



# ASIA EXPLAINED

TO ANALYZE, TO DEBATE ,TO UNDERSTAND

## AE Interview

*This is an edited transcript of the interview with Filip Jirouš, an independent researcher and an analyst recorded on December 14, 2022.*

### Chinese influence at Czech universities

Łukasz Sarek: Welcome everybody. In Asia Explained we host today Filip Jirouš, an independent researcher and an analyst focused on China's united front and on cooperation of European universities and research centers with Chinese defense industry and Chinese military. Today we will be talking about the Czech universities and Czech research centers cooperation with China and with Chinese partners of various backgrounds.

Before we get into the details and talk about the situation in Czech Republic, will you tell us something more about the objectives of the Chinese actors that target universities and why universities are so important for Chinese influence operations?

Filip : In general influence operations targeting universities abroad have several objectives. One of them is basically getting technology, getting information from the research. Influence operations usually help build networks of people that are friendly towards the entity that is actually doing the influence operations. It is basically about building networks that can then be used for something more specific. The other part is gathering intelligence on for example political circles within the country. It's important to remember the especially senior scholars often have ties to political parties or to the government itself. Quite often, scholars are basically easy targets not necessarily only for the intelligence agencies in China, but in general they are an easy way to get information that is not in the public domain. This is something that the Czech Counter Intelligence Agency (BIS) is actually listing as the sort of biggest activity of the Chinese intelligence agencies in the Czech Republic for the year 2021, because we had parliamentary elections in that year. And they basically talk about an increased activity of intelligence



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agencies targeting scholars to get information about what's going on in the political system.

In general, especially in humanities, it's the researchers, and universities who are good targets, if you want to influence the public opinion in a country. They are people who often give interviews, comment on various topics, write books about political issues, even for example, about China itself. So plenty of targets of this kind of influence operations, end up writing books about China that are surprisingly positive, when describing what's going on or what has been going on in China in recent decades. It's really plenty of objectives and in general universities, and think tanks are basically described as one of the weaker points in any society, not only in the Czech Republic.

LS: Speaking of the universities, being more precise about the professors or other top academicians' possible influence on public opinion and Czech politicians, which Czech universities, which Czech think tanks, the research centers were targeted by the Chinese influence agencies? Which cases you think are the most prominent?

FJ: I would say to some degree, that you could argue that all major universities have been targeted in one way or another, because the policy on the Chinese side is often sort of a total all out operation. Basically, by trying the field they test everybody. Then they make an assessment, who is who on the "willing side" and who's actually not going to cooperate in any way. And at a point, especially during the golden era or the honeymoon in the Czech - China relationship, which dates back to 2013 to 2018, the influence operations by various PRC actors targeted the whole of society, from media, to universities, to companies, etc, and to politicians obviously. So at that point, you can say that everybody was targeted, but some resisted or some were not willing to accept whatever the offer was. There are places that this approach has succeeded more. I would say, mainly in case of some individuals. And there are specific places that continue to have this very close relationship with the various PRC entities, such a partner for example is Olomouc University. We will probably talk about that. But in general, I would say the strategy has not really succeeded that much, especially after the view on China as this mythical land that will bring us money and save us from economic crisis, or



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the leftover problems of the 2008 economic crisis didn't materialize. Then people started being more suspicious about anything China related starting from 2018. It was because of what happened in the Czech - China relationship and what happened with the main company that was behind Chinese investments in the country. It was basically going bankrupt and was nationalized in China. We can get into the specific cases and in a sense, everybody was targeted, but most I would say did not accept the deal.

ŁS: You mentioned Olomouc as one of the universities that were targeted. But before we go to the specific cases, could you name some most important Chinese actors that are most active in capturing the Czech researchers and academicians? What is their position in the Chinese party state system?

FJ: Around the year 2013, through, let's say, 2015, when you read the annual reports of our country's intelligence agency BIS on situation in Czech Republic, you can see that the military intelligence was the most active in general in most of these operations. That is because military intelligence was very much embedded in the company called CEFC that, as I already mentioned, was the vanguard of the Chinese investments in the country. It was basically running around with the whole elite society, talking and then trying to coopt anybody they could. So at that point it included several researchers as well. Some of them, I think, continue working, with some Chinese entities although now, you know, that's getting more complicated, because of COVID. In the way any cooperation with China is now problematic. For example, Chinese citizens are not able to really travel abroad, etc.

