

Is Academic Freedom Threatened by China's Influence on U.S. Universities?

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I. The Impact of American Higher Education on China

The question we are considering today is whether academic freedom is threatened by China's influence on American universities. The history of U.S.-China educational relations suggests that we should first ask whether China has such influence at all.

Since 1854, when Yung Wing became the first Chinese student to graduate from an American university, influence has flowed almost entirely in the other direction: from the U.S. to China. Qing Dynasty students who came to New England as part of the Chinese Educational Mission in 1872 and the nearly 40,000 Chinese who studied here between 1870 and 1949 returned to China with knowledge and ideas that built Chinese industry and sparked calls for liberal social change. China had no perceptible impact on American universities during this period other than as a source of talent. In the same era, Americans like John Leighton Stuart and institutions like Johns Hopkins, Oberlin, Yale, and Harvard founded China's first modern universities and introduced the academic study of the natural, applied, and social sciences to China. Our universities have played and continue to play a vital role in China's development.

Today, there are more American higher educational exchanges with China than can be kept track of, and the scale and variety of such efforts is expanding. Chinese universities are adapting American academic standards and models to suit China's needs and Chinese scholars are seeking partnership with American experts and publication in American journals. Young Chinese now comprise 29% of all foreign students in the U.S. 287,260 hold U.S. student visas (approximately 2 million Chinese have pursued degrees here since 1979). In the 80s and 90s, most Chinese who came to the States were graduate students, but we are now witnessing an explosion in undergraduate enrollments as well. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the number of Chinese undergraduates at U.S. colleges has grown 900 percent over the past decade. Expanding enrollments in U.S. primary and secondary schools and in academic summer programs also testify to Chinese hunger for American education and American credentials.

The question of whether these students' exposure to American ideas and culture changes their thinking, and how those who return to China are shaping their nation has not been adequately studied. The history of our educational relations since 1854 makes clear, however, that, while we cannot predict or control how American education influences the thought, aspirations, and careers of Chinese students, that influence has been profound in ways that accrue to our national credit and that promote social pluralism and modern attitudes in China.

Looking at the other side of the unbalanced equation that is U.S.-China educational relations, American academics rarely seek publication in Chinese journals, most of which are of low

quality and many of which deal in plagiarized and faked research, and few American students pursue degrees from Chinese universities. Most American students who visit China do so for short-term language and cultural classes as part of U.S. degree programs. Chinese education as such holds little allure for Americans.

There can be no question that American universities have had a far greater impact on China than China has had on them, just as there can be no question that American soft power in China—our influence on Chinese institutions, aspirations, tastes, and values—dwarfs China’s soft power here. That fact should be kept clearly in mind as calls for reconsideration of our policy of engagement with China grow more strident.

II. China’s Leverage

Still, China *does* exert influence on American universities, and that influence is growing. It doesn’t stem from Chinese values or ideas or from the attractiveness of China’s educational system; it’s mostly about American colleges’ and Universities’ need for—and fear of losing—Chinese money.

Most of the Chinese PhD students who came to the States in the 80s and 90s received fellowships from American schools. Today, most Chinese undergraduate and master’s students pay full, out-of-state tuition for American degrees. Those fees have become a vital source of funds for some American schools. Chinese tuition became particularly important when the number of American out-of-state applicants to U.S. state universities dropped after 2008. That is when we began to see a rapid increase in Chinese undergraduate enrollments, the creation of U.S. master’s programs that cater to students from the PRC, and the building of “American campuses” in China that charge U.S.-level tuitions to Chinese students. American universities also compete with each other to sell executive training courses to mid-career Chinese leaders and they earn fees for “summer camps” for Chinese high school students and undergrads. Chinese students are also an economic boon to American communities. The Department of Commerce estimates that in the 2013-14 academic year, Chinese students contributed \$8.04 billion to the U.S. economy.

(It must be noted that the flow of Chinese money into American universities, important as it is, is not as beneficial as the flow of Chinese talent and energy into American society. Many Chinese students remain in the U.S. after graduation. The new generation of Chinese immigrants, like their predecessors, is providing a vital infusion of expertise into every professional field and academic discipline in the U.S. These new Americans found American companies, build American communities, and save and enrich American lives. Most come to the States initially as students. We must remember, therefore, that when we speak of “*Chinese* students,” we are also speaking of our *American* neighbors, colleagues, and friends.)

