

Teachers and students are not robots processing Chinese propaganda in Confucius classes

By **Jennifer Hsu**

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The NSW government's decision to terminate Confucius Classrooms in its public schools was based on a flawed zero-sum logic. Neither these classrooms nor the university-based Confucius Institutes should be viewed in binary terms: good/bad or benign/dangerous.

Missing from the debate is an attempt to understand the process of teaching and learning, and an acknowledgement of the diversity of Confucius institutions. The power and influence of the People's Republic of China is almost under daily attack by the Australian media and within the wider security and intelligence communities. Most commentary focuses nearly exclusively on national security and threats.

By allowing even the debate about Confucius Classrooms and Institutes to be framed by threat perceptions, the actions and views of the students and teachers are deemed irrelevant and inconsequential.

Given Confucius Institutes are overseen by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (aka Hanban), which is directly under the PRC Ministry of Education, the focus on foreign influence when discussing the institutes is unsurprising. However, the Department of Education's review of the 13 Confucius Classrooms across NSW netted no evidence of "actual political influence being exercised". Regardless, the suspicion remains.

Confucius Classrooms and Institutes undeniably constitute a pillar to the foundation of the PRC's soft power policy. They represent an attempt to make Chinese culture appealing to a global audience through language and cultural programs. But neither teachers nor students are robots.

As much as a Confucius Classroom and Institute teachers love their motherland, they still decide how they interpret, deliver and instruct their Australian students.

There is a presumption in the current debate that all Confucius Classroom and Institute teachers come from the same mould. But recent research conducted at the University of Reading in Britain indicates that these teachers are in fact globally minded.

Looking at the teaching materials shows that Chinese textbooks, as Jeffrey Gil of Flinders University writes, follow the norm of the vast majority of language textbooks where they present "a very bland ... view of the countries associated with the language".

Simply put, our students are being taught how to greet people, order food in restaurants and ask direction in the streets of Beijing and Shanghai – not Marxist-Leninist thought, or even Xi Jinping's "China Dream".

When we turn to the student experience, it becomes even clearer that the Confucius Classroom is an interactive classroom. Students have minds of their own, they challenge the material offered and thereby force teachers to adapt their material and teaching styles.

As my China Matters colleague Jackson Kwok noted last year, different Confucius Institutes will consider the demands and needs of each location. An anthropological study of US Confucius Institutes found that attempts to impose Hanban's view of "China" during a language trip to Beijing failed: "the students were more likely to see China as their own untamed Wild West, to be conquered as a marker of their own cosmopolitanism, not China's."

These experiences and voices deserve attention in the current conversation. The PRC's soft power policy, as with all policy, is not a neat package. Instead, it involves multiple stakeholders with different aims. No doubt Hanban seeks to project a China world view via its Confucius Institutes.

The current debate and the removal of the Confucius Classrooms may be seen as protecting our students from the forces of the Communist Party of China's propaganda. But in fact, the situation suggests that we do not trust our students to think critically and decide what components of a culture they will integrate or reject.

Sadly, this says more about the failure of our education system and our collective insecurities than it does about the PRC.

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