So, that was military intelligence creating the first networks, the backgrounds and the groundwork. Obviously, the embassy is a place that is very much involved in this, but problems with the embassies is that you can't really say properly which organ there it was in reality because embassies are mostly just like a launching platforms for all kinds of operations. The real entity that was very much involved and continues to be involved, not only directly but also through its various covers and think tanks, was the International Liaison Department of of the Central Committee of the CCP, which is basically an influence organ. It means that they are somewhere between doing propaganda and actual intelligence gathering. So again, for example, BIS, the



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Czech intelligence agency, actually called them a specific Chinese party intelligence agency. It really depends on how you view what intelligence gathering or intelligence actually means, but this entity definitely is in it. And for example the US security agencies are rather aware of that. As far as I understand, top level US politicians should not really be able to meet these people. But that's not the understanding or sort of awareness that you can see anywhere else. ILD was able to run around with universities, especially Charles University, and it was able to invite to events various politicians from basically all the main parties. It was the main driving force of a higher level intelligence and influence operations that we are aware of between the year 2015 and 2020. It's hard to say who's doing it now. We are aware of the Ministry of State Security, the main sibling intelligence agency in China, also sort of working towards these targets in academia. Some of them have already been revealed to the public and led to some consequences for the people involved. But there might be much more that you're necessarily aware of. And the other thing is that we know that MSS, Ministry of State Security, also runs intelligence operations, using cover of a newspaper. Specifically, in this case, we have Guangming Daily as one of the most favorite. This is even like a secondary literature. It's one of the most favorites newspapers for the MSS officers to use for themselves as a cover. Guangming Ribao (Guangming Daily) is actually the one newspapers that has established some level, and in one case rather deep level, of cooperation with Czech newspapers, where you have several friendly researchers that contribute. So we could say, basically, military intelligence in the beginning then ILD and MSS sort of doing separate kind of work but in the end targeting sometimes even the same people.

ŁS: Let's have a look now at the specific case. You have mentioned two universities already. I would like to focus firstly on the Charles University, the most famous, most prestigious and most prominent Czech University. And there was and there still is the Czech-Chinese Centre they established. Which Chinese actors were involved in establishment and supported operations of this center? What was its role? Actually, what were the objectives that Chinese wanted to achieve, and how it worked?

FJ: The center is actually gone since 2019, I think, when it was dismantled after the discovery of the whole problematic network or even more



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problematic ties was revealed in Czech media and the university had to react in a way. University basically dismantled this center while the rector of the university was actually, I think, one of the people who founded it in a sense of coming up with this idea. He was also the one who was at least formally in charge, or presiding over the center. In the end he said that he had nothing to do with it. You know, think about it what you will, but I think this entity was not necessarily driven by the Chinese side as much as by the Czech side. It was established in 2016, so still during the honeymoon period of the Czech - Chinese relations, when all various, something something China centers, were basically popping up like mushrooms all over the place.

Quite often, I would say the driving force was actually, let's say, the Czech side of the relationship trying to lure Chinese investments, Chinese money. In the case of Czech - Chinese Center, it was also about Chinese students to attend summer schools in the Czech Republic, I mean, Charles University specifically. So it's more about getting Chinese funding and Chinese money for the university and for the specific people involved, rather than being from the beginning an influence operation by the Chinese side. However, as it happens more often than not with this kind of operations, this kind of centers that are set up by by an entity abroad to engage with the willing Chinese actors, it then gets mixed up with the ILD, which I already mentioned, especially through one of its think tank covers and they are doing events together.

I mean the center was just like a nameplate really. It didn't have much of substance itself, but it was useful, especially for its secretary Miloš Balabán, to be used as a nameplate whenever he was trying to do something with the Chinese side. So for example we can't really say that a center did some research. They didn't really do any research. They didn't really do much work except for basically trying to establish this network of contacts and getting, I think, two summer schools at Charles University in total. Certainly it was not that much successful. But it turned out that it still led to this, that the secretary Miloš Balabán not only wrote rather friendly publications about the PRC, but he also set up a course at a university that basically can be described as a propaganda course, that went on describing how the Belt and Road Initiative is great, combined somehow, weirdly, with how the US is evil.



