

# Chinese Higher Education and the Quest for Autonomy: One Step Backward

Jeffery L. Wilson<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Virginia Commonwealth University*

\*Correspondence: Jlwilson4@vcu.edu

## ABSTRACT

China's quest for autonomy took a step backward as leaders of the Communist Party amended the bylaws at several postsecondary institutions. China's restrictions on freedom do not stop at its border and scholars within and visiting the country encounter increased surveillance and scrutiny. This paper explores China's continued interference in postsecondary autonomy.

*Keywords:* academic freedom, autonomy, China, communist party, freedom, governance, government, higher education, laws, leadership

## INTRODUCTION

The quest for autonomy continues to take a step backward in China as the Communist Party leadership amended the bylaws to several post-secondary institutions in 2019 to reflect obedience to the party rather than operating independently. At Fudan University, the phrase “freedom of thought” was abruptly removed from its 2014 revised charter. Fudan is described as “a prestigious Chinese University known for its liberal atmosphere” (Li, 2019, p. 1). The language to the institutions' bylaws was quickly changed to that in which the institutions' loyalty is stated as being to the Chinese Communist Party (Fischer, 2019). The bylaws now read “the university sticks to the party's leadership, fully implements the party's policies on education” with reference to promoting a politically backed form of philosophy known as “Xi Jinping Thought” (Fischer, 2019). Formally, the university's original document included language whereby its “educational philosophy was in accordance to the values advocated in its school song, which are ‘academic independence and freedom of thought’” (Li, 2019, p. 2). The new version of the bylaws has the phrase “freedom of thought” removed.

Additional changes include an amendment to the previously worded phrase “the school independently and autonomously runs the university” and “teacher and students independently and autonomously conduct academic studies while abiding with the law” whereby the word “independently” was deleted (Li, 2019). Substantial additions were made to the bylaws. New language around party leadership states “the university sticks to the party's leadership, fully implements the party's policies on education,” and “adheres to Marxism as the guiding philosophy and socialism as the foundation of the school's operation” to the constitution, and that the school should “always serve the people, serve the party's governance of China,” and “serve the consolidation and development of China's socialist system with Chinese characteristics” (Li, 2019, p. 3). Other institutions the following suit with similar changes include Nanjing University and Shaanxi Normal University (Fischer, 2019).

Received March 4, 2020; revised August 12, 2020; accepted September 13, 2020; electronically published May 1, 2021

*Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*

May, 2021, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 145-151.

DOI: 10.32674/jcihe.v13i2.2049

© 2021 Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education. All rights reserved.

Reaction to changes to Fudan's bylaws has been negative. An English professor in China told a graduating class in a speech that they should fight for individual liberty and likened the new bylaws as a form of "shameless suppression and temptation" (Li, 2019, p. 3). On the Chinese social networking site called Weibo, someone posted "I am really worried that children in the future will never know that Fudan had a period of valuing 'freedom of thought' and academic independence" (Li, 2019, p. 4). In America, the reaction has been equally concerning as many American institutions with collaborative agreements with Chinese institutions watch with great interest the rollbacks on academic freedom (Belkin & Wen, 2019).

Since the 1990s, China's higher education system has benefited greatly from an infusion of funds by the Chinese government (Owen, 2020). "The Chinese government has sought to transform Chinese academia into a world-class university system in a matter of decades" (Owen, 2020, p. 248). As China moves full steam ahead towards being the premier nation on innovation with stellar research being conducted by its universities, governmental intrusions into academic life and freedom continue to plague the nation (Zha & Shen, 2018).

### **Move for Modernization in Higher Education**

"Modern universities in China were established based on Western experience borrowed from Europe, America, and Japan" (Pan, 2009, p. 7). "Since the First Opium War in 1840, China was inflected by Japanese and Western imperial powers and started its modernization process" (Wu & Zha, 2018, p. 2). Closely aligned with the state, "traditional Chinese cultural heritage and theories have affected the development of Chinese higher education over the centuries (Pan, 2009, p. 20). "Unlike traditional Chinese higher education, modern Chinese higher education has been linked to economic development and Chinese national identity under foreign economic and cultural influences" (Pan, 2009, p. 21).

