

HEARING OF THE CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA

**“The Long Arm of China: Exporting Authoritarianism With Chinese Characteristics”**

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Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members of the Commission, I am honored to have been invited to participate in today’s hearing. I have long followed the Commission, and the important work that it does.

In my remarks today, I wish to address China’s efforts to cultivate and project soft power through a potent mixture of carrots and sticks. I will focus my attention on American higher education, that is the domain of universities, scholars, and the research they consume and produce.

As a point of departure, let me stipulate the obvious: China is a Leninist, one-party state, and its ruling Communist Party brooks no meaningful ideological or political opposition. That Party dominates Chinese society by hegemonizing the allocation of resources, controlling information, and vigorously suppressing dissent. But one must recognize that it has also earned a substantial reserve of performance legitimacy grounded in the meteoric rise in wealth and power that China has lately enjoyed on its watch.

On the strength of that record, President Xi Jinping has in recent months indicated a new confidence about projecting an as yet vaguely-defined “China model” globally, as an alternative to the liberal order anchored for decades by the United States. For some time, China has been working diligently to revise existing international institutions, and to create new ones of its own design in order to facilitate that vision and to exercise influence commensurate with its new ambitions.

Shaping public opinion is a key facet of that plan. Indeed, authoritative Chinese sources regularly depict public opinion as a “battlefield” 舆论战场 upon which a highly disciplined political struggle must be waged and won. The domestic implications of this military metaphor are well known to this Commission, and include various forms of state repression and censorship, but the point I would like to stress today is that they do not stop at the border. China is also intent on actively shaping the narrative about it abroad, and to varying degrees it has adapted methods honed at home to that task.

Since its origins as a hunted, underground revolutionary organization almost a century ago, the CCP has repeatedly proven adept at the art of turning unfavorable circumstances to its advantage by strategically coopting influential partners, nurturing relationships of dependency, and isolating and neutralizing potential opposition. It plays a long game, and like the Soviet Union and former socialist governments of Eastern Europe, it coordinates its influence operations across a variety of fronts, many of them seemingly innocent and on the surface unconnected to national strategy. However, recent disclosures in Australia and New Zealand should dispel any doubts or complacency on these points, and must serve as a wakeup call for the United States.

We can hardly expect China to reliably honor values on the world stage that it does not respect at home, and to the extent that it does endorse principles such as academic freedom with its international partners, it often attaches very different meanings to them. Moreover, judging from the historical record, we would do well to understand these disarming endorsements as provisional and transactional rather than as bedrock commitments. They survive purely at the pleasure of the Communist Party, which by its own admission is always in command, and they are therefore always subject to revision.

Consider, for example, the 2014 annual meeting of the European Association for Chinese Studies in Portugal, which received partial funding from the Hanban, the PRC state organ charged with promoting Chinese language and culture abroad, which also oversees Confucius Institutes worldwide, about which I will say more in a moment. Vice-Minister Xu Lin, Director-General of the Hanban, attended this conference, and directed her subordinates to confiscate copies of the conference program at the venue upon discovering that the program acknowledged the co-sponsorship of the conference by a Taiwan-based foundation. After a brief standoff, she agreed to return the program for distribution to the conference's participants, but only after her staff had torn four offending pages out of each of the confiscated copies.<sup>1</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, Chinese authorities have not carried such brazen bullying to the United States, but that is arguably a tactical decision that reflects the relative power dynamics between the two countries than a deeper commitment to tolerance. Instead, towards the United States, China has for the time being adopted a savvy strategy of winning friends and influencing people that aims where we are in fact most vulnerable: not at our hearts or even our minds, but at our wallets.

Lenin once said that "capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them," and the Chinese Communist Party has taken this lesson to heart. At a time when the United States is reconsidering its role in the world, and many domestic American institutions, such as the media and our universities, are retrenching, China is seizing the opportunity to step into the breach, flush with resources. It is asymmetrically exploiting the comparative openness of our society,

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Greatrex, "Report: The Deletion of Pages From EACS Conference Materials in Braga (July 2014)." (2014): accessed December 10, 2017, <http://chinesestudies.eu/?p=584>.

cultivating local allies, and extracting value in a bid to surpass us. As strategy, this is shrewd and deserves our respect.

