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at the hearing on

**“Is Academic Freedom Threatened by China’s
Influence on American Universities?”**

U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs

December 4, 2014

I. The Costs and Benefits of Academic Exchange with China

Since the “opening” of China following the death of Mao Zedong in the late 1970s, academics in China have sought to connect with their colleagues in the outside world. This is an entirely natural and healthful aspiration, one that scholars around the world have rightly supported. The resultant exchanges have benefited Chinese scholars and scholars everywhere.

This kind of exchange, scholar-to-scholar, in pursuit of objective knowledge, needs to be sharply distinguished from the programs of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which has continuously exercised one-party dictatorship over all programs of the Chinese government and whose goals are to advance its own power interests.

Two kinds of people—Chinese scholars and representatives of the CPC—have been involved in what both call “academic exchange” with the U.S. and other countries. It is crucial to understand the distinction between these two players and to appreciate their different motives. For U.S. academic administrators who are unfamiliar with China, observation of the distinction is made more difficult by the fact that some interlocutors on the Chinese side are a mixture of genuine scholar and CPC spokesperson, while many others, although genuine scholars underneath, are obliged to speak for the CPC out of fear of the consequences if they do not.

A common, almost universal, mistake among U.S. academic administrators is to accept the CPC as the authentic voice of “the other side.” This acceptance puts the power interests of a one-party dictatorship in a place where universal pursuit of truth should be. The CPC’s power interests include these:

- to obtain advanced technical know-how in service of strengthening the Chinese state;
- to spread abroad a version of Chinese history that is incomplete and on important points false;
- to intimidate and to punish scholars, both Chinese and Western, who do not cooperate in these goals.

The international community makes a grievous mistake when it fails to recognize the non-scholarly goals of the CPC; but it also makes a serious mistake if, in deterring the CPC’s parries, it forgets about genuine Chinese scholars.

Inexperienced academic administrators in the U.S. often draw up campus-to-campus “protocols” or “memoranda of understanding” with CPC officials. These are useful to CPC officials as credentials in their quest for prestige and funding within the Chinese context, but they do little if anything for genuine scholarly exchange. Genuine exchange happens when scholars themselves are moved to cooperate and take the initiatives themselves. This kind of scholarly collaboration, “from below,” should be encouraged. But U.S. administrators should be aware that the CPC has always feared and opposed scholarly cooperation of this kind, because of its independent origins.

Scholars in China have come under sharply increased pressure in recent months. Unsubtle guidelines that university professors must be “patriotic” (i.e., support the CPC) and must oppose ideas like “universal values” have been spread all across the country. The orders

have been broadly obeyed, in part because of the punishments that disobedience brings. The few scholars who dare not to obey have been monitored, threatened, harassed, fired, beaten, indicted, or imprisoned—the degree of their punishment calibrated to the degree to which they persist in their dissent. Individual American scholars often speak out for their Chinese colleagues under pressure, but American academic administrators seldom do, and formal cooperation with the CPC—the oppressing party—marches forward. This is not because U.S. academic administrators are illiberal in their values; it is because they do not understand the realities of the Chinese side and are insufficiently diligent in discovering them.

II. Harmful Influences of the Chinese Government on American Academic Freedom

For decades, the primary strategy of the CPC in censoring its own people has been to induce self-censorship. This has normally been achieved through fear: “say what you know we want to hear, or suffer the consequences”—which could be humiliation, job loss, imprisonment, and even death. In recent times, with the rise of the economy, the CPC has turned to positive inducements as well: “stay in bounds, join us, and you can have money, status, and a share of power.” But regardless of whether carrots or sticks are used, the key has been to engineer people into positions where they censor themselves willingly.

Now the CPC, stronger and wealthier than before, is looking to project these battle-tested methods onto the world stage. It uses both punishments and inducements to prevent unwanted expression. The techniques operate in many spheres, including business and diplomacy, but here I will comment only on the academic sphere. NOTE: These techniques are not just matters of “threat”; they have been in operation for years.

Punishments. American scholars who study China need access to the country. The CPC, knowing this, uses visa denials, blockage of access to archives or fieldwork, and other means, subtle and unsubtle, to make it clear that people who write or say things “unfriendly” to the CPC will have troubles. Blacklisted American scholars are sometimes summoned to Chinese consulates where they are told directly that they need to be less critical of the Chinese government if they want to travel to China. (Genuine Chinese scholars do not display this attitude; with very rare exceptions, they are open and welcoming of American scholars.)

It is crucial to understand that actual blockage of U.S. scholars is a much smaller problem than the pervasive *fear* of blockage. The number of American China scholars on visa blacklists is only a dozen or two at any given time, but the number who watch their words in order to *avoid* possible blacklisting is in the thousands. Indeed, such avoidance is the norm. I have been on a visa blacklist since the mid-1990s, and I hear, on average, two or three inquiries per month from younger scholars who want to know what they should avoid saying in order not to end up where I am.

Visa denials are the CPC’s strongest tools of punishment, but the others—blocking access to archives, fieldwork, or interviews—operate similarly.

Inducements. In recent years the CPC has offered funds to university and high-school campuses around the world, including in the U.S., to establish “Confucius Institutes” and other CPC-funded joint projects in teaching and research. American school administrators, always looking for more funding, have been largely receptive. Many have allowed CPC authorities in Beijing to choose teachers and set curricula on their campuses.

