

A New Frontier of West-China Competition: Academia and International Education

by Claudia Astarita

Growing concern about China's rising status is spilling into the realm of international education, as allegations of Chinese influence and spying operations in Western universities gathers currency in certain states. Conversely, in China, authorities are moving to strengthen central oversight of the national education system, consolidating the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its leader Xi Jinping, while closing down partnerships with foreign institutes and centres of learning.

Both trends are worrying in their own right and seem to signal that international education is becoming a new frontier in the evolving East-West tensions surrounding China's rise. Beijing's expanding economy and the premium attached to quality education have made Chinese students one of the largest group of foreigners flocking to US, Australian and European

universities,¹ where they represent a significant source of revenue for such institutions.²

In view of the conventional wisdom that has traditionally viewed education as a means to bridge divides and foster international understanding and cooperation, it is worrying to learn over the past 12 months Beijing has terminated 234 jointly-managed partnerships with international universities in the West.³ Officially

¹ In 2016 there were 869,387 Chinese students studying abroad, with 112,329 of them living in Australia. See the Unesco interactive map: *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students*, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

² John Ross, "China Experts Warn of Funding Shock to Research", in *The Australian*, 14 June 2017.

³ Yojana Sharma, "Ministry Ends Hundreds of Sino-foreign HE Partnerships", in *University World News*, No. 513 (6 July 2018), <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20180706154106269>.

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linked to poor quality, low enrolment and financial mismanagement, the decision also reflects a rising trend of suspicion towards foreign programmes, curriculums and ideology among Chinese authorities.

Meanwhile, 2017 also marked a new revision of the national education curriculum in China and a further tightening of the national campaign to promote a “patriotic striving spirit” among Chinese intellectuals.⁴ The CCP has always maintained tight control on curriculums, and new standardized textbooks are now promoting the image of President Xi Jinping and the CCP as champions of the Chinese nation.

Such efforts are not limited to the domestic scene. Reports have emerged that Chinese officials are also involved in supporting “patriotic students” or student groups abroad, helping to spread China’s official narratives in foreign university classrooms while monitoring and reporting on other Chinese students’ ideas and positions.⁵

⁴ Viola Zhou, “Into the Brains’ of China’s Children: Xi Jinping’s ‘Thought’ to Become Compulsory School Topic”, in *South China Morning Post*, 23 October 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/node/2116504>; Gordon Watts, “President Xi Jinping’s Policies Trigger an Academic Backlash in China”, in *Asia Times*, 8 August 2018, <http://ati.ms/TACCKc>.

⁵ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Chinese Government Gave Money to Georgetown Chinese Student Group”, in *Foreign Policy*, 14 February 2018, <http://bit.ly/2CkIOfW>; Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic, *A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education*, Washington, Wilson Center Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, September 2018, p. 10, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/77016>.

These trends are not unique to China, however. In late June, the Australian parliament passed a package of laws aimed at preventing foreign meddling in the country, targeting interference and espionage in politics and other domestic areas, including universities.

The Australian document made no direct reference to China, and the country’s prime minister at the time justified the decision by referring to “unprecedented and increasingly sophisticated attempts to influence the political process” carried out by foreign powers. Yet, he later acknowledged that recent “disturbing reports about Chinese influence” also played a role in the approval.⁶

In October, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) released a report alleging that, since 2007, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army has sponsored more than 2,500 military scientists and engineers to study abroad and has developed relationships with researchers and institutions across the globe to improve its technological and military capabilities.⁷

Similar concerns are also present in the United States, where the Wilson Center has published an extensive report on Chinese political influence and interference in US higher education.⁸

⁶ “China Accuses Australia of Paranoia over Foreign Influence Laws”, in *Reuters*, 6 December 2017, <https://reut.rs/2AanAF3>.

⁷ Alex Joske, “Picking Flowers, Making Honey. The Chinese Military’s Collaboration with Foreign Universities”, in *ASPI Policy Brief Reports*, No. 10/2018 (October 2018), p. 3, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey>.

