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Between a rock and a hard place: academic freedom in globalising Chinese universities

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ABSTRACT

This article examines academic freedom in China amid the tensions within a marketised global political economy of knowledge production. Joining the global competition for hegemony in the 'knowledge economy', the Chinese authorities signalled an acceptance of the 'rules of the game', even though these have the potential to undermine domestic political control. Global (as opposed to national) rankings of universities were actually initiated in China, and Chinese universities are competing for status. Likewise, China has created space for marketised higher education institutions and increasingly collaborates with global commercial publishing platforms, while academics there are under growing pressure to publish in globally ranked journals. The dynamic authoritarianism pursued under Xi Jinping has exacerbated the tensions inherent in these differing imperatives. The Xi era has witnessed declines in university autonomy; growing content-related restrictions in teaching, research and publishing including extending these to global firms; and increased distrust of research collaborations with 'foreigners'. We focus here on a central support for academic freedom: institutional and individual autonomy, showing how threats to autonomy in Chinese universities are related to two different types of authoritarianism: party control and managerialism. We also point to areas of tension between internationalisation of Chinese higher education and authoritarian impulses.

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Introduction

Academic workers increasingly face an environment in which their research and teaching is seen as part of a specific national 'knowledge economy' that is situated in an environment of global competition for recognition and prestige among countries. The concept of the 'knowledge economy' implies that academic knowledge should, in some sense, be translatable into a specific, measurable, economically productive form of 'value'. Such value is typically measured by the contribution of an academic's knowledge to a number of different fields: the reputation of the institution where a particular academic

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is employed, often measured by various schemes of global and national ranking; the potential of the knowledge to be transformed into commercial value through sale or collaboration with capitalist firms; the ability to attract research funding, the majority of which is provided by governments with specific policy-related agendas that shape the funding schemes they operate; and the extent to which teaching contributes to the development of 'human capital' measured in terms of graduate employability and post-graduation salaries. All these factors are aspects that are mobilised to 'attract' specific students, including high-paying internationally mobile students. This, in sum, is the university as a competitive business, an institution that also becomes a measure of national prestige and value on a global stage, or what some have termed 'the neoliberal university', reflecting an ideological formation of 'competition, privatization and individualism' and ruled by 'managerialism'.[1]

While such an environment of 'commercialization and corporatization'[2] might appear to provide conditions for disciplines that have obvious economic utility to flourish – and indeed the idea of the 'world class university' is one in which Business and STEM subjects lead the way – it arguably provides much less favourable terrain for the social sciences and humanities. Commodified versions of knowledge inevitably *devalue* forms of understanding and enquiry that do not fit into the metrics and audit arrangements they involve. This is where managerialist logics come in, intervening to weed out less 'productive' forms of teaching and research, or those that provide critical angles on their disciplinary subject matter.[3] Such logics have been evident in the post-Covid moment in the UK, as some universities arbitrarily select whole subjects for the axe, generally ones without a direct link to a clear career path. The UK government has imposed a 50 percent cut in funding to arts-related degree programmes, while UK universities are axing whole departments and programmes, apparently sometimes targeting union members for redundancies.[4] In a particularly egregious case raising academic freedom concerns, the University of Leicester selected staff in its business school for redundancy based on their scholarship in 'critical management studies' and 'political economy', which are deemed not to fit into plans to make the focus of the school more 'mainstream'.[5]

However, the trend towards the knowledge economy was set well before the pandemic as an aspect of the shift to the internationalised 'business university'.[6] This institutional form implies a move away from deciding on what is taught and researched based on the internal assessments of an autonomous scholarly community towards external forms of evaluation of what the university does based on priorities set by markets, customers, funders and states.[7] In the era of neoliberal globalisation beginning in the 1980s, but picking up steam in the 1990s and beyond, market logics are inserted into the heart of universities undergoing expansion and internationalisation at the same time. In this phase, business logics – some not even related to education, but to real estate, financial markets and so on – become overt drivers of decision-making within universities and in the sector. The small coterie of highly paid managers presiding over this shift are part of a globally circulating elite, encouraged by a plethora of for-profit consultancies, leadership forums and marketing and real estate companies that profit from the changes these leaders promote.[8] They adopt approaches derived from 'new public management', transferring techniques from the private sector into the running of universities.[9]

A key element of such moves are forms of branding and promotion, the epitome of which is the global system of rankings produced by private companies and celebrated by those at the top of the league. Recent research has highlighted the arbitrariness of these rankings, and their connection to commercial relationships between the firms producing them and the universities being ranked.[10] Whatever its connection with any real differences in 'quality', ranking is central in constituting the university student as customer. University education is increasingly considered a 'private good'; with the increase in the proportion of its expenses funded through student fees, universities become mechanisms for the sale of 'privileges' as Connell puts it, that confer 'future advantage in the job market'.[11]

