

The coronavirus, the CI and China

17 October 2020

The coronavirus has brought home to many the realisation of an increasingly repressive regime in China. Those who tried to warn the public of this new worrying disease were silenced, and threatened with repercussions. It was particularly poignant that Dr. Li Wenliang, the ophthalmologist from Wuhan, who had spoken out about his fears, faced official censure, and died at the young age of 36 from the very virus he tried to warn others about. A number of open letters and essays signed by academics were circulating in China in February in response to widespread concern about the handling of the COV-19 outbreak in the country. Letters called on the Chinese national government to protect freedom of speech and assembly, and to commemorate Dr. Li by making the 6th February a day for national free speech. Other medical personnel who tried to speak out and warn the public about the threat of the virus also found themselves reprimanded for “spreading rumours” about the coronavirus.

At a time when authoritarianism in China has been highlighted in the tragic consequences of the Cov-19, a number of Dawsonites have been wondering whether it is time to re-examine Dawson’s link with the Confucius Institute. After the initial enthusiastic embrace of Confucius institutes by many universities around the world starting in 2004, relations began to sour, amidst growing concerns about the manner of leadership in China, and the ideology of the Institutes which have been accused of distorting contemporary Chinese history, and censoring open discussion.

A 2019 report from Human Rights Watch stated the Confucius Institutes “are extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds, and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration.”(BBC News, Sept 19 2019).

A new report from the National Post (11 March 2020) recounts the story of a Confucius Institute “whistleblower”, Sonia Zhao, a former teacher at the McMaster institute who believes that Canada should have nothing to do with the Institute. Her experience led McMaster to close their Institute. University of Sherbrooke also closed its institute due to concerns about academic freedom and hiring. As of 2019, New Brunswick also decided to end its relationship with the Institutes based on concerns about freedom of education.

Is it time to re-think Dawson’s relationship with the Confucius Institute, or at least have some clarification in addressing the concerns expressed by many Dawson employees who are increasingly concerned about human rights abuses in China?

The above letter was written in March, but since then increasingly serious concerns have arisen about the Confucius Institute, and their less than innocent practices of influencing education, and ignoring or downright negating realities of oppression such as Tiananmen Square, the treatment of Uyghurs, and the increased repression in Hong Kong over recent months. Gary Mason’s opinion piece this week in The Globe and Mail “*The Confucius Institute shouldn’t be in Canada*” (17 October 2020), refers to the disturbing manner in which the Coquitlam B.C. Confucius curriculum goes beyond straightforward linguistic or cultural education, with subtle but influential distortions of political reality. Port Coquitlam’s mayor declares the continuation of the CI in B.C. as morally bankrupt, since the country funding the Confucius Institutes is also responsible for mass incarceration and repression of Uyghurs, and the detention of Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig. Gary Mason’s piece expressed his shame

that Confucius Institutes are still permitted to operate in Canada with no obligation to be registered or accountable about funding, personnel, curriculum and other activities.

Is it not time that we also question the continued operation of the Confucius Institute in Quebec based at Dawson College as a potential conflict of interest?

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