

Closure of the Lyon Confucius Institute

The Lyon Confucius Institute (LCI) definitively ceased activities on 23rd September 2013. This situation resulted from a disagreement that had persisted since September 2012 between the Lyon-based administrators of the LCI and the HQ of Confucius Institutes in Beijing (hereafter called the Hanban, an organization for the promotion of Chinese language and culture attached to the Ministry of Education of the PRC).

The LCI was a partnership between the Lyon 2 and Lyon 3* universities, and Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou). As with the other Confucius institutes in France and around the world, the LCI was in part subsidised by the Hanban. Its operational costs were also assured by income from the Institute's activities. In addition, the LCI was materially and logistically supported by the Lyon 2/Lyon 3 Universities.

From the very establishment of the Institute in 2009, the French side (Lyon2/Lyon3), while showing enthusiasm for this partnership that Sun Yat-sen had wanted for some time, had insisted on the Institute's academic and institutional independence. In addition, for legal and deontological reasons, the Institute could not be integrated in the University itself and was not to be implicated in its teaching and research activities. In order to assure this essential separation between a French public university and an entity financed and piloted by the Chinese State, the Institute took the form of an association under the law of 1901 (in other words, a not-for-profit organization).

At the moment of its constitution, this arrangement was not contested by Beijing. For a period of three years, the LCI staged cultural and linguistic activities (lectures, teaching, short-course in China, documentary film festivals) with the primary aim of better acquainting the Lyon public with the realities of contemporary Chinese society.

Tolerated until 2012, it seemed that our institutional and intellectual independence became unacceptable to Beijing. The experience of the past year [to September 2013] appears to confirm a change in policy on the part of the Hanban.

A new director taking his instructions direct from Beijing arrived in September 2012 and questioned the content of our courses and insisted strongly on a deeper integration of the LCI in the University itself. He wanted partnerships with our research centres in the domain of sinology, and held out the promise of PhD scholarships for our students willing to pursue their studies in China, and suggested that the LCI participate in the teaching of the University degree programs.

This interference in the University from an organization emanating from the Chinese state seemed to us inappropriate since it would put in doubt our academic freedom and transgress the spirit and the regulations of the French Republic's higher education system. In hindsight, we suppose that our firm stance in not acceding to these demands explains why in November 2012, the director general of the Hanban, Madame Xu Lin, demanded the resignation of the Chair of the LCI Board and announced without warning the suspension of the Hanban's annual subsidy. Over the course of the past few months, we have tried on numerous occasions to explain that it was impossible to cede to these new and exponential demands.

Supported by the LCI's Board and the Presidency of Lyon 3 University, we have attempted for the past year to reach an understanding acceptable to both parties. Unfortunately the inflexible attitude of the Hanban has prevented all possibility of a compromise.

It is with consternation that we witness the LCI experiment ending in this impasse, all the more so since we have always maintained close and fruitful relations with PRC academics and their universities.

Gregory Lee, Chair of the Board, LCI
Florent Villard, Director, LCI

* Lyon 3 University celebrated the centenary of its chair in Chinese in 2013.