Universities in China are already deeply embedded in these logics and have contributed to their evolution in several ways. It is worth recalling that the current neoliberal university model is one that has been a product of state interventions and choices[12] which, at first glance, appear to defy the anti-state preoccupations of most neoliberal thinkers. The first global (as opposed to national) university rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWS), were produced by Shanghai Jiaotong University in 2003 and are now produced by the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. A key aim of the university reforms promoted by the Chinese government over the last three decades has been to develop 'world class' universities based on such metrics. To this end, competition has been introduced into the Chinese university sector in a variety of different ways that parallel state promotion of market logics in higher education elsewhere and, in so doing, adopts unquestioningly criteria for 'excellence' developed in the rich world.[13] This is a paradigmatic instance of a broader stance adopted by elites in China, most often noted in international relations scholarship as an acceptance of the rules of the global 'liberal order'.[14] Restrictions on academic freedom in the Chinese context are often attributed exclusively to communist party control, fitting into the broad category of threats to this freedom by authoritarian states premised on their lack of democratic institutions. But we argue that at the current conjuncture, both in China and elsewhere, managerialism associated with marketisation can *also* militate against the exercise of individual and institutional autonomy central to definitions of academic freedom. In this sense, we understand academic freedom not as an abstract standard, but as a set of practices that are always embedded in specific social relations in particular frameworks of political economy. Temporally, our account also reveals how these forms of authoritarianism are challenging an apparent consensus that emerged in the post Cold War era on international standards on academic freedom, to which we now turn.

Our approach to academic freedom

In this article, we focus on one of the 'pillars' on which academic freedom rests: the individual and institutional autonomy of scholars and students. Without that underpinning, the central protected activities of freedom in research and teaching (and by extension of learning and enquiry for students) cannot be adequately supported. Among the most authoritative sources for the meaning of academic freedom is UNESCO's Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, which was adopted by the body's General Conference at its meeting in 1997, developed in conjunction with the International Labour Organisation (ILO).[15] Its provisions drew on a wide range of

human rights standards and labour conventions, and the document was endorsed by most countries in the world, including China.[16] This document states that institutional autonomy is 'a necessary precondition to guarantee the proper fulfilment of the functions entrusted to higher-education teaching personnel and institutions'.[17] This does not mean that universities may be operated as managerial fiefdoms; internal self-governance and accountability are central to the definitions of institutional autonomy contained in this and other subsequent documents on the subject. As Karran et al put it, 'without shared governance, institutional autonomy may easily lead to managerial tyranny'.[18] Some argue that such an 'occupation' of universities has already become a reality in marketised HE.[19]

Thus we address academic freedom not as an individualised and contested abstraction, but a collective and collaborative right that inheres in an autonomous professional community. As Butler puts it, it is both a right and an obligation that includes autonomy and involvement in self-governance in institutions of HE.[20] It is an aspect of an inherently dynamic 'knowledge formation' that assumes 'truth can only operate as a criterion for the practices through which knowledge is transformed'.[21] This implies an intrinsic indeterminacy: 'Academic freedom preserves the incalculable dimension of thought, the future of thought that eludes prediction and control'.[22] At a moment of challenge to the hegemony of forms of knowledge associated with coloniality and racial domination, the openness and indeterminacy this points to is critical to the prospect of decolonising knowledge formations.[23] It entails 'a receptiveness, a response-ability, to what is unknown, unforeseeable, beyond my intellectual power – an openness to the *event* of thought.'[24]

Our focus on individual and institutional autonomy also requires taking account of how the workforce in higher education institutions (below HEIs) collectively shape conditions for its exercise, and thus how increasing precarity of employment within that workforce erodes or even makes impossible the exercise of the right.[25] The involvement of the ILO in developing standards on academic freedom points to the centrality of working conditions to its realisation. The insecurity that goes along with growing use of short-term, temporary and hourly-paid contracts in HE is a global phenomenon, but particularly pronounced in the UK, where academic tenure was abolished in the 1980s. Even those on apparently secure contracts may find their employment terminated in 'reshaping projects' if their research is no longer considered by managers as a desirable part of the 'excellent' university their plans envisage.[26] This points to inequalities as a key factor in both access to and protection of academic freedom: staff and students in more privileged positions in more prestigious institutions may have scope for its exercise in ways others do not, with crucial intersectional implications that play out differently across countries and contexts.

While accounts of threats to academic freedom – particularly in the context of contemporary China – often refer to restrictions on the content of teaching, the speech of academics and the subjects of research, here we aim to situate such concerns within the broader framework and grounding for such freedom in institutional and individual autonomy. We argue that both the managerial 'occupation' of universities and the dictates of a party-state increasingly concerned to impose ideological orthodoxy represent threats to such autonomy in the Chinese context. In contrast to this autonomy expressed through self-governance, both imply forms of authoritarian control from outside the

university. Sometimes, however, as we show, the impulses of the internationalised 'business university' may create space for limited degrees of academic freedom – but in an uneven and unequal manner that reinforces institutional and individual privilege.