"The modern university was established in China in the late 19th century based on the structure of Western universities, and it developed further in the Republic of China (ROC) under the leadership of the KMT. It was influenced by the perceptions of the university held by Chinese scholars who had studied in Western universities and introduced the Western conception of the university to China. In particular, the ideas of Cai Yuanpei, which he had absorbed from Germany and France, influenced the development of China's universities in the early 20th century" (Pan, 2009, p. 23). "Chinese higher education has made remarkable progress in terms of massification and internationalization" (Wu & Zha, 2018, p. 3). "Project 211 and Project 985 were implemented by the Chinese government in 1995 and 1998, respectively, for promoting China's elite universities to reach world standard" (Wu & Zha, 2018, p. 3-4). "By 2009, 122 universities were supported by the central government through Project 211 (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China [MOE] 2015, and 39 of them were supported through Project 98/5 (MOE, n.d.)" (Wu & Zha, 2018, p. 4).

The twentieth century saw two prevailing higher education philosophies dominating the Chinese landscape, epistemological and political considerations (Wu & Zha, 2018). According to John Brubacher (1982), the epistemological approach "tend to pursue knowledge as an end" (p. 13) while the political philosophy focuses on "intricate problems of our complex society" (p. 14). The competing philosophies often clash whereas one approach, epistemology, is more on the side of "value-free" and the political philosophy runs contrary to that notion (Brubacher, 1982). "Scholars rather than political parties should administer the university so that it remained an institution for advancing knowledge and pursuing truth, rather than becoming a political tool" (Gao, 1992).

### **Academic Freedom and China**

Academic freedom “involves the rights of faculty members to pursue their research, undertake their classroom teaching, and in the American context, enact the full rights of citizenship devoid of restrictions” (Cain, 2016, p. 157). Academic freedom restrictions are woven into the culture of the university in countries such as China, Vietnam, and Cuba (Altbach, 2016). Observers argue that “in mainland China, state and university authorities have employed a range of tactics to intimidate, silence, and punish academics and students” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 4). For example, access to certain internet resources has been restricted to scholars by Chinese officials (Altbach, 2016). The Chinese government has “long monitored and conducted surveillance on students and academics from China and those studying China on campuses around the world” (Human Rights Watch, 2019, p. 2). Altbach (2016) noted that in Hong Kong “an academic pollster was warned by his university’s vice-chancellor not to publish polls critical of the region’s chief executive” (p. 238).

Chinese higher education has been in existence for over 2,000 years, thus, ranking as one of the oldest in the world (Wu & Zha, 2018). Universities in China operate under a dual-governance structure whereby there is a “coexistence of an administrative system chaired by a president, and a party system embodied as a party committee” (Han & Xu, 2019, p. 936). China is able to maintain strict oversight on institutional operations by “controlling the appointment of presidents and party secretaries, especially those of key research universities, and endowing the two positions with both political and administrative authorities over university affairs” (Han & Xu, 2019, p. 937). Consequently, China has implemented a number of oppressive tactics to clamp down on academic freedom such as “limits on internet access, libraries, and publication imports that impair research on topics the party-state deems controversial; surveillance and monitoring of academic activity that result in loss of position and self-censorship” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 4). Additional steps include “travel restrictions that disrupt the flow of ideas across borders; and the use of detentions, prosecutions, and other coercive tactics to retaliate against and constrain critical inquiry and expression” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 4).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to change the education system to be more in line with Party ideology through “Xi Jinping Thought Centers,” teacher training in Party ideology, and leveraging Party loyalty through research funding opportunities” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, pp. 4-5). “The pro-democracy protests of 2014 marked a turning point for Hong Kong, where Beijing has increasingly sought influence over higher education and civil society, including by attempts to eliminate dissent and critical inquiry” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 5).

In December of 2016, China President Xi Jinping asserted that universities in that country “should be strongholds of the Party, and that teachers should be propagators of ‘advanced ideology’ and ‘staunch supporter’ of the Current Political Climate” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 15). “The Constitution of China contains provisions from which protections for academic freedom may be independently and interdependently derived” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 16). For example, “limited access to information including filtering of online content, scholars being denied access to literature and archival materials, and challenges in accessing human research subjects deprives scholars and students in China of access to quality research, teaching, and learning” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 22). Additional measures expose students and faculty to extreme surveillance that includes “closed-circuit television, facial recognition technology, internet surveillance, and student informants” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 25). “Government and higher education authorities have censored academic expression in China, including publications, lectures, and events” (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 27).

