



House panel investigates 'Confucius institutes'

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WASHINGTON — Lawmakers are investigating whether academic freedom is being threatened at universities building campuses in China and partnering with the Chinese on "Confucius institutes" in the U.S.

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., chairman of a House subcommittee focusing on human rights, said at a hearing before the panel Thursday that he will seek a Governmental Accountability Office study of agreements between U.S. universities and China that allow China to promote its culture and language here through education programs it supervises and finances.

Smith said Congress could decide to withhold money for the Education Department or for State Department exchange programs if it decides the Chinese-sponsored efforts are compromising academic freedoms in the U.S.

"I think we can all agree that U.S. colleges and universities should not be outsourcing academic control, faculty and student oversight or curriculum to a foreign government — in this case a dictatorship," said Smith, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations.

There are 357 "Confucius classrooms" in secondary and elementary schools in the U.S., and 97 "Confucius institutes" at universities, including Stanford and Columbia universities. The institutes are named for the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius who paradoxically was vilified during the 1949-1976 reign of Communist Chairman Mao Zedong.

They are subsidized and supervised by Hanban, a Chinese government agency that influences the institutes' staff recruitment and curriculum.

A small number of American universities have satellite campuses in China.

The American Association of University Professors opposes Confucius institutes, writing in a June report that they "function as an arm of the Chinese state and are allowed to ignore academic freedom," and sacrifice the integrity of universities and academic staff. The association recommended that universities cease involvement with the institutes unless agreements are

renegotiated to provide for transparency and control by U.S. universities over all academic matters.

Witnesses at Thursday's hearing said the Chinese exert influence over American scholars by denying them visas and blocking access to archives. Perry Link, chancellorial chairman at the University of California, Riverside, said fear of being denied a visa by the Chinese results in self-censorship.

"I have been on a visa blacklist since the mid-1990s, and I hear, on average, two or three inquiries per month from younger scholars who want to know what they should avoid saying in order not to end up where I am," he said in written testimony.

Link said American administrators who accept funds from the Communist Party of China for endeavors such as Confucius institutes understand, without being told, which topics are unwelcome, such as Tibetan or Uighur autonomy, Taiwan independence or the Tiananmen massacre.

"American students are presented a roseate cameo of China and are told that it is the whole," he stated. "Omission of the forbidden topics not only reduces the size of the picture, it misrepresents the character of the part that remains."

Another witness, Yeliang Xia, a visiting scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, said a speech he was scheduled to give on China's economy at Stanford University's Confucius institute was canceled last year by a student union leader who said the institute wasn't happy about his earlier discussion on constitutional issues in China.

"How can you export liberal ideas to ... authoritarian countries if you cannot persist on your own ideals?" he asked.

Smith said he continues to question why New York University last year terminated the fellowship of human rights advocate Chen Guangcheng, who alleged the university succumbed to pressure from China.

NYU, which recently launched a campus in Shanghai, has said the fellowship was always intended to expire after a year. The university's president and faculty declined multiple invitations to testify, Smith said.

The subcommittee hearing was the first in a series, Smith said, and the beginning of "a long hard look" at costs and benefits of partnerships between U.S. universities and China. He said he will ask the GAO to investigate whether the partnership agreements are public, whether they compromise academic or other freedoms, and whether Chinese teachers are free to worship as they please and to teach topics considered taboo by Chinese officials.

He will also ask the GAO to investigate whether U.S. satellite campuses in China operate differently from Chinese universities, whether Communist Party committees operate on those campuses and whether academic freedoms on the campuses are protected.

"We need to look at whether these issues can be handled by the universities, their faculties and trustees themselves, or if there is something the U.S. Congress must do to ensure academic freedom is protected," Smith said.