In the next section, we set the scene by outlining how Chinese universities have become subject to national and international frameworks of competition associated with the business university. We proceed with a discussion of the climate for university autonomy in China, showing how it has been characterised by a pendulum swing from state control (very limited autonomy) to state supervision (relative autonomy), reflecting in part the degree to which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to assert its authority. In section three we describe recent content-related limitations to academic freedom in classrooms. In the final section, we discuss tensions and illuminating exceptions to restrictions and censorship. In conclusion, we review what we learn by considering questions of academic freedom in China from the perspective of the political economy of marketised higher education.

As UK-based academics who study aspects of the sociology of China, we are not specialists in the domestic or transnational sociology of higher education. We draw on the research of experts in this field to document the issues we raise, but also use our own experience as a source of insights. As we are most familiar with it, we use UK HE to illustrate the broader transnational trends, but this is not intended as a comparative exercise. Two factors make such examples particularly telling: first, UK HE is among the most marketised globally, based on a number of different measures; and second, legal protection for academic freedom is deficient in comparison to other European countries.[27] The UK example also highlights how inequalities associated with marketisation imperil academic freedom of both staff and students. Finally, bringing in the UK case also reveals the intertwined character of the transnational logics underlying our story: in both countries within a broadly similar time frame, we observe the rise of the globalised business university, and more recently the emergence of security-oriented logics of control over knowledge production against the backdrop of rhetoric about a 'new Cold War' beginning.

Chinese HE rejoins 'the international track'

Universities have played a central role in China's modern history. As Perry notes, between 1919 and 1989, 'every generation of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals … engaged in politically consequential protest' with university students and faculty playing critical parts.[28] Such participation was a noted feature of the nationwide 1989 protests, and avoiding a repeat has been at the top of the CCP's agenda for universities since that time. The authorities responded to the tumultuous events of that year not only with repression, but with reform of the university sector. This was an aspect of the broader programme of economic restructuring launched in the 1990s, when the state decided to concentrate resources on a smaller number of 'pillar' industries and firms while 'releasing' smaller enterprises to the market.[29]

Underlying such changes was the adoption of logics of competition and marketisation as strategies for development of the domestic Chinese economy and its insertion into a variety of transnational frameworks. Such logics shape conditions in which academic research, teaching and governance occurs in universities in China,[30] and include

domestic and global university ranking systems; domestic and transnational competition to attract and retain 'talents', both students and researchers; metrics and payments related to scholarly publishing; the rise of private HE providers, including in ventures that cross the boundaries of states forming what is known as 'transnational higher education'; and the proliferation of the business engagements all this may entail. Each of these logics and how they have played out in the domestic development of HE from the 1990s on are briefly sketched out below.

A key mechanism used in the restructuring of Chinese HE has been systems of government ranking that prioritised and concentrated central funding on the development of a minority of 'key' institutions. This formalised, government-endorsed system means that ranking of universities has an official character that is generally somewhat more diffuse in HE elsewhere in the world. Of course, governments contribute to creating distinctions among HEIs in many ways, including the UK's official assessment of universities' research 'power' through the 'research excellence framework' and other such forms of governance by metrics. Over a hundred universities were included in the first of the Chinese state's ranking schemes, the '211 project' initiated in 1995 which aimed at ensuring China would develop 100 world class universities for the twenty-first century. A more select group of HEIs was subsequently grouped under the '985 project' launched in 1998 which eventually included 39 institutions when the government closed the door to new entrants in 2011.[31] In the same year, an elite group of nine universities was singled out for special levels of funding, formalised in 2009 as the 'C9 League' or 'China's Ivy League'.[32] Such terminology points to the models underlying this transformation.

Policies related to rapid expansion of HE in the 1990s kept these priority 'first tier' HEIs affiliated directly with the Ministry of Education and subject to its administrative control, while management of the majority of HEIs was decentralised to the control of province- and local-level bureaux of education.[33] In addition, the 1998 Higher Education Law 'introduced the concept of *minban* (privately-run) enterprises in higher education'[34]; later, joint-ventures between domestic and overseas HEIs were permitted. These changes have contributed to significant differences in levels of funding and facilities among HEIs. While top ranking universities enjoy the highest levels of resources, the significant variation among regions in funding for locally-controlled institutions reflects broader logics of uneven development and ranking of cities in China, which are both administrative and symbolic.

Rates of student enrolment in the top ranked HEIs have grown relatively slowly. In contrast, expansion in the locally-controlled institutions has been rapid, accounting for more than 80 percent of student enrolment by the early 2010s.[35] As well as public HEIs, these locally-managed institutions include private universities and colleges, some of which are 'branches' of publicly funded universities, while others are transnational joint ventures. By the late 2000s, around 20 percent of HE students were enrolled in private HEIs of various types.[36] Thus 'institutional stratification is one of the most striking characteristics of the massification of higher education in China'.[37] As we discuss below, this structure has distinctive implications for the exercise of academic freedom.

