

# Differentiating risks to academic freedom in the globalised university in China

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psc)**Sophia Woodman***University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK***Tim Pringle\*** *SOAS University of London, London, UK*

## Abstract

Academic freedom in China is unquestionably under threat from various quarters. Yet the assumption that only the logics of authoritarian Communist Party power shape the terrain in which scholars operate provides us with a limited perspective on these threats. The Chinese academy has become deeply entangled with transnational forces, and is increasingly driven by similar business logics to those in play in universities around the world. We argue that these forces too contribute to the context for the exercise of academic freedom and its restriction. As is the case elsewhere, discourses around developing the national ‘knowledge economy’ and related logics of securitisation around knowledge production create conditions in which some forms of academic research are prioritised over others. Echoing the ‘culture wars’ plaguing the academy in many other countries, the research agendas most under threat in China are ones that connect to transnational movements and struggles, especially those focussed on labour and class, gender and feminism, race and ethnicity and human rights. In this article, we outline what we see as the key forces shaping the landscape for academic freedom in China, with a concentration on areas of research and teaching in the social sciences and humanities that are most at risk in the current conjuncture.

## Keywords

academic freedom, China, higher education, marketisation, transnational

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## Introduction

At the March 2021 session of China's top level advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a prominent scholar and CPPCC member submitted a proposal arguing that restrictions on meetings with foreigners by Chinese academics were hindering academic research and thus affecting the policy advice they could provide. In the proposal, Jia Qingguo, a professor of international relations at the prestigious Peking University, apparently called the measures excessive. In the context of worsening US–China relations, Jia was one of a number of scholars who questioned the impact of these and other restrictions on the environment for doing meaningful research. Some, including international relations scholars and economists, did so in the name of 'academic freedom'. Others pointed out that the research climate contributed to brain drain, as academics trained abroad did not want to return, or scholars wished to leave China to find institutional affiliations more amenable to conducting their research without restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

With President Xi Jinping making ideological control over universities a stated priority, calling for them to become 'strongholds that adhere to Party leadership'<sup>2</sup>, such public expression of support for academic freedom might seem foolhardy, if not dangerous. There is no indication that the prominent scholars involved faced retaliation, however. Their critique was framed in entirely utilitarian terms – arguing that greater research 'power' would contribute to China's national project by improving policy-making – rather than as a general commitment to academic freedom. Such an instrumental and state-centred view of the role of academics is an aspect of both international frameworks of competition,<sup>3</sup> and a domestic environment in which research that contributes to policy-making, innovation and technological 'progress' is prioritised.

Worsening conditions for the exercise of academic freedom in China over the last five years are well documented. Restrictive controls include the following: constraints on what can be taught in universities; limits on research with individuals and institutions overseas, as well as on travel outside China and meetings with foreigners; and increased scrutiny of scholarly publications, including those published overseas in languages other than Chinese, which used to be exempt due to being less accessible and published outside the 'Great Firewall'.<sup>4</sup> In addition, international academic publishers have come under pressure to censor 'problematic' or 'sensitive' content related to China in the packages of scholarly materials they sell in the PRC, with most caving and agreeing to 'abide by Chinese law'.<sup>5</sup> Most such content has been in journals in the social sciences and humanities.

Our introductory snapshots highlight the contested and increasingly transnational character of issues surrounding academic freedom in China that we focus on in this article. Firstly, for the past 40 years, 'academic freedom' has been a key term shaping the roles of universities and academics in China, as part of a transnational formation that incorporates international standard-setting bodies (notably UNESCO), global academic mobility of staff and students and standards around what a university should be. Secondly, elite academics frame the value of academic freedom as a contribution to building national power that situates universities as central to international competition, related to broader

global trends towards ‘knowledge economies’, and more recently towards securitisation amid concerns about protecting national sites of knowledge production from foreign parties.<sup>6</sup> This relates to a third element, the rise of the model of the ‘business university’ that implies the corporatisation and commodification of functions of the academy, including rising tuition fees, commodification of academic knowledge and links to business ventures, both in terms of know-how and in financial, consulting and real estate businesses associated with university expansion, including transnational education.<sup>7</sup>

