

# Confucius Institutes: Vehicles of CCP Propaganda?

Sponsored by China's government, Confucius Institutes (CIs) comprise the world's largest government-funded culture and language promotion program, and currently operate at universities and schools in over 160 countries. Over time, the CIs have received scrutiny for purportedly serving as vehicles of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda, censorship, and indoctrination beyond China's borders. Yet, little is known about whether China's government exerts control over CI teachers, how it might shape the behavior of CI teachers, and whether CI teachers censor politically sensitive topics or perpetuate government narratives.

**The data.** Researchers first undertook a qualitative examination of the CI teacher selection process and training and interviewed 25 current and former CI teachers from North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

## INSIGHTS

■ China's Confucius Institutes (CI) teachers receive minimal training on political topics and encounter very little day-to-day monitoring while teaching abroad.

■ There is little indication CI teachers are screened for their political beliefs.

■ Nevertheless, CI teachers exhibit a high degree of political compliance while working abroad either by disseminating the political views of the CCP or censoring discussions around politically sensitive topics.

Second, researchers conducted a survey of 284 CI teachers from more than 70 host countries. The surveys were identical, but contained a survey experiment where respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of three reminders when filling out the survey.

1. The first group received a neutral statement, "People may encounter different scenarios in life and at work," and served as a control.
2. The second group received a reminder stating, "People conducting official business overseas should adhere to the disciplinary principles of the People's Republic of China."
3. The third group received a reminder stating, "In daily work and social interactions, people should avoid friction and conflict with others who have different points of view."

Teachers in all three groups were then asked to report how they would respond to hypothetical vignettes in which students or colleagues discussed the political status of Taiwan. Based on how CI teachers responded, researchers were able to gauge to what extent CI teachers espoused CCP positions under different conditions.

**Minimal political training or monitoring of CI teachers.** The qualitative interviews and review of the CI teacher training curriculum found that CI teachers are not selected for their political beliefs or trained to adopt a particular set of political behaviors while abroad. CCP membership is not a requirement for becoming a CI teacher. While all CI teachers are required to complete a standard training program, the curriculum excludes explicit or specific instructions on how to manage political discussions inside or outside the classroom in the host country.

The interviews also made clear that China's government exerts little direct power over the actions of CI teachers and is largely unable to closely monitor what teachers do inside their classrooms. Although CI directors' evaluations of teachers' performance can influence the short-term and long-term material benefits CI teachers receive, these evaluations are not based on political attitudes or behaviors.

**Espousing CCP objectives.** Analysis of the survey experiment data finds that CI teachers report frequently espousing the CCP's position even without specific instruction or prompting regarding what to say or do when encountering sensitive political topics abroad. With no reminder at all (in the control condition), more than 70% of CI teachers reported they would change the subject and prevent their students and/or colleagues from further expressing their views; or simply echo the official CCP line that Taiwan was part of the PRC. Those receiving the reminder to adhere to PRC disciplinary principles were 10% more willing to echo the CCP line and 14% less likely to self-censor. Interview data from CI teachers also suggest that even those teachers who foster open discussion on controversial topics such as Taiwan do so in order to persuade others that the CCP's position is correct, not to stimulate genuine debate.

## DATA & METHODS

■ Researchers examined CI training and evaluation materials, policy regulations, and application form; plus interviewed 25 CI teachers.

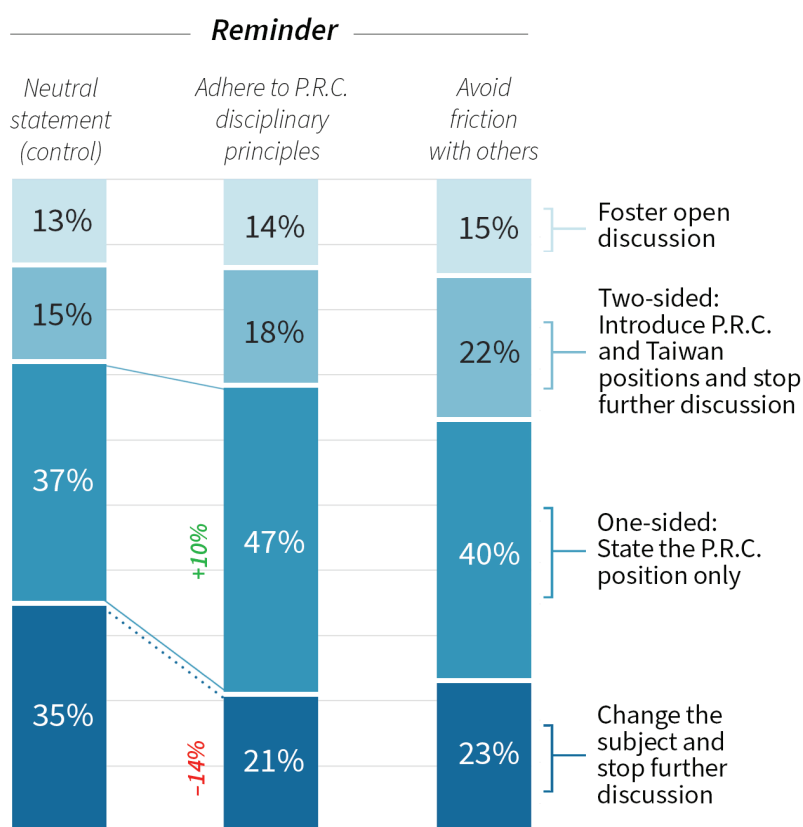
■ Researchers conducted an experiment contained within a survey distributed to 284 CI teachers from 70+ countries.

## SOURCE PUBLICATION

Yingjie Fan, Jennifer Pan, and Tongtong Zhang (2021). **How the Chinese Government Prescribes Objectives to Obtain Political Obedience.** Working paper.

[VIEW SOURCE >](#)

*Experimental reminders and CI teachers' responses to hypothetical Taiwan vignettes*



**Obtaining compliance.** The analysis suggests that the CCP can secure obedience of CI teachers and advance its position via CI teachers without providing any overt direction or incentives to do so. Rather than explicitly selecting loyalists, issuing specific instructions, or sanctioning political behaviors, the government effectively lays out general and non-specific guidelines independently of any training program that elicit political compliance. While CIs do indeed seem to serve as an overseas mechanism for the CCP to spread political influence by way of CI teachers, it nevertheless remains unclear whether audiences are receptive to or are shaped by CI teachers' messaging.