The policy of 'massification' (expansion in enrolment) in China and elsewhere is often justified as a response to inequality, premised on the apparent correlation between HE

and 'better' employment. Such notions are embedded in theories of 'human capital' formation, that claim individuals can access the knowledge economy via education and training, providing a 'fix' for persistent inequality.[38] But the stubborn persistence of inequalities in access to and outcomes from HE in China, the UK and elsewhere[39] do not appear to dent the enthusiasm of policy-makers for such claims. Former British prime minister Tony Blair's famous 1996 slogan, 'education, education, education', set the stage for a significant expansion of HE in the UK. Blair's New Labour government's 1998 education 'fix' introduced university tuition fees that were initially low but have risen exponentially to among the highest in the world.[40] While enrolment of working class students in the UK has increased in absolute terms, inequality has persisted, particularly based on class, but with important intersectional dimensions.[41] University tuition fees in China were introduced in 1997 and rose quickly to levels way above the poorest families' ability to pay, but were later capped by government which has also mandated the roll-out of means-tested financial aid programmes. Analogous dynamics of persistent inequality based on class, place of origin and the rural-urban divide are well documented.

In the same year – 1998 – that New Labour was expanding HE on the back of replacing grants with loans for fees, the Chinese government was likewise promulgating a transformative Higher Education Law that served as a roadmap to the business university in China. As noted, the Law allowed for private HEIs paving the way for joint ventures between HEIs in China and abroad as China joined in the internationalisation – and commodification – of HE. This was a dramatic political as well as economic reaction to the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis and pressure on labour markets, serving to channel large numbers of potentially restless young people into HE,[42] amid a perceived risk to communist rule in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc:

> China's struggle with the Asian financial crisis was at a 'critical juncture', [and] social stability and regime survival were the Party's overriding concerns … The Party intended to use radical expansion [of HE] as a policy instrument to boost domestic consumption, stimulate economic growth and create jobs, as well as to delay the entry of high school graduates into job markets, make room for laid-off workers and reduce the unemployment rate.[43]

HE recruitment is also linked to the broader 'competition for talents' in which China's cities and regions are engaged,[44] especially since research has found that students tend to seek employment in the cities where they have studied.[45] Even in the apparent planned economy of undergraduate recruitment where public universities are set quotas of students that they can recruit to specific programmes based on a published entrance exam (*gaokao*) threshold, there is fierce competition to attract the best students in the *gaokao* score range of the particular institution. This situates universities as pull factors in a battle among regions to attract 'human capital', as aspects of local economic development strategy that is critical in the evaluation of local political leaders.[46] Regional inequalities in the distribution of 'good' universities, as well as in the allocation of resources described above, contributes to what some scholars have called 'brain drain' *within* China.[47]

The competitive environment extends to funding sources. At local level, the increase in the proportion of local funding following the 1998 reforms led to HEIs being 'more active in serving local interests'.[48] This may take a variety of forms, including increased

allocation of quota places for students with local *hukou* (household registration). This latter dynamic applies even in elite universities, which grant disproportionate access to students from the cities where they are located. As is the case globally, most direct funding for research comes from government, and reflects priorities set by them that focus on specific, narrow instrumental aims.[49]

Such processes occur in a wider eco-system in which commercial factors become central in the management of universities, involving a range of entities including players in real estate and construction business; educational agencies, consultancies and marketers; and business spin-offs run by or related to university staff. Universities have become imbricated in urban planning and development schemes, including the building of hundreds of satellite 'university towns'.[50] Although the role of universities in such projects has rarely been the focus for researchers studying such initiatives in China, a few studies point to the active involvement of universities, and thus similar logics of financialisation in the orientation of Chinese universities to those elsewhere.[51]

Autonomy: from state control to state supervision – and back

The idea that principles of academic autonomy should apply in Chinese universities has been 'a central concern in China's policy-making, scholarly research, and public debates' in the post-Mao period, beginning with reform measures in the mid-1980s and codified in law in the 1990s.[52] A crucial factor here has been the overall policy of decentralisation during this period, along with a shift to 'rule by law'.[53] However, the scope of autonomy has always been subject to the constraints of the 'four basic principles' set in the 1982 Constitution that enshrine CCP leadership and ideology. In this section, we trace shifts in institutional autonomy and some of their implications.