As we show in this article, in such a configuration of forces, research that engages with social movements at local, national and transnational scales has faced particularly restrictive conditions, especially when academics and students see their studies as part of those struggles. Echoing the ‘culture wars’ plaguing the academy in many other countries, the research agendas most under threat in China are ones that connect to transnational movements and struggles, especially those focussed on labour and class, gender and feminism, race and ethnicity and human rights. As elsewhere too, these forms of enquiry face a dual attack from the state and conservative nationalists who denounce their commitment to critique, social justice and equality as sapping national strength and undermining ‘tradition’, while those who pursue them are labelled as tools of ‘hostile foreign forces’ and even ‘subversives’.<sup>8</sup> In the case of intellectuals in the PRC’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region, such framings of efforts to document, preserve and revive regional cultures and languages, as well as critique of pervasive discrimination against Muslim populations, have led to disappearances, lengthy prison sentences and even death sentences for prominent Uyghur intellectuals.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, we address the three elements of the configurations outlined above. We begin with a brief overview of how academic freedom has been defined in the Chinese university sector and the relationship of those definitions to the evolution of international standards in this field. We proceed to consider the entanglement of utilitarian approaches to national knowledge production and the rise of the ‘business university’ in the Chinese context. Throughout, we aim to highlight the differential and unequal effects of such formations on academic freedom by focussing on those areas of study that are most at risk in the current conjuncture.

## **Academic freedom amid marketisation and internationalisation**

In the project of developing China’s economy through introducing market mechanisms and engaging with the global economy in the post-Mao era (1978- ), expertise was revalorised, along with key sites of its development, universities and research institutes. Unsurprisingly, study and teaching in science and technology was prioritised as one of the ‘Four Modernisations’. This commitment also involved promotion of academic mobility, with significant numbers of students going abroad to study, many with government funding. The first commitment to the institutional autonomy that is central to many definitions of academic freedom appeared in a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) document in 1985,<sup>10</sup> a period when China also began to sign and ratify a number of international human rights treaties, some of which codify academic freedom. For example, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which monitors

implementation of the International Convention of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, has stated that ‘the right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by the academic freedom of staff and students’.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the CCP remained wary of the potential of universities to foster critique and act as seedbeds for student activism; this had emerged in grassroots challenges to repressive policies just prior to Mao’s death in 1976, and then later in the Democracy Wall movement of 1978–1979, and continued to be seen in various forms throughout the 1980s. Such engagement of students and faculty members in social and political struggles is part of a longer-term pattern that includes the founders of the CCP itself, and culminated in the 1989 uprising. As Perry highlights, ‘every generation of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals... engaged in politically consequential protest’ and avoiding such protests has been a central concern of CCP leaders in their governance of universities. Such anxieties have remained acute since 1989 following the violent suppression of a huge student-led Democracy Movement.<sup>12</sup> State violence was followed up with investigations of individuals’ participation in the demonstrations and imposition of military training for all first year university students.

In the shift to a market economy in the early 1990s, universities were not protected from the market forces that descended on previously state-owned companies and institutions. Marketisation was accompanied by a decentralisation of power, as various official ranking systems focussed national funding on developing key universities while releasing control of many others to provincial and municipal authorities. In similar logics to those applied to businesses and some other public institutions (such as hospitals), State Council policy in the early 1990s set out measures that made universities independent as legal and financial entities, a framework that was later incorporated into the 1998 Higher Education Law.<sup>13</sup> While such provisions may support aspects of the institutional autonomy dimension of academic freedom, Article 10 addresses this more directly: ‘The State, in accordance with law, ensures the freedoms of scientific research, literary and artistic creation and other cultural activities conducted in higher education institutions. Research, literary and artistic creation and other cultural activities in higher education institutions shall be conducted in compliance with law.’ Evidently, the focus on ‘law’ in this formulation makes the state an arbiter of the legitimate exercise of academic freedom, as well as its ‘guarantor’. It is also important to note the absence of academic freedom in relation to teaching in this formulation.

In the same period as the enactment of this law, China also participated in processes of developing UNESCO’s Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, the most authoritative measures outlining the meaning of academic freedom adopted by a General Conference 1997, and endorsed by most states, including the PRC.<sup>14</sup> China’s participation may be seen as part of a broader initiative to ‘get on the international track’ during this period that saw increased engagement with various international frameworks for cooperation and competition, including in universities, but also relating to civil society and the economy.

