

# **BUILDING A BETTER PUBLIC IMAGE OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES**

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I apologise that I will ask you to listen to me without the relief, or perhaps the distraction of visual imagery.

Much has been said in this Forum, and in the session on this topic this morning, about the work that is being done throughout the world to promote the image of CIs through the many, varied and valuable programmes they are conducting.

I intend to take a slightly different approach to the topic before us. I start with the question of why it is that we are being asked to address this particular question. Why is it that we feel that we need a “better public image” - other than a general expectation that we should always be working on improving performance, skill levels and public perceptions and attitudes.

We are in a situation not only of having to build a better public image: we have to defend the image we have all worked to build. We have to acknowledge that there are perceptions of Confucius Institutes that have gained some profile, some prominence, in a number of countries that host our Institutes.

It is timely to discuss this. We should not be embarrassed about doing so. It is our friends in Hanban who have been the ones who have raised the subject with me. They rightly are concerned.

The criticisms and the attacks need to be addressed, not ignored or trivialised: the charges against CIs would be extremely serious if true.

The reality is that CIs around the world are under pressure: we have the record of Chicago, Penn State, Stockholm University, Lyon University, what happened in Toronto, and only last week a vigorous and concerted attack on the CI in New South Wales in Australia.

The allegation has basically been that CIs are a vehicle not only for promotion of cultural and language objectives, but also to advance a Chinese political agenda, often through inappropriate means.

If these allegations were a valid charge against CIs there would not be 2500 people, representing over 500 universities, gathered here in Xian this week. We have come with a wide but coherent spectrum of reasons for our support of the role of CIs in our universities

In the last two days we have had an endless parade of quantitative assessments of the work of CIs. But one figure that has not been presented is the financial contribution that universities make to the work of CIs. My rough estimate is that universities around the world are contributing something in the order of \$70 million of their money, not Chinese funds, to support CIs. They would not be investing this amount of money if they accepted the validity of the charges against CIs.

If these assertions were accurate the number of universities that would cease to be part of CI network would be very large.

As Sir Keith Burnett, the Vice Chancellor of Sheffield University, said this morning “We cannot stop criticism; but we can refute it”.

This is an international discussion about CIs and their motivations, but the response to it – the steps needed to build our public image – have to be locally based:

So, In order to build a better public image

- we need to be unequivocal about quality and relevance of what we are doing, and about our achievements.
- we need to demonstrate that by having a CI in our university we are advancing **our own national interests**; the interests of our universities and of our communities
- we need to identify university priority activities, and show how CIs support and contribute to these
- we need to tell our stories: in the case of our particular Confucius Institute we should be celebrating the fact that the number of NZ children studying Chinese has risen by nearly 400% in the last five years: 60% in last year alone, bringing Chinese learning opportunities to poorer, rural largely Maori communities as well as to elite schools in our capital
- we need to assert unequivocally that no university will tolerate for a moment any suggestion that the price for having a CI would be a limitation on academic freedom
- we need to be transparent: we need to be willing to subject ourselves to scrutiny
- we should avoid an impression, let alone the practice of secrecy in the way we conduct our programmes

We also have to be clear about what we do not do: we cannot be a vehicle for support and promotion of Chinese political, diplomatic and security interests; if we label ourselves as an educational and cultural organisation we must stick to those parameters. One cannot defend a CI as an agency concerned with language and culture if we engage in activities that address other issues.

In our case, if our friends from Xiamen came and told us they wanted to send someone to speak on the outcomes of the Party Congress we would respectfully say no, and point them to another part of the university

So working to improve, and to defend the public image of CIs requires a self-denying ordinance on the part of Hanban, and Chinese authorities: an acceptance that they should not put pressure on CIs to do things that we judge are not consistent with our interests and priorities, that are not consistent with the values or the expectations of the university and the community that supports it

To sum up:

- accept that there are issues that we need to be aware of and be ready to confront them
- don't be hesitant or reluctant to advertise our achievements; promote and defend what we are doing
- make it clear that the qualities we embrace are ones that emphasise relevance, quality and our own national interest ahead of the interests of the government of China

We need to accept too that while our reasons for universities throughout the world to support Confucius Institutes and the reasons that drive China to support them may ultimately be the same or similar, but the way in which we present our narratives, the public image we promote, the short term priorities that we have, the challenges that we face, will inevitably be different.