Institutional autonomy for universities was first prescribed in a CCP document in 1985, then reiterated in a State Council education policy reform programme in 1993, and finally codified in the 1998 Higher Education Law, coinciding with the UNESCO conference on academic freedom mentioned above. This trajectory also points to the key external elements that structure university governance: law, policy (including CCP policy) and funding.[54] The form of autonomy for universities in the law can be seen as analogous to that provided for business ventures, in that it provides them with legal personality and makes them responsible for their own finances. In the wake of the legal codification of autonomy, since the first decade of the new millennium, various authors noted a shift from 'state control' to 'state supervision' in the governance of universities.[55] The shift facilitated 'a perceived increase in institutional autonomy and individual academic freedom'.[56] It is important to note that both the centre and the provinces are sources of law, policy and funding, and which regimes a particular institution is subject to is thus variable. While provincial level law and policy generally follows the directions set by the centre, there may be crucial differences of emphasis and interpretation.[57]

The focus on autonomy was also reflected in changes to internal governance mechanisms. From 2012 onwards, the Ministry of Education passed several regulations establishing such mechanisms within universities, giving a role to academics in participating in how their institutions are run.[58] These rules mandated universities to enact their own internal charters, specifying responsibilities and processes of decision-making and

accountability. Hao finds limited cause for optimism in the charters, noting, for example, that the academic council of Renmin University (a key HEI in Beijing) would, according to its charter, be led by a senior academic, not a manager.[59]

As with many other spheres of governance in the PRC, from the Party's point of view, the guarantee for proper exercise of autonomy that fits within the aforementioned 'four basic principles' is the network of CCP committees and members within institutions, as well as control over appointments. In universities, this takes the form of a CCP-led Presidential Accountability System (PAS). Here 'autonomy' implies university self-governance under Party leadership in a multidimensional power relationship between the president's office and the Party Committee within the university that allows public HEIs room for self-governance as long as the 'political vision and mission of HEIs falls in line with the ideological interests and mandate of the CCP'.[60] As one university Party secretary interviewed by Jian and Mols put it: 'The [Party] has absolute leadership over the university'. In such a context, university presidents generally 'complain about an absence of genuine autonomy'.[61]

If the PAS amplifies the dynamic political delineations of institutional autonomy, administrative hierarchies function as enforcers in the day-to-day decision-making and governance of universities. While employed as a mid-level administrator in a Chinese university, Bodenhorn observed ongoing debate within the academic community in China on opposing management styles known as 'administerisation' (*xingzhenghua)* and 'de-administerisation' (*qu xingzhenghua*), sometimes alternatively translated respectively as bureaucratic control and reducing that control. Bodenhorn describes 'administerisation' as a hierarchy of power over China's universities with the party-state at the top operating at national and provincial levels, followed by campus level Party secretaries, university presidents and various vice presidents. The bottom layer is composed of 'mid-level administrators and faculty members' who are generally the last to be informed of policy changes.[62] In such a regime, academics are regularly undermined by even junior non-academic administrators, who, working in the dual administrative structure found in all of China's public institutions, enjoy a more direct line of communication to government officials. This is a system that is 'designed to ensure ultimate control of the higher education system by the party-state'.[63] While this system has distinctive features, it is also reminiscent of the 'occupation' of universities by management logics in the era of the business university elsewhere,[64] and it is worth emphasising that in the China context too, local officials' priorities may be business-related rather than obviously 'political'. And Hao points out that many academics, especially in fields with commercial potential, may be more focused on business opportunities than academic autonomy.[65]

As in many spheres, the accession to power of Xi Jinping in 2012 heralded a shift towards more ideological orthodoxy, with the state-control/state-supervision pendulum swinging in an authoritarian direction that re-emphasised Party leadership, and began to be apparent in HE several years after. In 2016, President Xi stated that universities 'must adhere to correct political ideologies' and become 'strongholds that adhere to the Party's leadership'.[66] Indeed, as Xi's harsher shade of authoritarianism[67] spread into universities, even the liberal reputation of Shanghai's Fudan University suffered a significant setback when in 2019 the phrases 'spirit of independence and freedom of thought' were deleted from its charter, against vocal opposition from some students.[68]

The political constraints that Xi has brought in suggest that the grip of 'ideological control can be understood through the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power'.[69] Thus, academic workers in China encounter the limits of what is acceptable knowledge production at the national scale through the CCP's monopoly on political power.[70] The recent deterioration in relations between China and some Western countries has generated a narrative – at times paranoid and Sinophobic – that these limits are being reproduced outside China as academic mobility increases and the country's universities move up global rankings attracting international students in the process. We argue that far from supplying a counter to the CCP's political power and its concomitant limitations for both institutional autonomy and academic freedom, the transnational integration of HE with market forces has produced an academic capitalism preoccupied with pecuniary value. This logic intersects with (and sometimes complicates) the rise of 'New Cold War' positions that imply securitisation of 'national' knowledge, whether in China or elsewhere.[71]