Teaching in the Confucius Institutes is primarily of Chinese language and cultural topics that have little relation to one-party rule by the CPC. American academic administrators who accept CPC funds point to this fact when they say they are importing no political biases. The CPC uses this anodyne approach to gain acceptance on campuses; its others goals—of spreading a false image of itself and of Chinese history—are achieved largely by two other means:

1. The teachers at Confucius Institutes are selected and trained to present pro-CPC versions of Chinese history and society in all contexts, formal and informal, while they are abroad. The degree to which they do this willingly is irrelevant to the fact that they will be held responsible if they do not do it correctly.

2. American administrators who accept CPC funds understand, without needing to be directly told, that topics the CPC does not welcome—such as Tibetan or Uighur autonomy, Taiwan independence, Occupy Central in Hong Kong, the Falun Gong, underground Christian churches, the Tiananmen massacre, China’s imprisoned Nobel Peace Laureate, the spectacular wealth of the families of Xi Jinping, Li Peng, Wen Jiabao, and others in the super-elite, and more (the list is constantly changing and growing)—will not be sponsored by Confucius Institutes. Money-induced self-censorship prevents even the suggestion of such topics. American students are presented a roseate cameo of China and are told that it is the whole. Omission of the forbidden topics not only reduces the size of the picture; it misrepresents the character of the part that remains.

Some academic administrators in the U.S. have acknowledged the cameo problem but say that it does not matter because healthy university campuses have many other sources of information about China that can serve as needed correctives. This is true for large campuses (less so for small ones, or high schools), but it seems an odd argument to make. Should you do something harmful because you are confident that something beneficial can outweigh it? Do you cut off a finger because, after all, you have nine others?

III. Costs to the U.S. and the International Community

When American scholars cannot go to China to do their interviewing or field study, or to visit archives, there are real costs to their work. But, as noted above, these costs are small compared to the very much larger problem of the widespread self-censorship that results from fear of being blacklisted. Here are some representative examples (all factual, although I omit names):

--A brilliant Ph.D. student wants to write a dissertation about Chinese democracy, but his well-meaning advisers counsel against it; it could get him blacklisted and ruin his budding career; he settles for a tamer topic.

--A seasoned historian, who has written on the ideologies of Chinese rebel movements, is invited to the PBS Newshour to discuss the Falun Gong. She declines; it could complicate her research access in China; the U.S. public hears from a second-best authority on the Newshour.

--An idealistic undergraduate gets a summer internship with Human Rights Watch; later she hears that such a thing on her record might bar her from China; she declines the internship. (In this case, and many others, self-censorship goes far beyond what is needed.)

Yet even cases like these, of which there are many, do not make clear the most widespread costs of academic self-censorship about China. The widest costs are in language use. China scholars know that if you are writing about politics in Taiwan, you do not speak of Taiwan independence but of the “the Taiwan question”; the Tiananmen massacre was not a massacre but an “incident” or an “event”; China’s super-rich may be corrupt but, please, let’s avoid naming names. And most important, while observing CPC red lines, speak and write about as if the red lines were not there.

China scholars sometimes point out that this kind of circumspection in their expression is only a code of convenience. Everyone is clear about what the term “Taiwan question” really refers to, so why stick a finger in the dragon’s eye by bringing up the word “independence”? This point is fair enough, as long as it is inside the club of China scholars. The problem—and it is a large one—is that the code words are not shed when scholars step outside their club to address students in a classroom or the public over the airwaves or in cyberspace. Will the public be able to guess what the Taiwan “question” really is? Will it know that an “incident” in 1989 was actually a massacre? Many people in the Chinese public under twenty years of age already do not know about that massacre; it is a goal of the CPC that the American and international public not know about it, either.

Thirty years ago Americans could look at the CPC’s repression of speech, assembly, and publication inside China and, from a distance, feel empathy for the Chinese people. Today the luxury of distance is gone. The CPC has brought its engineering techniques to U.S. shores and is setting up shop.

IV. Policy recommendations

1. *The U.S. government should fund Chinese-language programs in the U.S.* Why should American campuses that need such programs have to turn for support to the CPC and its campaign to make the world safe for autocrats—even at the risk of misleading the American young? Why don’t we meet the CPC challenge where it is being made? A single B-2 Spirit

Bomber reportedly costs about \$2.4 billion. That amount would provide far more than adequate funding to every American campus that needs an honest Chinese language program—and very arguably do more to blunt the CPC’s advance than the airplane could.

2. *American university administrators, in their programs with China, should adopt a policy of “consciously staking out the broadest of fields.”* By this I mean that they should say, and should show in their actions, right at the outset, in a dignified but clear way, that specific topics like the Dalai Lama, the imprisoned Nobel laureate, the Tiananmen massacre, and others, will be in bounds in the exchange. They should make periodic efforts to re-insert these topics (or to support Chinese and American scholars who wish to insert them). The reason for this policy is not to pick fights with CPC representatives, and it is fine to make clear that belligerence is not the motive. The absolutely crucial reason for the policy is that, if it is not there, then the CPC’s mechanisms of induced self-censorship will take over, the scope of “mentionable” topics will contract, the contracted field will come to seem “normal,” and academic freedom will die.

3. *The U.S. government should withhold visas for Confucius Institute instructors at high-profile U.S. institutions until the practice of withholding visas for American scholars on political grounds is ended.*

V. The Larger Context

The policies of the CPC since the ascension of Xi Jinping two years ago have become intensely more ominous. The crackdown on press freedom and academic freedom inside China is worse than anything we have seen since Mao Zedong, and it is clear that Xi is looking to project the CPC’s power globally.

Xi, though, is no Mao, in either intellect or force of personality, and it is an open question whether his juggernaut will crash or soar. Whichever happens, the consequences for the American people, and people everywhere, could be severe. One of the many costs of the troubles in the Middle East is that it has distracted attention from the trouble that is quite clearly brewing in China.