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You know, it might seem like I'm sort of overstating this, but I sadly had to attend two of the lessons within the course. I myself heard really strange things that had nothing to do with the BRI. I mean, it's totally okay to do a course on the BRI if it's done properly, but it was basically using only Chinese state sources, you know, like China Daily, which was mentioned in the description of the course as a reliable source on getting information about the BRI. I mean, it's a reliable source, if you want to want know what the Chinese wants you to know about the BRI, but it wasn't the concept of the course. It was basically this type of course, that was just describing in really strange manner how China becoming a superpower is good for us, and how the United States are evil. The fair criticism of both the US and China and BRI can be a good thing in some cases, but that wasn't the point of the course, it was just propaganda. I'm sad to say. It actually turned out that not only it was the content of the course, that was problematic, but Balabán was actually secretly getting money for the course from the Chinese embassy, which was obviously not known to the university. Later it was revealed through a media investigation. So not only you had very problematic Chinese state actors involved in the mix, but you also had an actual propaganda course for Chinese money done by researchers who themselves were semi reputable within the field.

And also the case of Mr. Balabán. He was very much politically linked to the Social Democratic Party, which was a ruling party at that time. And he still actually continues being their defense expert, which says something about the party itself after such a scandal. And to be fair, the president of the university, who was also known for the center, was also linked to this party. So it was sort of a mix of politic and the greediness that in the end led to having a propaganda course on the grounds of, as you said, one of the most prestigious universities in the Czech Republic.

ŁS: In result the Chinese achieved two objectives. The first one was to influence students, because the propaganda course helped to shape, favorable views of the students.

FJ: If I may add that some of the best students within the course, I think, actually it happened, they were supposed to go to China. I don't know whether



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it was a successful operation in the end targeting the students. But that's how basically Chinese cooptation usually works. It's done in China in an intelligence operation.

ŁS: And the second objective was that hat they had some say in politics because of Mr. Balabán's connections and his position. Speaking about greed and about money, I think that now we can bring the case of university in Olomouc.

FJ: University in Olomouc was the first place where a Confucius Institute was set up. Confucius Institutes is already a topic that has been probably described, in many cases rather well. These institutions technically pretend to give only language courses and do cultural teachings about cultural affairs in China. They're supposed to do cultural exchange and everything. First problem is that not only the language courses are lacking in the terms that they only teach you the standard Chinese used in China. For example, they don't teach you in traditional characters, which are on its own, I would say, rather important if you want to really study Chinese and deal with the Chinese world as a whole. But it's probably a different story. The other problem is that any cultural exchange with China is actually done by the state on this level, and is, by its definition, basically, a propaganda and influence operation at the same time. We have known cases of Confucius Institutes being used, basically, as a launching platform for intelligence operations, for example for getting people from the MSS into a country through the institute itself. And it also does anything that increases the pressure to self censor, and censor students and the teachers of the university.

ŁS: And how did it work in Olomouc?

FJ: The problem there is again with specific individuals that were in charge of the Chinese, I don't know if it's a department or something else, I don't want to be incorrect, but basically the people in charge of the Chinese program at the University, mainly Ondřej Kučera, who's currently a deputy dean at the Faculty of Arts, they're the faculty where the Chinese studies are. He was actually I think, deputy director, or at least the founder, one of the cofounders



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of the Confucius Institutes at the university. It is helpful to say that before it started, he was receiving scholarships from Taiwan. I guess, when they ended and when China became the more prominent entity of the two China's, if you will, in the context of the Czech Republic, when the money was coming and when the Chinese side really wanted to engage with the Czech society in its fullness, then, at that point, he switched sides. It seems that he started criticizing, for example very much openly and in specific context the pro Tibetan movement in the Czech society, which is something that's rather strangely strong in the Czech Republic. He also criticized the protests against the visit of Xi Jinping in 2016 in Prague. Back in 2016, we could already see the authoritarian turn, or speaking more open, an authoritarian regime in China. When he started acting this friendly and when then Confucius Institute was established the Chinese embassy started giving them grants and books, etc. It was a very profitable relationship at that point, I think. Hard to say whether greed was the only motivation there. From what I understand, and especially from other writings, it's clear that some of the people involved might actually really believe in what they say and that actually makes sense. It's hard to say but definitely money was involved in the sense of grants and donations from the Chinese embassy.

