

The Chinese Communist Party has growing sway in Western universities

*In recent years, China has fostered academic links with Western universities by funding Confucius Institutes and sending its students to study abroad. As the recent uproar over the decision of Cambridge University Press to censor a list of journal articles for the Chinese market has highlighted, it also exerts growing influence in academic publishing. **Alexander Dukalskis (University College Dublin)** argues that the so-called '1% argument' for censorship is disingenuous, and Confucius Institute activity should be strictly restricted to language instruction. Students and academics must be able to scrutinise China freely.*



University of Sydney students on a Confucius Institute cultural tour in China, 2014.
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The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) real and potential influence over higher education outside its borders came to the public's attention last month when *The Economist* featured CCP "sharp power" influence – including in higher education – on its cover. Its [briefing article](#) drew its terminology from a [report](#) by the US-based National Endowment for Democracy. The Woodrow Wilson Center published a [detailed report](#) about the CCP's effort to curry political influence abroad, including in academia. Observers are increasingly paying attention to CCP influence in areas of publishing, student exchange, classroom instruction, and research.

I have a special interest in these topics as the author of [a book](#) and [academic articles](#) about how authoritarian governments control public discourse domestically. The CCP's export of some of these practices is concerning. I purposely use the descriptor "CCP" because in China the state is subordinate to the party. So when we talk about the Chinese state or Chinese government, what we are really talking about is the CCP.

In August, Cambridge University Press (CUP) acceded to a request by China's import agency to censor a list of articles from its journal *China Quarterly*. CUP initially complied until an [open letter by the editor](#) of the journal caught the attention of academics and journalists, who then led an outcry on social media. CUP eventually agreed to not pre-emptively censor its articles, but many were startled by how quickly and easily such a prestigious press agreed to censor on behalf of an authoritarian government.

The rationale, of course, is that CUP and other presses like it wish to protect access to the Chinese market. They argue that if they censor a small portion of their offerings, then the vast majority can be accessed in China, thereby salvaging links between foreign and Chinese academics. This is the [1% argument](#): only 1% is censored but 99% can be accessed, so really this is not such a big problem.

This is disingenuous, for two reasons. First, it ignores that censorship is even more insidious and powerful when people do not know they are subject to it. By selectively pruning offerings for the Chinese market, presses [lead readers to believe that the post-censorship catalogue represents the full picture of foreign perspectives on China](#). Editing out so-called “sensitive” topics like the Tiananmen Square repression of 1989, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and studies of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan gives the false impression that the CCP view on these issues is the only legitimate one and that foreign academia agrees.

Second, the 1% argument obscures the likely financial motives behind such censorship decisions. In [CUP's case](#) the CCP threatened to halt the press' best-selling English language curriculum. SpringerNature now not only [censors some of its offerings](#) in the journals *International Politics* and the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* but has also [signed a letter of intent](#) with the People's Publishing House apparently to [publish propagandistic works by CCP leader Xi Jinping](#). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that financial motives play a major role in these sorts of decisions.

Of course publishing is not the only higher education target of the CCP. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students study abroad each year, which is a source of funds for universities in the West. In my admittedly anecdotal and limited experience, these students are most often a joy to work with because they are smart, curious and have interesting perspectives.

However, they are also subject to surveillance and mobilisation by the officially-sponsored [Chinese Students and Scholars Association](#) (CSSA). Western universities have been mostly silent about the CSSA, which is understandable. The CSSA presents itself as a means of helping Chinese students settle in abroad, so university leaders may feel there is little they can do. However, some troubling examples suggest that it also plays a more [assertive role in policing public discourse](#). This includes instances of [policing what lecturers say in the classroom](#).

Indeed, one function of the CCP's strategy to control public discourse about China in foreign universities is precisely to influence classroom instruction. Hundreds of Confucius Institutes teach Chinese language and culture at Western universities and schools.

Confucius Institutes present themselves as politically innocuous, but it does not take long for instruction in Chinese “culture” to morph into China “studies”, with all the off-limits topics that this implies for the CCP. It is worth remembering that the parent institution of Confucius Institutes is Hanban, which is a department of the Chinese Ministry of Education, itself ultimately [under the purview of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department](#). Indeed, high-level [CCP officials have often been quite blunt](#) about the Confucius Institutes being a part of the party's foreign propaganda effort.

Here again, part of the motivation for welcoming Confucius Institutes on campus in the first place is financial. Typically Confucius Institutes come with [financial subsidies from Hanban](#) (and thus ultimately the CCP). Additionally, university administrators may see the prospect of tighter links with the CCP as facilitating the recruitment of fee-paying Chinese students. The upshot is that universities outsource their Chinese language instruction while Confucius Institute officials sometimes get a seat at the table in discussions about the curriculum in which those language or culture offerings are embedded.

The CCP also attempts to sway the tenor of research about China. Projects like the [Institute for China-America Studies](#) or the CCP-linked [endowed professorship in China Studies](#) at Johns Hopkins University are prominent examples. The overall aim is to influence the way that China is researched, discussed, and presented.

Ultimately, what is to be done? First, leaders of universities and publishing houses need to firmly and publicly stand up for academic freedom. They should say early, often and publicly that the university places free inquiry at the centre of its engagement with China. If this offends CCP partners, then so be it.

Second, universities should re-evaluate their relationships with Confucius Institutes, particularly given the CCP's more aggressive turn under Xi Jinping. Confucius Institute contracts sometimes have clauses that call for re-evaluation every so often and universities should take advantage of these opportunities. Ideally, universities would use such clauses to terminate their relationships with CIs and CI-affiliated “research” institutes. Short of that, they could press for terms relating to academic freedom to be included and for the activities of CIs to be strictly restricted to language instruction.

Third, individual academics should consider boycotting peer review and submission for presses that censor their catalogues for the Chinese market. Publishing houses rely on the mostly free labour of academics to generate their products. Scholars therefore have some leverage to influence the situation. In a [petition that is still open](#), more than 1,000 have already signed up to boycott reviewing for publications that censor their content for the CCP.

It is incumbent on university leaders, publishing houses, individual academics, and the general public to preserve free inquiry when it comes to China. This is of pressing importance because as a rising economic and military power, China will only play a more important role in the world. It is up to all of us to ensure that this role can be scrutinised freely and fairly.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.



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