



Lijst **Calimero**

## Speech Confucius Institute Groningen

Given by **Rozemarijn Gierkink**, faction chair Lijst Calimero 20/21, during the University Council of the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2021

I want to emphasize that none of our concerns are aimed at or about the Chinese students and employees at this University. If anything, they are meant to help those that might feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions freely. Stigmatization of the Chinese members of our academic community is unacceptable, and I therefore want to urge everyone who is either partaking in or listening to this discussion to keep the concerns about the Chinese government separate from individuals. We have to do everything we can to guarantee that everyone can feel safe and welcome at our university.

Now, my concerns about the Groningen Confucius Institute, are mostly fueled by the current developments in China mister De Vries already mentioned.

These circumstances are also a part of contemporary China right now. However, the representation of China in general, and Chinese culture in particular of the GCI, can be considered as unbalanced and one sided.

- **The representation of Chinese culture**

By its selection of topics and dissemination of positive (or neutral) information, cooperation with China is presented as nothing more than an opportunity for all sides. CI branches present the situation in China subjectively. Stereotypical elements of Chinese culture, such as tea making and calligraphy, are emphasized. Issues such as the Uyghur minority, ethnic Tibetans or the events of June 1989, which are equally important aspects of contemporary China, are absent from the CI programme. Links and topics presented on the GCI website also only refer to information domains dominated by positive information on China.

- **Teachers**

According to the agreement between the RUG and Hanban, the teachers come from university and are selected from a pool in Hanban, based on the requirements on teaching of China. That sounds quite logical, unless we find out what these requirements are. One basic qualification for volunteer teachers is to have “no record of participation in Falun Gong and other illegal organizations” Does this count for our paid teachers as well? Is this not an infringement of their human rights?.

- **Transparency**

As you can hear here, there is a lot of uncertainty around this institute. A discussion like this would be much easier if we could have access to more information. We only possess contracts after a WOB procedure had to take place. Passages in the contracts are black,

in places that are crucial, even incriminating information is expected to be found. And when we have information, there is no independent China expert at our university, so how can we even assess it properly.

Most numbers, sometimes whole tables, are blackened in the documents as well, and we cannot find a recent update on the finances, so a financial argument is almost impossible to make

However, a fundamental question we should ask ourselves is whether foreign governments, especially those from non-democratic countries, should be involved financially and in terms of content at all. The university is a place of debate, and not supposed to be drawn into politics.

- **structure in comparison to comparable institute**

Other institutes such as the German Goethe Institute, the Spanish Cervantes Institutes and the French Alliances Françaises have a similar setup, but they operate independently from their government. The Confucius Institute on the other hand, is bound to the Chinese state. Even though it has been slightly distanced, the question is how much influence this really has. According to Ingrid d'Hooghe, Sinologist and researcher at the Clingendael Institute, this is mostly a cosmetic question, as she states that cutting ties with the government does not exist in China.

I want to end with three recommendations.

Firstly: if the university decides to continue with the GCI despite our concerns, I urge you to set up an action plan to guarantee academic freedom. If we'd really want such an institute, at least make sure that human rights have a central place, and that they are subject of conversation and the discourse

Secondly: send a signal to our government. If they want academic freedom, they should help us to ensure that. Address this against them, because there should be more space, and more financial support for this. If the government would subsidize Chinese lessons, would we still need the Confucius institute?

Finally: an alternative: offer Chinese at the language centre, hire your own teachers and select your own material. Because China is becoming a larger world power every day, and we cannot avoid working together with them. There are even a lot of chances here, and speaking the language is then a huge benefit. However, we cannot neglect the human rights crisis that is taking place in this country, and therefore we have to be careful and critical. Offering Chinese as an integral part of the language centre would be a solution for this, combining the best of two worlds.