

Testimony of John T. McNay, PhD  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 19, 2023

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is John McNay, and I am a professor of History at the University of Cincinnati where I have taught for 23 years. I am not speaking for the university, but I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

There are many other problems in SB 83 that would damage higher education in Ohio but I am going to focus on just one issue.

I am opposed to the language in SB 83 about includes restrictions regarding China. This section has the potential to do the most damage:

*No state institution of higher education shall enter into any academic relationship with an academic institution located in China or an academic institution that is located in another country and is associated with the People's Republic of China.*

As a historian of World War II and the Cold War, some years ago, I was fortunate enough to teach a course I called *The Eagle, The Dragon, and The Rising Sun: World War II in Asia* in a study abroad program in Chengdu, China. The opportunity was immensely rewarding to me, to my students, and to the Chinese people we interacted with.

We traveled to a nearby museum, built by a Chinese businessman, that was dedicated to the Americans who served in the Flying Tigers. The unit, established before the US was in the war, famously fought the Japanese who had invaded China and they clearly remain heroes to the Chinese. The museum was filled with items left behind – typewriters, gas cans, 1940s calculators, signs, and the like. But the walls were filled with photos of the faces of the young American air and ground crews and there is a memorial statue to the Flying Tigers commander, Claire Chennault. There is a great John Wayne movie about the Flying Tigers.

China is gradually coming to grips with the disastrous Cultural Revolution in the early 1960s and we were also able to visit a museum that told that story in a more honest way that even a few years before would not have been possible.

This kind of people-to-people diplomacy is vitally important. In fact, we should remember that it was not the huge US military build up that brought down the Soviet Union. It was the growing realization through personal contacts that life was simply better in the West.

This misguided legislation would stop that interaction. There would no longer be moments like when a young Chinese student came up to me after class and quietly asked how was it possible Mao Zedong had been so wrong in the Cultural Revolution. Or when I was sitting alone at a restaurant and a Chinese waiter spoke me to quietly about the Korean War. Didn't the Americans really attack first, he asked? And he listened as I told him the truth.

To deprive American and Chinese students of this contact is a tragic blunder. The bill goes on to more bad ideas. It bans Chinese government-sponsored Confucius Institutes, probably because in some places, they do seem to have been conduits for intelligence gathering. But why have universities been so open to the institutes? Because the legislature has starved our institutions for funding for years and foreign language instruction is rapidly disappearing. These programs represented real opportunity because they taught the Chinese language with native speakers.

But the language in the bill is pointless hyperbole because there are no longer any institutes in Ohio so any risk, real or imagined, is gone but so is the opportunity for the language instruction. One of the most valuable exchanges that went on during the Cold War were scientists working together, particularly after the meeting of Reagan and Gorbachev. The exchanges did an extraordinary job to help maintain U.S.-Soviet relations and prepare the ground for signing arms control agreements.

Similarly, the University of Cincinnati and other Ohio institutions have invested much time and money in crafting relationships with Chinese universities to provide opportunity for students in both nations. All that good work could go up in smoke.

Being in China makes it clear that the authoritarian grip of the Chinese government is firmly in control. In a Tibetan neighborhood near our university, the heavy security presence was obvious. On our visit to Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the security was oppressive.

But we should always remember Tiananmen and the massacre of the brave students who tried to make the revolutions that took down the Berlin Wall happen in China. The students, inspired by American history, crafted a Statue of Liberty. And we should never forget the iconic image of the brave student who faced down dozens of tanks before disappearing.

SB 83 would abandon those courageous young people. It is bad for higher education, bad for students, and bad for Ohio.