ŁS: So the university benefited from Chinese actors, because the opinions voiced by the academicians as Kučera but also others, as we know from other publications, were quite friendly for the Chinese regime, and they prized the Chinese achievements, Chinese way and Chinese politics. So these mutual benefits have been the base of the cooperation as we can see in this case. I think, looking at the Olomouc case, that not only money was important. We could now recall the example of Mr. Marek Hrubec, who is even known among Polish researchers on China, as his case was quite prominent and was highlighted by the Czech media and later by other media.

FJ: Marek Hrubec is a political sociologist who's focusing on global studies as he says, I don't really know what that actually means. He still works at the Academy of Sciences, the Czech Academy of Sciences He was actually the person teaching the propaganda course at Charles university, the course that was funded by the Chinese embassy and officially run by Mr. Balabán. But it was actually Marek Hrubec teaching most of it, as far as I understand. At least he was the one teaching when I was there.





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He basically is what I would call a conservative leftist, if that actually means anything today. He is a person who is friendly to all kinds at least, tentatively or ostensibly, leftist regimes. He basically was supporting, not only in his works, but also in his comments, anything that was against the US. I would say that probably it is the best definition [of conservative leftist] to be fair. So he ended up doing all kinds of events with not only problematic Chinese actors from the propaganda sectors ILD, as I already mentioned, but also with Russian propagandists who were guests at his conferences. Again, typical mix, at least in this part of the world.

I guess, there were two most problematic, the most traumatic things he actually did, that in the end led to him being removed from a rather senior managerial position within the academy. First one was the book he had funded by the Chinese state owned publishing house, where he actually censored any contributions to the book made by his fellow scholars that would be critical of the PRC in any way. This is very much in public knowledge by now. But the other thing is that he collaborated with this China-CEE Institute in Budapest, which, at least since 2021 has been actually run by the Ministry of State Security, the MSS. As far as we understand, he and his assistant basically were actually working for the Chinese and were giving them this kind of sort of still open source information to some degree, but they were also providing a knowledge that you only acquire if you actually are in the context, in the environment. It means that while Chinese scientist or Chinese intelligence officer could do in-depth research, but they would be missing key points, because, you need this edge, this angle of understanding the whole context really to do this kind of assessment of political system and political situation in a specific environment. And that's what this institution in Budapest seems actually to be all about - getting scholars from the CEE that are friendly to the CCP to provide information on the political situation in their own countries.

ŁS: So it looks like Mr. Hrubec's case is much more important and has a little more weight than other cases, because it was not only about shaping the positive views on CPC or spreading the propaganda, It was like the two way street because it was also about providing Chinese with valuable information,



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not classified but very difficult to obtain for Chinese analysts. How do you think is there any chance that the Czech researchers, Czech academics, learning from Marek Hrubec's example, as he finally was punished, as we can say, will be more aware, more cautious about the what they are doing? Will they be more careful, more diligent in speaking and writing about China?

FJ: I think that in general, the fact that he actually got removed from again, very senior position, meant that whole academy had to agree on a very political level to remove him. He was part of the scandal with Mr. Balaban, his center and the propaganda course, which happened in 2019 and nothing happened to him at that time. Maybe he was scolded by the academy's director, but that was probably basically all. His position was firm. But two years after doubts you had another scandal. I mean, from my point of view, probably more problematic, but still similar level from the perspective of reputational damage to the academy and he was removed, rather swiftly. So I think whether individual scholars will be less inclined to do this kind of cooperation is hard to say but we have definitely seen a shift in the perception on what the China's as a whole is and what could actually be problematic when doing any research which could even use civilian open source. If you do it with the wrong people on the Chinese side, then you can get into trouble. And I think that you know, this lesson, I hope was probably learned by he parts of the Czech society that was doing this kind of thing. But we'll have to see.

ŁS: That was quite optimistic and I hope that future development will be optimistic and that people who are involved in Chinese propaganda and as in case of Mr Hrubec people providing information to the Chinese think tanks will be properly evaluated by the society and public opinion.

Thank you Filip for joining us today and I hope we will host you soon again.