With that in mind, let me draw your attention to four ways in which the long-arm of Chinese authoritarianism is reshaping American academia:

### 1) Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes are far and away the best known vehicle by which the Chinese government is carving out a space in American education. By the Hanban's own figures, there are currently 110 Confucius Institutes, and 501 Confucius Classrooms in the United States. The former are predominantly embedded in American colleges and universities, while the latter are hosted by American primary and secondary schools. Their mandate is to promote cultural exchange, primarily through instruction in Chinese language and culture.

Contracts differ from campus to campus, and are usually not public, which is of concern, but generally speaking expenses are shared by the Chinese and American partners, while instructors and teaching materials are selected in China by the Hanban.

Therein lies the problem. By outsourcing academic services to the Hanban, participating schools have traded away some of their autonomy to an organ of the Chinese state that is obliged, in the final analysis, to promote the ideological program and policy goals of the Chinese Communist Party. We must acknowledge that openly.

This arrangement is unprecedented in American education, and intensely controversial.<sup>2</sup> How it plays out in practice hinges greatly on local factors, such as the terms of the contract, the prestige, bargaining power and institutional robustness of host schools, and the degree of oversight those schools can muster. Nevertheless, instances of academic censorship and problematic employment practices have been documented at some Confucius Institutes, prompting a small number of schools to terminate their participation. And a general unease about entrusting a government that practices aggressive censorship and tightly restricts academic inquiry at home with the education or, as critics might say, indoctrination of Americans rightly hangs like a shadow over the program. At the very least, these circumstances invite misfortune.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher R. Hughes, "Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission From the Cultural," *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014), 45-83; Rachele Petersen, "Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education." (2017): accessed December 10, 2017, [https://www.nas.org/images/documents/confucius\\_institutes/NAS\\_confuciusInstitutes.pdf](https://www.nas.org/images/documents/confucius_institutes/NAS_confuciusInstitutes.pdf); Marshall Sahlins, *Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2015).

Yet, in spite of that infirmity, the number of Confucius Institutes continues to grow, and we need to ask why. Many schools depend on them to fill staffing and curriculum gaps, and to fund activities that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to provide on their own, for lack of resources. Reducing the presence of the institutes on American campuses would almost certainly set back Chinese Studies in the United States at a time when we can ill afford that as a nation. We are to an extent dependent on the services they provide -- a predicament of our own making that does not serve our long-term interests, but suits those of the Chinese government admirably.

## 2) International students

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), students from the PRC accounted for nearly one-third of all international students studying in American colleges and universities during the 2016-2017 academic year. By country of origin, they are far and away the largest group of international students in the United States, numbering more than 350,000, and they inject more than \$12 billion into the U.S. economy.<sup>3</sup> On some campuses, they make up more than half of all international students, which can complicate the question of who is meant to accommodate to whom.

Chinese students in the United States are socio-economically and politically diverse and, in my experience, typically thoughtful and open to opposing viewpoints in the classroom, even on issues that are sensitive or passionately felt in China. Nevertheless, they are exposed to information and perspectives about China that are rarely found in the PRC outside of a few elite institutions, and for some those encounters can be unsettling or even upsetting. A minority have responded with defiant patriotism in defense of national honor.

In rare instances, conflict has erupted on campus, and then spilled over into China, carried by the Internet. A particularly heated episode erupted at MIT in 2006 over a Japanese woodblock print depicting the gruesome execution of Chinese prisoners of war during the 1895 Sino-Japanese War. In the ensuing fracas, MIT faculty were threatened, and police were called in.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in 2017, after consulting with the local Chinese consulate, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association at UC San Diego demanded that the university rescind its invitation to the Dalai Lama to serve as a commencement speaker. Appropriating the language of equity and inclusion lately favored by other campus activists, the group insisted that the invitation “contravened the spirit of respect, tolerance, equality, and earnestness—the ethos upon which the university is built,” and it promised unspecified “further measures to firmly resist the university’s unreasonable behavior” if the invitation stood. The university’s Shanghai alumni group added that the Chinese community at the school would feel “extremely offended and

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<sup>3</sup> Institute of International Education, “Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange.” (2017): accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter C. Perdue, “Reflections on the “Visualizing Cultures” Incident.” *MIT Faculty Newsletter* 28(5) (2006): accessed December 10, 2017, <http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/perdue.html>.

disrespected” if the speech went forward, as it ultimately did. In apparent retaliation, months later, the China Scholarship Council, a PRC state organ that funds overseas study for Chinese students, announced that it would no longer process applications for Chinese students to attend UC San Diego.

