

A comment by Jason Gallaher

Having read Jackson Kwok's piece regarding potential problems with Confucius Institutes in Australia I just wanted to give an account of my experience of learning in a Confucius Institute in Australia.

I have been studying at the Confucius Institute at the University of Newcastle for the past 6 years and over that time I have never been subjected to any propaganda or political dogma either overt or subtle from any of the teachers I have had. I have had many teachers over that period and all of them have been open and sincere individuals and none of them have had an interest in advancing political points of view. If there is any subtle influencing going on it, has certainly been lost on me as it has not had an effect on my position in regards to any sensitive political matters relating to China.

The times when political discussions have arisen in class it has always been when brought up by fellow Australian students. At these times I have never felt restricted from airing my point of view. I am not especially enthusiastic about the Communist Party of China and in the classroom, I feel comfortable expressing points of view that are not in line with those of the CPC. Perhaps if not at an institutional level then on an individual level, rather than CIs suppressing sensitive matters, I would go as far as suggesting that the students who study at the Confucius Institute become much more aware of contentious issues in China as a result of their interest in China and their studying the Chinese language.

The classes I have attended at the CI are simply about learning the Chinese language and gaining an insight into Chinese culture. The teachers are proud of their country as people anywhere are proud of theirs but that doesn't mean that they are extending Communist Party influence into the classroom. To suggest that Australians could be so easily influenced is a little insulting and the alleged threat posed also exaggerates the level of interest in learning the language and about Chinese culture.

For people like myself and my classmates the Confucius Institute offers an environment where we can learn the Chinese language and can meet and engage with Chinese

people who are as interested in us as we are in them. In Newcastle if you want to learn a language it is extremely difficult to find a class for any language anywhere with sufficient numbers to go ahead. If the Confucius Institute was not there it would just be another activity that we could not participate in.

Having studied at the Confucius Institute for so long naturally I have developed friendships over that time. I have known personally two of the young teaching assistants who have taught in the Confucius classrooms in schools in the area and they are no different from any young Australian teaching students who might apply for a gap year teaching position overseas. They are not motivated by politics, they are excited about the opportunity to come to Australia and for them it is the chance of a lifetime to travel overseas and to experience living and working in a foreign country. They are young student teachers and teaching in Australia is a new experience for them. They have enough troubles controlling some of the unruly Australian school kids without worrying about trying to push CPC propaganda as well.

For myself and my fellow classmates we study at the Confucius Institute because we want to study the Chinese language and it is something we enjoy, we are not coerced into doing this, without the Confucius Institute there would be no way for us to continue to study the Chinese language in Newcastle in any kind of formal setting.

Studying Chinese at the Confucius Institute and travelling in China has given me a much more sophisticated understanding of China and insight into Chinese life, culture and politics. I believe my insights relating to China are more balanced than the overly alarmist or naively optimistic.

Governments should stand up to any attempts to stifle political debate but that doesn't mean that Confucius Institutes don't offer a valuable service for those who wish to study there. If anything, any thoughts I have on China are stronger and more independent than had I never had the opportunity to study at a Confucius Institute.

Jason Gallaher works for a large national delivery and logistics company in Australia. He has studied Chinese at the Confucius Institute at the University of Newcastle for the past six years.