China's restrictions on freedom do not stop at its border. "Chinese authorities have restricted Chinese and international scholars and students travel in, out, and within the country in connection with their academic activity, including by denying entry and exit, refusing visas, and confiscating passports" (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 29). "Chinese diplomats have also complained to university officials about hosting speakers such as the Dalai Lama whom the Chinese government considers sensitive" (Human Rights Watch, 2019, p. 2). Scholars from western nations have had visas denied or revoked if they published researched that is considered off-limits by Chinese authorities (Owens, 2020). In China itself, scholars are subjected to "investigations and suspensions to termination and credential revocation, retaliation by university authorities disrupts studies and irreparably harms careers" (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 31). "State authorities in China have intimidated, taken coercive legal action against, and imprisoned scholars and students to restrict and retaliate against academic work and other nonviolent expressive activities" (Scholars at Risk, 2019, p. 33). This paper explores China's system of higher education and the continued governmental interference in postsecondary autonomy.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this paper was to examine China's unique higher education system and the apparent rollback in academic freedom for students and scholars in the communist nation. By examining China as a case study, opportunities presented the chance to participate in a conference proceeding, lead a course lecture, live in on-campus housing, tour facilities, and examine college informational brochures. Thus, enabling further unpacking of China's unique higher education culture phenomena (Merriam, 1998).

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In October of 2019, I had an opportunity to visit China as a visiting scholar where I spent time on two college campuses. This was my first visit to China and I was eager to experience higher education in another nation. Part of my China visit was related to an inaugural research conference sponsored by my home institution, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and Jiangnan University (JU), a *211 Project* institution, located in the city of Wuxi. The conference theme was *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Research, Teaching, and Learning* and was marketed as being "a safe space within which both well established, and early-career academics can find a forum to provoke debate, stimulate discussion, offer new ideas, and share their research findings" (Call for Proposals, 2019, p. 1).

I was also invited to conduct a full day-long professional development workshop for Shanghai Normal University's new faculty training program. My session focused on expanding cultural competency and knowledge acquisition. The road to stepping on the plane to embark on the 16-hour flight to China required numerous steps. Before embarking on my trip I had to secure numerous documents and go through a thorough visa approval process. First, an official letterhead document from my college Dean verifying my trip to China and confirming expense coverage was needed, as well as verification that I was in the process of applying for a Category F Visa. In addition, I needed an invitation letter on an official letterhead paper from the Chinese host institution stating that they were extending an invitation to me as a participant of the joint conference during a specified time period. Exact travel dates and information related to hotel stays for each night while in the country were needed. Having completed the extensive visa application paperwork, my visa was approved within a week of departure.

#### **An Invitation to Learn About China**

Upon touchdown at the Shanghai Pudong International Airport, my first trip to China far exceeded expectations. I was comforted to see the display of signage in both Chinese and English. The customs process went smoothly and as I entered the main entrance of the airport I spotted a poster with my name on it where I was met by two Shanghai Normal University students who would assist with my arrival and check-in to the hotel.

The students I encountered in my walk around the two campuses, in the classroom, and at the conference were extremely polite and spoke good English. They informed me that it was a requirement in grade school. They were enthusiastic about their students and fielded my numerous questions about college life in China with ease and enthusiasm. Despite not having access to the familiar Google website or my university Gmail account, there were no inconveniences throughout my stay in China.

I encountered my fellow Chinese academic colleagues who were as passionate about research and student learning as my colleagues in the U.S. I was able to engage several professors in their individual research pursuits. The students who attended my workshop at Shanghai Normal University appeared eager for knowledge and freely engaged in conversation about the U.S. education system and comparisons with China. I couldn't help but think about what these recent governmental rollbacks to academic freedom will mean for their continued educational freedoms.

