’s Trojan Horse,” *Foreign Policy* (May 9, 2017), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/09/american-universities-are-welcoming-chinas-trojan-horse-confucius-institutes>.

⁴ Epstein, *supra* note 1.

⁵ Jane Pong and Emily Feng, “Confucius Institutes: cultural asset or campus threat?,” *Financial Times* (Oct. 26, 2017), available at <https://ig.ft.com/confucius-institutes>.

⁶ American Association of University Professors, “On Partnerships with Foreign Governments: The Case of Confucius Institutes” (June 2014), available at <https://www.aaup.org/article/confucius-institutes-threaten-academic-freedom#.XFdlcM9Kg6U>.

⁷ China’s Non-Traditional Espionage Against the United States: The Threat and Potential Policy Responses: Hearing Before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary (December 12, 2018) (Statement of FBI Assistant Director, Counterintelligence Division, E.W. “Bill” Priestap), available at <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/chinas-non-traditional-espionage-against-the-united-states-the-threat-and-potential-policy-responses>.

⁸ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “How China Managed to Play Censor at a Conference on U.S. Soil,” *Foreign Policy* (May 9, 2018), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/09/how-china-managed-to-play-censor-at-a-conference-on-u-s-soil>.

⁹ Worldwide Threats: Hearing Before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (Feb. 13, 2018) (Statement of FBI Director Chris A. Wray), available at <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-worldwide-threats-0>.

¹⁰ China’s Non-Traditional Espionage Against the United States, *supra* note 8.

or Chinese Communist Party propaganda, to encourage censorship, to restrict academic freedom, et cetera.”¹¹ I expect that China’s espionage and influence campaigns in areas like education and technology will continue to be a topic of Senate investigation, including in the Committees on the Judiciary, Armed Services, and Small Business and Entrepreneurship, on which I sit.

Many of your fellow university leaders have concluded that these partnerships are not worth the risk. At least ten colleges and universities have closed their Confucius Institutes in the last two years, including Texas A&M University, the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of Minnesota at Twin Cities, the University of Rhode Island, and North Carolina State University.¹² These are in addition to earlier closures at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Chicago.¹³ Webster University should follow their examples.

I respectfully and strongly urge you to reconsider the costs and risks that come with allowing a Confucius Institute to remain on your campus, and with entering any other agreements with the Chinese government. My office stands ready to assist you and to address any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Josh Hawley
U.S. Senator

¹¹ Oversight of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (July 23, 2018) (Statement of FBI Director Christopher Wray), available at <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/meetings/07/23/2019/oversight-of-the-federal-bureau-of-investigation>.

¹² Elizabeth Redden, “Closing Confucius Institutes,” *Inside Higher Ed* (January 9, 2019), available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/09/colleges-move-close-chinese-government-funded-confucius-institutes-amid-increasing>

¹³ *Ibid.*