

## GLOBAL

## Universities must stand up to Chinese censorship

Bruce Macfarlane 25 August 2017 Issue No:471

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Cambridge University Press, or CUP, recently found itself at the centre of a storm of controversy when it tamely acceded to the demands of the censorship arm of the mainland Chinese government to remove 300 articles from the Chinese website version of one of its well-respected journals, *The China Quarterly*.

Following critical press coverage and protests from academics, CUP made a sharp U-turn, claiming that the decision was only a temporary measure. Whatever the excuses, the incident is a worrying illustration of the lengths Beijing will go to in order to shore up the Great Firewall of China.

Prominent among the titles of the articles identified for censorship were the so-called three 'T's': Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen. Of the 300 articles released by CUP, I counted at least 33 with the word Taiwan in their title, 47 about Tibet and a further 26 that mentioned the word Tiananmen, a reference to the massacre of student-led protestors there in 1989.

Along with historical analysis of the Cultural Revolution, these are taboo subjects as far as the mainland Chinese government is concerned. Any discussion, debate and academic analysis are considered beyond the pale.

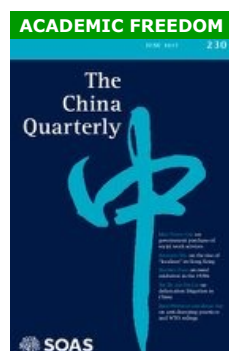
Yet, despite the reversal of the original decision of the CUP to block the 300 articles, the mainland Chinese government has been adept at stifling debate and public awareness about these topics. More worrying still is the level of complicity in the West, both by governments and major organisations, in appeasing the censors in Beijing.

The first of the 'T's' is Taiwan, otherwise known as the Republic of China. Unlike the Communist mainland, Taiwan has a multi-party democracy yet it is only recognised by a small handful of countries around the world. The United Kingdom is not one of them and nor is any European country with the exception of the Holy See in Rome.

This is because Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province and pressurises other nations to cut their ties with it. Most comply, conveniently ignoring Taiwan's democratic credentials in favour of more lucrative economic ties with the mainland. Panama was the latest country that chose to do this in June.

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Beijing also insists that Taiwan is referred to as 'Chinese Taipei', a demand that is slavishly followed by organisations ranging from the World Health Organization to the Miss Earth beauty pageant. Even the 13 Taiwanese tennis players at this year's Wimbledon were labelled as from 'Chinese Taipei'.

Chinese state control of the web and social media means that information about protests about the second 'T', Tibet, are routinely suppressed. But again there is plenty of evidence that the West is appeasing and colluding with this censorship.

In 2016 a screenwriter for the Marvel Studios movie, *Doctor Strange*, admitted that the story's original references to Tibet had been changed in a deliberate attempt to avoid causing any offence to Beijing.

The Apple store in Beijing removed an app which gave access to books about Tibet among other titles. *The Financial Times* reported this was linked to access the app had given to three books by Wang Lixiong, a well-known critic of China's policy on Tibet.

The initial decision of CUP to censor its own journal would have further reduced the already limited access of mainland Chinese to academic analysis about their own country.

I learnt about how little the mainland Chinese knew about the third 'T' – Tiananmen – when I worked at the University of Hong Kong, or HKU, a few years ago. I asked one of my mainland Chinese PhD students to show a visiting professor around the campus, including the so-called 'Pillar of Shame', a Tiananmen Square memorial statue erected by students at HKU in 2009. She later told me that she had never even heard about the Tiananmen Square massacre before arriving in Hong Kong.

It is this degree of ignorance, even among its graduates, that the mainland Chinese government wants to maintain.

### Self-censorship

The CUP controversy is just the latest high-profile example of the complicity of the West in helping Beijing to close down debate. The wider threat to academic freedom within the academic community is self-censorship: skating over or simply avoiding controversial or taboo subjects in teaching or research that might cause offence.

In reality this is much more insidious and widespread than direct censorship. The majority of PhD students in Hong Kong, for example, are from the mainland and there are also large numbers now studying in the West. These PhD students will shortly swell the ranks of university academics all over the world. Yet, how free will they be to speak their minds?

Academic freedom is easy to exercise when one has little to lose, although there will always be a handful brave enough to speak out whatever the personal risks. But how unfettered do Chinese academics feel to exercise academic freedom if they still have family ties in mainland China, regardless of whether they have a Western passport?

Even if they hold citizenship at a safe distance, their relatives back in mainland China may pay the price through harassment and other forms of retribution if they choose to exercise their academic freedom abroad.

Universities in the UK have been major beneficiaries of the gravy train in students coming to study in the West from mainland China. But if universities still believe in their own founding principles – enlightenment and precious knowledge in the case of the University of Cambridge which owns CUP – they need to demonstrate this in the way they deal with naked attempts to shut down debate and academic freedom.

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This ought to apply as much in opening up our own Western taboos to scrutiny – such as the legacy of slavery and colonialism – as in ensuring that those subjects regarded as off-limits by Beijing are debated openly and freely.

*Bruce Macfarlane is professor of higher education at the University of Southampton, United Kingdom.*

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