On my visit to the Jiangnan University campus, I noticed in one of the academic buildings a few offices devoted to the government. The door signage on each office read "Party Secretary's office" and "Party Committee Office & Personnel File Room". A sign of the times that in China, unlike America's separation of governmental intrusion in many institutional functions, China's postsecondary institutions do not know that luxury or freedom.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Altbach (2016, p. 271) noted that "as Chinese universities seek to compete globally, academic freedom is becoming more recognized as a necessary part of a world-class university". China's recent actions to curtail academic freedom at its universities set these institutions on a downward trajectory rather than upward in attaining elite status. "An effective academic culture must be free of corruption" (Altbach, 2016, p. 271). Groups such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) suggest postsecondary institutions should not only be alarmed by China's effort to undermine academic freedom but also resist where they can (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Laying out its rationale in a recent release 12-point Code of Conduct plan to stand up for freedom against the Chinese government, HRW calls for institutions around the world to:

1. Speak out for academic freedom
2. Strengthen academic freedom on campus
3. Counter threats to academic freedom
4. Record incidents of Chinese government infringement of academic freedom
5. Join with other academic institutions to promote research in China
6. Offer flexibility for scholars and students working on China
7. Reject Confucius Institutes
8. Monitor Chinese government-linked organizations
9. Promote academic freedom of students and scholars from China
10. Disclose all Chinese government funding
11. Ensure academic freedom in exchange programs and on satellite campuses

12. Monitor impact of Chinese government interference in academic freedom (Human Rights Watch, 2019, p. 6).

The call for unity among the institutions with ties to China is an effort to better address and propel attempts by the Chinese government to clamp down on academic freedom for those students and scholars who seek to study abroad (Human Rights Watch, 2019). As outlined above, by taking steps to ensure not only that Chinese scholars and students enjoy protected academic freedom rights at visiting institutions, but to also put China on notice that any infringement to these freedoms is unacceptable in modern-day academia.

---

**Jeffery Lamont Wilson** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership. He completed his doctoral studies in Higher Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Prior to UNLV, he completed his master's degree in Student Affairs Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and his undergrad at Virginia Commonwealth University. At Nebraska, Dr. Wilson participated extensively in student service projects within the Division of Student Affairs gaining exposure to multiple areas focused on student development such as Student Involvement, Multicultural Programming, and Career Services. Dr. Wilson's research is centered on diversity and leadership in higher education.

---

## REFERENCES

- Altbach, P. G. (2016). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Belkin, D., and Philip W. (2019, December 27). "American Colleges Watch for Changes at Chinese Universities; they Worry about Moves that could Limit Academic Freedom and how that May Affect their Branches in the Country." *Wall Street Journal (Online), ProQuest*. Access on 15 July 2020.
- Brubacher, J. (1982). *On the philosophy of higher education*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cain, T. R. (2016). A historiography of academic freedom for American faculty, 1865-1941. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 157-215). Springer.
- Call for proposals. (2019). Jiangnan University and Virginia Commonwealth University Annual Conference.
- Fischer, K. (2019). Chinese university deletes academic freedom From Its Charter. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Chinese-University-Deletes/247743>
- Gao, Q. (1992). *Zhongguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Sixiang Shi: Historical review of Chinese ideals of higher education*. People's Education Press.
- Han, S., & Xu, Xin. (2019). How far has the state 'stepped back': An exploratory study of the changing governance of higher education in China (1978–2018)." *Higher Education*, 78(5), 931–946.
- Human Rights Watch. (2019, March 21). China: Government threats to academic freedom abroad: New 12-point code of conduct to help educational institutions respond. *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/21/china-government-threats-academic-freedom-abroad>
- Li, J. (2019). College party: A top Chinese university stripped "freedom of thought" from its charter". *Quartz*. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1770693/chinas-fudan-university-axes-freedom-of-thought-from-charter/>
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.), Jossey-Bass education series). Jossey-Bass.
- Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China. (2015). 211 gongcheng. Xuexiao Mingdan (211 Project list of universities). Retrieved from [http://old.moe.gov.cn./publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_94/201002/82762.html](http://old.moe.gov.cn./publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_94/201002/82762.html)

- Owen, C. (2020). The 'internationalisation agenda' and the rise of the Chinese university: Towards the inevitable erosion of academic freedom? *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 22(2), 238–255.
- Pan, S.-Y. (2009). *University autonomy, the state and social change in China*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Scholars at Risk. (2019). Obstacles to excellence: Academic freedom & China's quest for world-class universities. New York: Freedom Mentoring Project. Retrieved from <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/obstacles-to-excellence-academic-freedom-chinas-quest-for-world-class-universities/>
- Wu, H., & Zha, Q. (2018). History of Chinese higher education. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 598-615). Springer.
- Zha, Q., & Shen, W. (2018). The paradox of academic freedom in the Chinese context. *History of Education Quarterly*, 58(3), 447-452.