However, aspects of the globally competitive academic environment can sometimes be in tension with ideological orthodoxy, providing incentives for both institutions and individuals to try to bend or get around the rules. For example, competition for academic prestige can potentially conflict with authoritarian logics around content restrictions. Since the 1990s, Chinese universities have incentivised researchers to publish in journals that rank highly in global citation indices.[72] By the late 2010s, according to one study, some universities were offering sums up to one million *yuan* for publication of an article in a top flight journal.[73] Performance management applies to individual academics too: systems of assessment require publication in highly-cited journals and managerialist approaches to assessing performance and evaluating staff and outcomes have also been widely adopted.[74] While the specifics of assessment vary, generally it requires – echoing the UK's research excellence framework – publications that are cited in SCI, SSCI, or A&HCI. Those that are not in such global indices cannot be counted for assessment. Some universities have even adopted regimes that require academic staff to leave after six years if they have not won promotion, with some being given annual quotas of articles they must publish in their first few years of work if they are to be retained in the university where they are employed. Thus new hires and those without permanent posts can come under intense pressure to publish in top journals, with some even requiring publications in English. According to one recent study, 'the particular desire to pass the university assessment has become the dominant incentive for publishing in international journals'.[75] Also, pressure to publish means a shift away from teaching as a focus, particularly for early career scholars. Such pressures cause significant anxiety and stress among academics. One reason for the approaches adopted, argues Lu, is that 'Chinese universities are attempting to squeeze into the world university ranking system' by using their researchers' recognition as measured by publications in citations indices.[76] These systems are not uncontroversial: the particular ways assessment of publications skews research has been criticised by some scholars of HE in China.[77]

Yet market incentives beyond China also affect access to knowledge there: the tensions between the free circulation of knowledge and academic freedom are clearly revealed when large firms that publish scholarly books and journals face demands to block content from publication 'bundles' for sale in China. Such censorship is itself made possible by the 'oligopoly' in academic publishing under which a handful of large global

companies control the majority of publishing outlets.[78] Under this perverse publishing system, as Connell puts it so aptly, these companies have 'turned universities into the customers for their own research, and into the bargain get a great deal of free labour from academics as editors, reviewers and authors'.[79] It is deeply problematic that the increasing lure of the growing academic market in China means that these companies can become complicit in censoring academic content. Censorship of scholarly publishing has come to light primarily in the fields of social science and humanities, where major international commercial academic publishers have acknowledged blocking certain content from packages of journals provided for access in China. While in some cases publishers have reversed decisions to agree to censorship, in most they have justified such measures in terms of 'compliance with Chinese law' and providing access to their content to readers in China.[80] Such practices constitute 'academic knowledge as a commodified good, with researchers creating "knowledge products" that are made available on the "marketplace of ideas" to consumers'.[81]

Classroom control and content censorship

Along with the decreasing space for academic autonomy under Xi Jinping, over the last five years or so, colleagues in China and their students have been facing increasingly restrictive conditions for teaching, including bans on specific content and intensified monitoring. These developments have rolled back earlier optimism on increased academic freedom following the 1998 Higher Education Law.[82] Evidently, however, the impact of content restrictions is felt very differently depending on discipline, location and relative prestige of institutions and individuals. And it is as much directed at limiting the potential for student protest and organising as constraining the speech of academics.

The shift began soon after Xi Jinping's accession to the presidency. In 2013, a list of areas on which teaching is specifically prohibited was issued, the so-called 'Seven Nos' of 'civil society, civil rights, universal values, legal independence, press freedom, the bourgeois class with money and power, and the historical wrongs of the Party'.[83] An earlier set of prohibitions was in place but on a more narrowly framed set of specific taboo topics known as the 'three Ts': Tiananmen, specifically the June 4 uprising, Taiwan and Tibet – to which Xinjiang must surely be added given recent repression including mass incarceration, leading to accusations that China is committing 'cultural genocide'.[84] Xi Jinping has made repeated announcements exhorting universities to become effective classroom conduits of CCP ideology in general and Xi Jinping Thought in particular. In December 2020, the Ministry of Education told philosophy and social science scholars publishing in English in international journals that they must not 'degrade or vilify' the country in their writings, pointing to pressure to extend these content limitations beyond China's borders.[85]

Content restrictions are now enforced by the installation of CCTV in virtually all university classrooms. Reports of such systems emerged in 2014 when education officials in Guizhou Province ordered the installation of CCTV to 'build an all-around oversight system for teaching quality control'.[86] In 2016, Wuchang University of Technology in Wuhan reportedly installed surveillance cameras in student dormitories apparently to 'encourage good study habits'.[87] Ai Xiaoming, a retired feminist academic and well-known documentary-film director, pointed to how classroom surveillance means

lecturers avoid sensitive issues. He Weifang, a senior law professor at Beijing University, told Scholars at Risk that all lecture plans had to be submitted to the university's Party Committee propaganda office for approval.[88]