Such episodes prey on the aversion of American universities to negative publicity, particularly on issues associated with identity politics, and can damage the university’s brand among a coveted community of international donors and applicants, many of whom are prepared to pay full tuition, and are therefore a potentially significant source of income. Accordingly, tenured faculty have felt pressure to apologize for offending Chinese sensibilities, and some non-tenured faculty, whose employment is already precarious, shy away from provocative classroom discussions in order to avoid career-damaging controversy, fearful that their own universities may not adequately support them.

Furthermore, it is widely believed that the Chinese government cultivates informants among its citizens studying abroad, and Chinese scholars and students are certainly aware that heterodox or impolitic views expressed on American campuses can reach home with traumatic consequences. In 2008, an undergraduate from the PRC was vilified in China, and her family was threatened after she struck an independent stance at Duke University on human rights in Tibet. In 2017, a graduating senior from the PRC at the University of Maryland was hounded into an apology by compatriots after her commencement address describing free speech in the United States as a breath of fresh air went viral in China, and aroused online outrage. Such incidents chill speech among Chinese students, and diminish learning outcomes for everyone.

### 3) Self-Censorship and Surveillance

The extent to which foreign scholars of China practice self-censorship is fiercely debated in academic circles. Many would insist that they choose their research freely, and that their students continue to work on sensitive topics. While the data on this matter is primarily anecdotal, the enduring intensity of the debate suggests that other academics feel quite certain that self-censorship occurs regularly, and professional rank is surely pertinent here. For early career scholars, who lack the security of tenure, visa denials can be disastrous, and examples of promising academics whose prospects were cut short after making a Chinese government blacklist are well-known. While few in number, their abilities to pursue field work, interface with colleagues, and publish groundbreaking research are profoundly diminished. Some disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and modern history, carry this weight more heavily than others, and certain advisors do in fact counsel their students to exercise caution so as not to jeopardize fledgling careers.

The status of one’s home institution is arguably also relevant. Foreign academics from elite universities may enjoy greater leeway to work on sensitive topics in the interests of preserving larger, mutually beneficial relationships. At the same time, those relationships and the considerable sums at stake in them may also militate against their home institutions mounting principled defenses of academic freedom on behalf of individuals singled out for retaliation by

the PRC. In one way, American universities clearly are practicing self-censorship. Increasingly, they are pursuing institutional collaborations in fields that present fewer ideological obstacles, such as engineering and the sciences, and are excluding their China area specialists from the negotiations over these ventures.

Sadly, foreign publishers are also practicing self-censorship. For instance, in 2017, both Cambridge University Press (CUP) and Springer Nature admitted to withholding content at the request of Chinese censors from subscribers visiting their online sites from the PRC.<sup>5</sup> CUP removed more than 300 articles and book reviews from its back catalog of the venerable British academic journal, *The China Quarterly*, and was also asked to remove more than 100 articles from its catalog of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, the flagship publication of the American Association of Asian Studies (AAS). Following negative publicity, the press reversed itself and restored the missing content. By contrast, Springer Nature, a privately-held German firm that bills itself as the world's largest academic press, has held firm, arguing that the more than 1,000 titles it has censored from subscribers in the PRC amount to a small fraction of its total catalog, and are in effect the cost of doing business in China. By demonstrating the willingness of Western academic presses to compromise their integrity in exchange for market access, the PRC has set an important precedent, which it may press further in the future, and other authoritarian regimes will no doubt also seek to build on. It remains to be seen whether China's preferences will over time affect the global editorial policies of the affected journals and the manuscripts they accept for publication. Content that cannot be sold in a major market is arguably less attractive to a publisher.

Lastly, the long-arm of the Chinese state surveils foreign academics from afar. We are routinely targeted by malware, phishing schemes, and fake social media profiles designed to compromise our information security, and our Chinese informants. In many instances, our Chinese colleagues are already under surveillance, and face far more harrowing constraints. Institutional email accounts have also been penetrated and quietly reconfigured to forward all activity to mysterious addresses, and ostensibly private academic listservs are monitored by Chinese authorities. This too can exert a chilling effect on academic inquiry.

#### 4) Manipulation of the source base

Censorship in China is not ordinarily news. The Chinese state has long manipulated domestic flows of information and the source base from which history is written. However, the emergence of new technologies and the turn towards digitization have raised these practices to a new and terrifying level of efficiency that brings to mind the dystopic visions of George Orwell.

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<sup>5</sup> Ellie Bothwell, "Chinese Power 'May Lead to Global Academic Censorship Crisis'." *Times Higher Education* (2017): accessed December 10, 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/chinese-power-may-lead-global-academic-censorship-crisis>.