The elevation of Xi Jinping to CCP General Secretary (2012) and the presidency (2013) was followed by a gradual shift towards greater Party control in many spheres of

activity, including universities. This was most directly targeted at the burgeoning NGO sector, particularly those spheres linked to challenges to local state enforcement of law and commitments to human rights and equality.<sup>15</sup> The year 2015 was something of a watershed moment: on the eve of International Women's Day, five young feminist activists were detained for planning a campaign of action against sexual harassment on public transport.<sup>16</sup> While none of the detainees was an academic, their connections to a broader network of feminist scholars, study and projects were apparent, and adopting the label 'feminist' in itself implies a commitment to engagement in social movements beyond the academy.<sup>17</sup> Similar links between more activist-orientated labour scholars and labour activists have been severely restricted since a police sweep of labour NGOs in Guangdong in November 2015.<sup>18</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, it is perhaps no surprise that the Party would come to feel uncomfortable with connections between academics and NGOs focussed on the coalface of working class formation in a reform era characterised by the reification of market forces and stability. Scholars Pun and Chan argued as early as 2008 that the language of 'class' had become virtually taboo in the academy and beyond, even though the 'lived experience of class is very acute for Chinese workers...the discourse of class is seriously subdued'.<sup>19</sup> The burgeoning literature on what is rendered 'middle class' in English almost invariably uses the term 'middle stratum' in Chinese, and adopts a social stratification, rather than a class analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Blanket outlawing of topics constitutes another more direct censoring of academic freedom. Known as the Three Ts, critical research and even conversation on Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen are subject to heavy constraints and narrow nationalist-informed parameters that follow Party guidelines.<sup>21</sup> In 2013, the CCP released the 'Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere' known as Document No. 9 that called for 'intense struggle' against seven 'false ideological trends, positions and activities' in a clear signal to academics against critical teaching of subjects such as constitutionalism, civil society, universal values and a ban on 'historical nihilism', interpreted as 'trying to undermine the history of the CCP'.<sup>22</sup>

A recent example of how such content restrictions play out is instructive. Song Gengyi, a journalism teacher at a vocational college in Shanghai, was fired from her job just hours after a student in her class reported that she had questioned the official figure of 300,000 victims killed in the Nanjing Massacre in 1937. Song's point was not to challenge the scope of the massacre, but about sources and how to confirm such figures. However, the student also posted a clip of what she had said online, prompting a rebuke from the official Weibo account of *People's Daily*, and precipitating Song's dismissal.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, some netizens went on to attack the student for ratting on Song – but these posts were later deleted.

## Patterns of privilege

While the attacks on academic freedom are manifest in the above selection of examples, the measures are not applied in a uniform manner across contexts and disciplines. As we have stated, social science and humanities research that engages directly with issues of social justice is restricted, but the scope for research on less controversial topics in

disciplines that largely adopt the globally hegemonic epistemic positions of mainstream science and support the status quo, such as most economics, international relations and psychology, is broader, in our experience. This is in part due to the perceived utility of such disciplinary approaches to policy making and supporting the national project.

Along with disciplinary privilege, academics in more prestigious institutions enjoy more latitude to shape their own research agendas and to access resources that others are denied. In some elite universities, researchers may be able to read and download publications and materials that are generally blocked due to the 'Great Firewall'. Such access can be crucial to be able to publish in internationally ranked journals and collaborate with scholars overseas. Providing such facilities to enable their researchers to compete globally depends in part on the level of trust, political astuteness and connections to higher authorities of university leaders, demonstrating how personalised authority matters in the Chinese context. However, this is not just personal: the ability of university presidents to make exceptions to general rules (such as allowing use of VPNs, which are technically illegal in China but widely used) also depends on the relative prestige of the institution they lead. As one president told researchers: 'The more prestigious your university is, the more privileges your university has'.<sup>24</sup> Anthropologist Xiang Biao has argued that 'privileged institutions' likewise enjoy more space for research that is critical of policy – although not of the CCP itself.<sup>25</sup>

Similar sets of exceptions can be observed in certain parts of the transnational higher education sector. For example, in some Sino-foreign joint-venture universities, providing students with access to VPNs is routine, while students also reported that some of the prohibited types of content listed above were taught in their courses.<sup>26</sup> Concerns about academic freedom in US–China joint venture universities prompted an investigation by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), which found mixed experience: while 'fewer than half of the [12] universities GAO reviewed have uncensored Internet access', 'university members generally indicated that they experienced academic freedom'.<sup>27</sup> The figures on internet access suggest that in five out of the 12 institutions, access to materials beyond the Great Firewall *is* available. The scope of these exceptions should not be overstated. Less prestigious ventures lack the clout to resist pressures to conform if conflicts over academic freedom arise. Based on a wide survey of transnational higher education projects, Gow concludes the following: 'China's higher education authorities have constructed a system which allows for foreign universities to be mobilized in service of state-regulated higher education provision'.<sup>28</sup> The vast majority of degree-awarding ventures in the sector are in business and engineering; of the 1445 such programmes approved between 1994 and 2015, none were in sociology or politics, and there were only a handful of social science programmes and law degrees.<sup>29</sup>

