

China Politics & Policy

Curtailling academic freedom is China's latest export to the world

Beijing's pressure on Cambridge University Press is a sign of things to come

Global Insight



Chinese censors told Cambridge University Press to block access to more than 300 politically sensitive articles from its leading China-focused journal © Julian Eales/Alamy

18 HOURS AGO by: Ben Bland in Hong Kong

Mao Zedong once bragged that his crackdown on troublesome scholars dwarfed the efforts of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, who is said to have buried alive 460 men of letters in the third century BC.

Now President Xi Jinping, who has concentrated more power than any Chinese leader since Mao, is determined to leave his own mark on academia, with a crackdown that threatens universities and publishers not just in [China](#), but all over the world.

As President Xi's censors have extended their campaign against dissent beyond China's borders, Cambridge University Press received word from a government agency that it should block online access in China to more than 300 politically sensitive articles from its leading China-focused journal or face the consequences.

The world's oldest publisher initially [caved in](#), removing the articles about subjects from Tibet to the Tiananmen Square massacre. CUP cited the fear of many corporations, that its access to China's vast and fast-growing market would be cut off totally unless it complied.

[CUP reversed course](#) on Monday, after an outcry over its decision to sacrifice the principle of academic freedom on the altar of commercial opportunity.

Cambridge's volte-face was welcomed by the many Sinologists who had attacked its initial self-censorship as shameful and cowardly.

But this furore is only a foretaste of the pressure that is to come on foreign universities and publishing groups, as well as other businesses and governments, as repression becomes the latest export in Beijing's "Going Out" strategy.

The decision to block the 300 articles in *China Quarterly* was not merely an issue for the tiny community of academic readers within China. More importantly, it sent a message, via one of the world's most prestigious universities, that the banned subjects were not a safe area for research and debate.

This chilling effect comes at a time when, from Australia to the US, academics are concerned about the increasing influence of the Chinese Communist party on campuses, whether through donations by well-connected Chinese tycoons, funding by Beijing, or protests against course content and lecturers by student groups affiliated with the party.

The Chinese authorities are yet to respond to Cambridge's belated act of defiance. But many academics fear that universities will increasingly be forced to make concessions to the Chinese Communist party's narrow view of political correctness or face the threat of access to the lucrative Chinese market being cut off.

Many foreign investors in China have, of course, already faced this dilemma. Some, [like Apple](#), which recently removed from its Chinese app store applications that help users bypass China's "Great Firewall", have complied to preserve market access.

Others, like Google, tried to work out a compromise before eventually finding the censorship requests — and reputational damage in the West — too much, and quitting China.

What is different and more worrying about the Cambridge case is that the collaboration with Chinese censors would have had an impact far beyond China's borders.

Jonathan Sullivan, a member of China Quarterly's executive committee and author of one of the blocked articles, says that the incident should be a wake-up call.

“We have given little thought about how to deal with [China’s] nascent attempt to import Chinese political cultural norms into western classrooms full of Chinese students; or how to uphold academic values in the face of attempts to censor our work,” he [wrote](#) for the China Policy Institute at the University of Nottingham, which he directs.

The principled response, which Cambridge has turned toward, is for universities to resist Chinese pressure, maintaining their international reputation and forcing Beijing to do its own dirty work.

If Beijing ups the ante and blocks CUP’s business in China, what will be the reaction of the millions of middle-class Chinese parents who rely on CUP’s English language courses and examinations to boost their children’s education?

Will Beijing be willing to take the public relations hit for squelching the publishing arm of one of the world’s leading universities?

The *Global Times*, a nationalistic tabloid that is owned by the *People’s Daily*, the Communist party’s mouthpiece, argues that the issue will not be decided by principles but by economic and political clout.

“In this case it’s not true that ‘everyone is entitled to their own opinion’,” it said in an editorial. “This is about a power play. Only time will tell who is in the right.”

ben.bland@ft.com

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