In recent years, a number of online commercial databases have appeared in the PRC that promise to open the fruits of Chinese academic research more widely to the world. Tempted by the convenience and scale of these offerings, many foreign universities are subscribing and clearing out redundant paper volumes from their stacks.

My research establishes that leading academic journal databases in China are practicing deliberate censorship aimed at rewriting history to suit the current Party line.<sup>6</sup> In the past, censors altered history by striking offensive passages, tearing out pages, and seizing or destroying entire texts, all crude methods by today's standards. Now, they can tinker endlessly with the digital record to achieve their goals without ever leaving their desks, making one non-destructive edit after another, each propagating nearly instantaneously around the globe, leaving behind no discernible trace or loose ends. The same technologies that filter our newsfeeds can be used to tamper with scholarship and memory.

In short, Chinese censors are capitalizing on the conversion of our libraries from redundant, fault-tolerant repositories of tangible objects into passive links in a centralized distribution chain dominated by a small number of online providers. As the CUP and Springer episodes demonstrate, we are dependent on the good faith of these providers, and vulnerable to the political, regulatory, commercial and licensing terms that may impinge upon it. As libraries outsource growing shares of their collections to Chinese providers in particular, they are voluntarily surrendering the evidence necessary to independently monitor the performance of those providers and hold them to account.

As a strategy for co-opting foreign academics and reshaping the public opinion battlefield, this is brilliant because the more faithful foreign scholars are to their subtly censored Chinese sources, the better they may unwittingly promote the biases and agendas of the censors, and incorporate those biases and agendas into the received wisdom of their disciplines, which can influence policymaking. American academics have yet to come to terms with the full implications of this new environment.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

Let me be clear: American academic exchanges with the PRC have been of immense benefit to both nations, and they have promoted mutual understanding in what is likely to be one of the most consequential bilateral relationships of the next century. Personal connections between students and scholars in both countries remain both warm and fruitful, and I have every hope that this will continue to be the case.

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<sup>6</sup> John Pomfret, "China's Odious Manipulation of History is Infecting the West." (2017): accessed December 10, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/08/23/chinas-odious-manipulation-of-history-is-infecting-the-west/?utm\\_term=.53a4274400c9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/08/23/chinas-odious-manipulation-of-history-is-infecting-the-west/?utm_term=.53a4274400c9).

Yet, the government of the PRC, and the Party that controls it, have strategic goals that they pursue, just as we do, and that complicates the relationship. Most academics who live and work outside of the PRC can take solace in the fact that the long arm of Chinese authoritarianism reaches them only obliquely, often as spillover from the CCP's primary concern with controlling its own people and maintaining its grip on power. Our ability to resist will remain strong if we recognize that insecurity for what it is, devise measured responses and remain vigilant.

In many instances, China is merely exploiting openings that we have given them, and that is where I believe that we should focus our attention. Deep structural shifts have made American academia more vulnerable to the long-arm of Chinese authoritarianism than it has ever been before. Declining support for higher education at every level of American government has put pressure on university budgets and forced administrators to seek revenue where they can find it. But if we tear down the ivory tower, and push higher education to be more entrepreneurial and responsive to the market, can we fault it for behaving more like a business, and for responding to the financial inducements the PRC dangles before it? Can we fault our schools for accepting the bargain Confucius Institutes offer at a time when area studies in the United States is under assault, and our own elected officials express disdain for the humanities? If we undermine graduate enrollments by raising the tax burden for American students, can we fault our universities for worrying about their brands overseas, or for entertaining the demands of foreigners who will pay full tuition?

The decline of tenure and the increasing precarity of academic employment are making many American scholars risk averse, and sowing doubt over the extent to which administrators will defend academic freedom when it may jeopardize the broader institutional stakes universities have in maintaining good relationships with the Chinese state. Similarly, the privatization of academic publishing and its centralization in the hands of a few media conglomerates is eroding the traditional resolve of even the most established presses, and evidently making complicity in Chinese censorship simply a cost of doing business.

In closing, I submit to you that one way of looking at Lenin's prediction about capitalists and their rope is that we do have control over our fate if we can simply muster the courage to seize it. China has deeper pockets than the Soviet Union ever had, and American academia is arguably less robust than it once was, which makes the challenge all the harder. But the choice to uphold our academic independence is ours alone, and as matters of national policy and national interest, I hope that you will help us make it.