## And patterns of erasure

In stark contrast to the privileged access discussed in the previous section, at the other extreme, academic freedom in Xinjiang has disappeared altogether. On the one hand, largely Han scholars have contributed to a state narrative of assimilation that has taken an especially egregious manifestation in recent years with the incarceration of over a million

Uyghur citizens.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the CCP's policies of 'slow structural violence' have taken on a transnational character as Beijing has 'recently more rigorously framed the Uyghur question within a Global War on Terror security framework, rather than within its traditional framing as a contained, domestic separatist concern'.<sup>31</sup> Uyghur scholars have faced harsh repression that extends well beyond constraints on their academic freedom. Since 2014, the economist Ilhan Tohti has been serving a life term for advocating autonomy for his region. Professor Rahile Dawut is an internationally renowned scholar of Uyghur folklore and traditions who has previously won awards and grants from China's Ministry of Culture. She disappeared in 2017 and has been reported as serving a prison sentence, although no information is available about her whereabouts or condition.<sup>32</sup> The former President of Xinjiang University Tashpolat Tiyip built a path-breaking 30-year career in academia as both a geographer and high-level university administrator. Dr Tiyip was reportedly detained at Beijing Capital International Airport while on his way to a conference in Germany in 2017. He was subsequently found guilty of 'separatism' and sentenced to death with a two year-reprieve. Despite global petitions from scholars for his release, it is not known if he was executed.<sup>33</sup> Researchers estimate 'at least 312 Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim intellectuals and cultural elites are currently being held in some form of detention'.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

At a moment of rising authoritarianism around the globe that cuts across familiar distinctions among political regimes, academic freedom is under attack for varying reasons and with varying impacts on teaching and research, and differential effects on individual scholars. Nationalist narratives and political conservatism of many stripes, as well as related securitisation, are often central in official, state-sponsored challenges to the independence of the academy and of scholars. Thus China is not an exception, although threats to academic freedom there certainly have their own specific character and dynamics.

Particularly in the context of the 'new cold war' and rising Sinophobia, questions of academic freedom in China are often presented in a simplistic way that constructs the academy and its logics there as fundamentally other, without commonalities to such questions in universities in places like the UK. Such accounts also tend to ignore the increasing entanglement of the Chinese academy in transnational frameworks of mobility, cooperation and competition.

In this article, we have sought to show how restrictions on academic freedom in the PRC actually play out very differently depending on the discipline, institution and history of particular scholars and fields of study. Some academics in China have a saying: 'There is no restriction in academic studies, but there is discipline in the classroom'.<sup>35</sup> But this depends on who you are, where you work and what you study.

Academics in prestigious universities have access to a broader range of global resources, greater opportunities for transnational mobility and exchanges and more latitude to engage in scholarship that is somewhat critical of the authorities or divergent from official positions. In contrast, scholarship that has been most under threat since the authoritarian turn under President Xi Jinping is that connected to social and political struggles and movements, including for labour rights, gender equality and human rights. At the extreme, such

repression has meant the complete erasure of academic study and teaching about Uyghur culture, history and language and the disappearance and imprisonment of experts in these fields. These restrictions are related to broader moves against independent civil society and journalism and effort to break links of domestic groups and actors in China with transnational movements for social justice, and to global ‘assemblages of repression’ targeting Muslim minorities in the name of ‘fighting terrorism’.<sup>36</sup>

Despite these challenges, some academics in China continue to produce exciting research that contributes to the global knowledge commons, and sometimes challenges received wisdom. However, the transnational integration of higher education with market forces has produced an academic capitalism preoccupied with pecuniary value over the facilitation of such a ‘knowledge commons’.<sup>37</sup> If global academe is to avoid New Cold War positions<sup>38</sup> exercising an ideological grip in its lecture halls, classrooms and journals, both de-commodification and decolonisation of knowledge and knowledge creation will be indispensable processes, in our view.<sup>39</sup> Our hope is that we can draw from this enquiry an understanding of some of the commonalities in struggles for academic freedom across national contexts and barriers to the creation of a knowledge commons, as we consider such understanding to be crucial in building transnational solidarity.

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## Notes

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