Money isn’t the only thing American universities want from the PRC; they also cooperate with China in order to fulfill their academic missions. American scholars need access to Chinese archives, data, and research sites. They need to interview Chinese experts and survey Chinese populations. They need study abroad opportunities for American students, who cannot be leaders in their fields unless they have knowledge of China. In short, because the PRC is central to nearly every global issue—strategic, economic, technological, environmental, public health—U.S. universities cannot do their work well unless they engage with China.

Engagement means that our universities don't merely offer *academic* China programs or conduct educational *exchanges* with China; they now have complex *interests* in China. Universities have their own China *relations*, their own China *policies*. This is a positive development, but it has its dangers. American universities fear ill repute in China, they fear being cut off from China, and they fear the loss of Chinese tuition and fees. That fear gives China leverage, and China knows it.

III. Reason to Worry

We must be skeptical about how China will wield this influence. China takes names. It blacklists American scholars if their findings or even the focus of their research are seen as a threat to the party-state. Not only do the Chinese ministries of Public Security, Propaganda, Culture, and Education monitor the activities of Chinese universities and American scholars and schools working in China, Chinese universities are themselves led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While there are many brilliant, hard-working students and scholars in Chinese universities, it must be remembered that the primary mission of Chinese higher education is not the advancement of knowledge; it is the training of personnel that the CCP has determined are needed for the continued development of China's economy and comprehensive power.

The CCP has invested heavily in higher education and has made it possible for a high percentage of Chinese to earn university degrees. But the Party is also wary of academics. Chinese universities and intellectuals have long seen themselves as having the moral and patriotic duty to promote Chinese social modernization and to call out wrong-headed government policies. This was demonstrated in the May 4th Movement of 1919 and the Tiananmen Movement of 1989.

This tradition of academic activism is the reason that Xi Jinping and China's Ministry of Education have made universities a focus of a national campaign to guard against the influence of Western thought. Xi has named Western values as one of the non-traditional threats that will be addressed by the new National Security Commission that Xi himself chairs. The Commission views Western values as an existential threat to the party-state on a par with terrorism and sedition. Xi spelled out what he means by "Western values" in 2013 in a notice commonly known as Document 9. It lists subjects that are not to be openly discussed in the media or in university classrooms, including Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberal economics, and Western ideas about journalism.

The *New York Times* reported that Document 9's proscriptions were strengthened in 2014 by Document 30, which called for cleansing Chinese universities and cultural institutions of Western-inspired liberal ideas. Xi spurred the campaign at a meeting on the Party's work in higher education in late 2014, stressing that universities are "charged with the heavy responsibility of studying, researching, and propagating Marxism, (and) training the next generation of builders of socialism with Chinese characteristics," and that "strengthening the Party's leadership of universities, and strengthening and advancing the Party apparatus within universities is the most basic guarantee of the success of socialist universities with Chinese characteristics."

To advance Xi's agenda, the Minister of Education, Yuan Guiren told Chinese university leaders in January of this year to reduce the number of Western-published textbooks in their classrooms and to "by no means allow teaching materials that disseminate Western values." The reason for this prohibition was provided by China's state-run *Global Times* newspaper: "Young students and teachers are the major groups used by enemy forces to penetrate and divide China."

Yuan's statement sounds like a direct order to Chinese universities and a direct threat to American schools that offer American degrees on Chinese soil. If Western textbooks are vectors that infect young Chinese minds and weaken the country, are not Western faculty and universities more dangerous still? The Ministry of Education's suspicion of American education is echoed in China's draft law on the governance of foreign NGOs. The draft places all non-Chinese NGOs—a category which may include foreign educational institutions—under management by China's Public Security Bureau, treating them, in effect, as criminal suspects.

This situation compels this committee to ask how American colleges and universities founded on academic freedom can work in or with such a country under such conditions. This question should be considered seriously by every American institution of higher education.

IV. The Way Forward

Despite Xi Jinping's ideology campaign, and despite the political character of Chinese universities, American universities can interact with Chinese counterparts in ways that do not threaten the academic freedom that makes our system of higher education the finest in the world. It is not only possible for American universities to work with China in this way, it is essential that they do so. It is necessary both for the fulfilment of their academic missions and for America's national interest.