Technological surveillance is backed up by more traditional forms of monitoring. Yan provides a comprehensive description of 'control, surveillance and "self-management"' devoted to 'engineering stability' since the 1990s.[89] Selected student informers responsible to university-level political cadres are supposed to pick up and report political views and behaviour likely to upset the carefully engineered stability that has successfully headed off unsanctioned collective activity on campus since 1989. The monitoring of classrooms is thus also directed at students, who are subject to a triumvirate of surveillance committees that may also perform other roles related to student well-being. In one way or another, the Student Committee, the Communist Party Branch and the Communist Youth League (CYL) Branch monitor students for 'mistakes', while contributing to surveillance in the classroom as well. The triumvirate is reinforced by the political counsellors who sit at department- and faculty-levels and act as 'the primary working force for the moral and ideological education of university students'[90] or as Perry puts it 'the cornerstone of the control regimen'.[91] This system addresses China's long history of student protest, as mentioned above.

Tensions, exceptions … and exit

Although clearly high, the degree of censorship in the classroom, and by extension research, is impossible to measure due to hidden self-censorship and, crucially, differences in access to information – and by extension teaching – among universities. However, control over students and faculty should not be overstated. Exceptions to the rules are legion, and despite our concerns about the restrictions, academics in China continue to produce exciting research that contributes to the global knowledge commons, and sometimes challenges received wisdom. Some academics have a saying: 'There is no restriction in academic studies, but there is discipline in the classroom'.[92] Below we outline some of these exceptions, which can sometimes be fostered by the transnational linkages that bring China into the neoliberal regime.

Reports that some student informers are employed directly by security agencies rather than the universities[93] points to official perceptions of weaknesses in the internal university monitoring systems. A study of CYL activities in three HEIs showed that a significant minority of over 30 percent of students do not engage with the League at all, and in the two universities in the sample, among the majority who do engage, less than 20 percent do so 'at least once a month'.[94] Yan observes that depoliticisation among students may give rise to a potentially dangerous political cynicism especially where employment prospects for graduates are poor. In this context, mental health measures have 'developed into a novel instrument used by the Party-state to monitor students' thoughts and detect irregularities'.[95] Disengagement from such official channels to university students appears to be even more pronounced for Chinese students overseas. A representative sample survey of Chinese international students in the UK found that over 70 percent 'never' participated in activities of the government-supported Chinese student associations.[96]

The limits of deliberately manufactured 'depoliticisation' – and of surveillance – can be observed in the case of engagement of leftist students in the study of Marxism and

advocacy around worker rights in recent years. Marxist study groups at elite universities took seriously Xi's exhortations to 'incorporate Marxist classics and principles into our lifestyle and treat Marxism as a spiritual pursuit'.[97] Among other instances of active involvement in workers' struggles, some students rallied to support calls for a trade union at Jasic Technology in Guangdong Province. Actions against this mobilisation led to the arrest of 44 students.[98] The Marxist campus study groups involved were quickly shut down or re-organised. Qiu Zhanxuan, the president of Beijing University's Marxist society, was taken away by police, while another key organiser who was also arrested, Yue Xin, had been involved in a campaign against sexual harassment at universities, revealing links between different forms of student activism.[99]

These cases point to the fact that connections between academics and social movements, including feminist and labour struggles, have been among the targets of new restrictions on academic freedom.[100] Engaged scholarship of this type has a long history in China, going back to Chinese leader Mao Zedong's investigations of peasant movements and before. Activist scholars and students sometimes[101] explicitly draw on this Maoist legacy as inspiration, as in the Jasic case.[102] These struggles are also transnational and cross-disciplinary, with links, for example, between feminist and labour movement organisations in different regions of China, within East Asia and beyond.[103] Broadly speaking, the pre-Xi era was distinguished by a limited flowering of positive and mutually beneficial collaboration between academics and more campaign orientated labour, feminist, and environmental NGOs in which NGOs sometimes acted as gatekeepers to the research 'field' and academics provided research assistance. In the wave of repression, such activist academic work is dismissed by the state as the projects of 'hostile foreign forces', a rhetoric bolstered online by nationalist/conservative netizens in China who label concerns about various forms of inequalities as '*baizuo*' (literally, 'white left'). Since about 2015, this term has become 'one of most popular derogatory descriptions for Chinese netizens to discredit their opponents in online debates' whether inside or outside China, and is analogous to right-wing terms 'libtards' or 'regressive liberals' concerned about multiculturalism, minority rights, gender equality and the like.[104]

While such attacks are reminiscent of 'culture wars' against academics and others elsewhere, including in the UK, the logic of competition means that closing off academic researchers in China from transnational networks is neither feasible nor desirable. As we have pointed out, Chinese academics are encouraged to publish their research in globally ranked English-language journals. Such research requires access to relevant scholarship published in journals censored in China. The logics of exception can be observed in the waiving of rules to allow privileged researchers access to data that others are denied. In one elite university in China, for example, researchers in a social science building had internet access that allowed unimpeded, fast connections across the 'Great Firewall' to sites that are normally blocked inside China, such as Google Scholar. Trusted university leaders with good connections can provide their staff with intellectual space for teaching and research that goes beyond official constraints, reflecting ways that authority in China can be personalised and based on patronage.[105] The freedom of university presidents to grant such exceptions is contingent on the status of their institution; as one put it: 'The more prestigious your university is, the more privileges your university has'.[106]