There is room for honorable maneuver by American universities because Xi Jinping's campaign and Yuan Guiren's pronouncements don't mean much *in practice* yet. There is an atmosphere of hesitancy and fear in Chinese academic, cultural, and media circles that we haven't seen since the aftermath of Tiananmen, but, to date, there have been no reports of Chinese faculty being required to revise their reading lists or of Chinese colleges altering curricula. There has been no systematic implementation of the ideology campaign in Chinese university classrooms. Many Chinese students and scholars, furthermore, question and mock Yuan Guiren's call to restrict Western textbooks, and they do so in state-run media. The president of Tiankai University wrote in the Communist Party's flagship paper, *People's Daily*, "I've read people on the Internet saying that the ranks of academics must be cleansed, purified and rectified. I can't agree with this. This was the mentality of 1957 (the Anti-Rightist Campaign) or 1966 (launch of the Cultural Revolution)." Other Chinese critics point out that Marxism itself is of Western origin.

It may be that Beijing will only pay lip service to the rectification of Chinese campuses. Beijing's attitudes toward Western learning are, after all, conflicted. The West still leads the world in nearly every field of academic inquiry and Xi surely knows that, despite demonizing Western culture, China cannot meet his reform goals unless it masters Western learning. Xi's desire to make China a leader in the international knowledge economy and his demand that

China's universities train more innovative students are at odds with his calls for ideological purity. He may also be restrained by the fact of his daughter's recent graduation from Harvard.

Xi, in other words, faces the same quandary that confounded his predecessors: he cannot find a way to make China both *Chinese*, as he understands the term, and truly modern. He wants to keep the modernist wolf at the door even as he ushers it in. He is trying to manage this paradox, furthermore, as China faces a daunting set of domestic and international challenges and while the nation is changing at a pace and on a scale unprecedented in human history. Everything in the PRC is in flux, and the stakes are extremely high. High for China, high for its neighbors, and high for the United States.

That is why America must continue to engage vigorously with China. As the foundation of our intellectual and technological strength, universities play a key role in our geostrategic competition with China and in promoting the cooperation that keeps competition in check.

V. Recommendations

Our universities, founded on the principle of academic freedom, must comprehensively engage with China if they are to fulfill their academic missions and advance our national interests. But cooperation means that China, which opposes academic freedom, has a say in setting the terms of interaction. I'd like to close by recommending several steps that universities might take in order to protect standards of academic freedom while working with Chinese counterparts.

- MOUs with Chinese universities should state that any relationship or program can be concluded at any time, by either party, if its standards of academic freedom, academic integrity, or academic rigor are compromised. Such a clause will serve as warning and reminder of first principles for both parties, and will protect American partners if Xi's ideological agenda is actually put into practice.
- MOUs should be made public, as any practices that fall short of full transparency will fuel reasonable skepticism on the part of American faculty, students, and other stakeholders.
- American faculty should be consulted at every stage in the planning of cooperative ventures with China and should vote to decide whether projects meet their standards of academic quality. This is essential, as university administrators must consider financial and political matters, while faculty loyalty is to academic disciplines, departments, and standards.
- U.S. colleges and universities should not allow the Chinese government (or any other government) or its agencies to appoint faculty or instructors on American campuses, to violate U.S. fair hiring laws, or to dictate program conditions that violate U.S. best practices.
- The U.S. government should ask Beijing to clarify its opposition to Western culture and its policies restricting foreign NGOs. China doesn't shy away from accusing American media of bias against China. We shouldn't be reticent about asking why Beijing demonizes our values.

In conclusion,

1. **China does not have any influence on American universities that American universities don't permit it to have.** Hearings like this one help raise awareness of the pitfalls and opportunities of academic engagement with China. I thank the Chair and Ranking Member for hosting this valuable discussion.
2. The dangers of academic engagement shouldn't be overstated. U.S.-China educational relations are not a battlefield. They are mutually beneficial and mutually enriching at both the institutional and personal levels. Our joint challenge is to manage these complex relations well, not to peer under every rock for Western liberalization, in China's case, and for Communist Party perfidy, in America's case.
3. Even as we remain vigilant, Americans must remember that our educational institutions, culture, and ideas have vastly more influence in China than China has here. This influence is made possible by the policy of engagement. Curtailing engagement would cut off our influence, serving neither American interests nor those of the Chinese people.