The relative scope for exceptions also applies to the transnational higher education (TNHE) sector. Joint Sino-foreign universities are sometimes able to gain uncensored internet access; indeed students in some such institutions said that access to a VPN is a normal part of provision for their studies.[107] A report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 'fewer than half of the [12] universities GAO reviewed have uncensored Internet access', which suggests that up to five Sino-US joint venture universities enjoyed such access and that, interestingly, 'university members generally indicated that they experienced academic freedom'.[108] The types of content restrictions on teaching described in the previous section do not apply in some parts of these institutions.

The scope of these exceptions should not be overstated. Much has been made of the arrival of the handful of high-profile joint venture HEIs in China, such as Xian Jiaotong Liverpool University in Suzhou, and NYU Shanghai. Yet these institutions, which have concentrations of social scientists, some of whom study China, are not typical. TNHE is a product of the patterns of decentralisation and experimentation at local level in China, and is regionally variable, largely concentrated in the rich coastal regions of the country.[109] While the likes of NYU Shanghai may insist that 'principles of academic freedom are honoured every day' as Professor Lehman, its vice-chancellor, told a US House of Representatives hearing,[110] he also admitted to some uncertainty about how to navigate the complex landscape of HE in China: '[T]here are mixed signals all around us. We hear different voices all the time'.[111] In the past year, facing an employment discrimination legal action, NYU Shanghai insisted that it is absolutely bound by the legal regime in China.[112] Inevitably, less prestigious ventures lack the clout to resist pressures to conform if conflicts over academic freedom arise. Based on a wide survey of TNHE projects, Gow concludes: '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'.[113] His analysis shows that the vast majority of TNHE programmes that award degrees are in business and engineering; of the 1445 approved between 1994 and 2015, only a handful were in social science and law, and none were in sociology or politics.[114]

Conclusion

Academic colleagues in China who might share our vision of a transnational critical scholarly 'knowledge commons' that is open to those inside and outside universities now find themselves between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they are subject to authoritarian controls that particularly focus on limiting ideas that might result in collective action. On the other, they also face the devaluation of knowledge that does not further their institutions' competitive edge in the global contention for 'knowledge dominance'. Scholarship that seeks to contribute to or connect with struggles against inequality and for social justice is particularly beleaguered, with critical disciplines not only facing state controls and censorship but also subject to attacks from nationalist conservatives.

In the UK's highly marketised HE, with government attacks on classroom content inspired by conservative nationalism and widespread casualisation of employment practices, we find some similarities. Clearly, some of the logics in China are different and

authoritarian controls are exercised more directly. In this article, we have attempted to demonstrate these differences in the context of broader commonalities operating at a global level, evidenced in part through the contemporaneous emergence of similar logics across the very different higher education landscapes of China and the UK. Our aim in doing so is question the exceptionalism that so often characterises accounts of struggles for academic freedom in China, while simultaneously illustrating how the parameters of institutional autonomy are spatially and temporally variable. We have argued that the insertion of Chinese universities within the globally circulating model of the 'neoliberal university' that is a key institution in national knowledge economies contributes to the threats to academic freedom even as it provides opportunities to academics in elite universities to compete in the global competition for knowledge dominance. This is particularly important at the current conjuncture: we speculate that the neoliberal moment may be ending even as internationalisation of HE continues apace. What shape can that internationalisation take in the context of shifts towards discourses of securitisation in universities and in relation to knowledge production? How will these combine with the continuing efforts to extract profits and turn universities, and knowledge making, into business ventures? Neither of these directions look favourable for the knowledge commons on which academic freedom depends. But in facing such threats, transnational solidarity becomes of critical importance. We assert that to avoid new Cold War positions exercising an ideological grip in our lecture halls, classrooms and journals, both de-commodification and decolonisation of knowledge and knowledge creation will be indispensable processes.[115]

In posing the questions above, we accept that as we are not experts in HE research, our work here is necessarily impressionistic. We have drawn on our own experience and pointed out similar logics at play, rather than making comparisons. Our aims are thus modest, but we come to this subject as scholars increasingly concerned about the shrinking space of our colleagues in China for autonomous academic enquiry, particularly in fields we write on, such as labour rights, citizenship, and social movements, as well as the ways the Chinese state's 'foreign spy' scare rhetoric has made it difficult for those colleagues to work with us.[116] We also are committed to promoting a conversation on the interconnected character of the struggles we study and work with, and to observing the disturbing global journeys of 'assemblages of repression' that implicate our own environment in the concerns we raise, as well as those in China.[117]

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