⁸ Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic, *A Preliminary*

Most recently, Cornell University has suspended two exchange programmes with Renmin University in China out of concerns for academic freedom. The decision was taken after exchange students complained they had been punished for their labour rights activism in the United States.⁹

While some cases of “classroom interferences” have indeed been reported in Hong Kong, Australia and the United States, it is important to place these events in their appropriate context, avoiding broad generalizations.¹⁰ A blanket depiction of Chinese students acting as agents of the Chinese government is extremely worrying in this regard.

Such trends could transform university campuses into more closed and divided environments, fostering increased nationalist tendencies that can lead to a corrosive mistrust of diversity and a weakening of the principle of free speech and thought. The labelling of foreign students coming from specific non-democratic countries as potential agents of a foreign state will not only discourage these from studying abroad – thereby depriving them of potential

opportunities or a broadening of their horizons – it may also limit the mingling of students from different backgrounds within universities, undermining the benefits of international education by limiting the cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences.

A number of Australian scholars, including Clive Hamilton, have indeed gone too far in promoting the image of Chinese students acting as a mini-fifth column, infiltrating Australian schools and universities and confronting academics and fellow students accused of being critical of China.¹¹

Hamilton is not alone in voicing such concern. Associate Professor Sally Sargeson, Senior Fellow at the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra believes China’s surveillance of overseas students is “a problem not confined to ANU, or indeed all Australian universities. I know from conversations with U.S. academics and from having worked at the University of Nottingham [in the U.K.], that there is a significant effort by Chinese embassies, and CCP-linked companies and prominent citizens, to stifle expressions of opinion (not to mention dissent) among Chinese citizen students” in these locations.¹²

Chinese officials have strongly denounced these accusations. Responding to similar allegations advanced by a retired diplomat from

Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education, cit.

⁹ Phoebe Zhang, “Cornell Decision Adds to Growing Climate of Fear on Chinese Campuses”, in *South China Morning Post*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/node/2170749>.

¹⁰ Anders Corr, “Chinese Informants in the Classroom: Pedagogical Strategies”, in *Forbes*, 28 June 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anderscorr/2017/06/28/chinese-informants-in-the-classroom-pedagogical-strategies>; Stephanie Saul, “On Campuses Far From China, Still Under Beijing’s Watchful Eye”, in *The New York Times*, 4 May 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2pMaWWp>.

¹¹ Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion. China’s Influence in Australia*, Melbourne, Hardie Grant Books, 2018, p. 220.

¹² Anders Corr, “Chinese Informants in the Classroom: Pedagogical Strategies”, cit.

Singapore during a keynote speech at the forum on Chinese Public Diplomacy in East Asia and the Pacific in June, China's ambassador to Singapore noted how "China's foreign policies are aimed at serving its national development. Beyond that, China also endeavours to incorporate its development into the greater cause of world peace and prosperity, working towards the goal of building a community with a shared future for mankind".¹³

With many Western universities increasingly starved for funds and eager to increase their intake of foreign, particularly Asian, students, it is growing harder to find an acceptable compromise between efforts to attract and satisfy requests by foreign students and their home government while maintaining and resisting unwanted interferences on national curriculums or student life. Efforts to find an adequate balance between the monitoring and reporting of unwanted interferences or pressure on students and faculty and the continued attachment to the principles of free speech, intellectual freedom and critical thinking will therefore need to be addressed.

Continuing to provide a safe haven for students – irrespective of nationality, religious creed or political colours – represents the best ingredient to combat mutual suspicions, xenophobia and parochial identity politics. While some will no doubt seek to take advantage of this system, these

will always remain in the minority. Clamping down on a whole nationality of foreign students or student groups out of fear and suspicion risks making matters worse, depriving both the host and guest nationalities with valuable opportunities to meet and exchange.

Ultimately, the fact that a number of western countries are growing increasingly concerned about a supposed expansion of Chinese covert influence operations in their countries may be more reflective of the West's own fears of decline than a realistic appraisal of Chinese capabilities or intentions in these domains.

Engaging Chinese authorities, as well as students and student groups, and fostering interlinkages and exchanges with other expat communities and host nation citizens should represent the way forward. Closure, suspicions and monitoring would instead represent a step backwards; potentially creating a slippery slope that could descend into a sort of "education war" between China and the West, a war in which both sides stand to lose.

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¹³ "China Does Not Manipulate Other Countries: Chinese Ambassador Responds to Remarks from Former Singapore Diplomat Bilahari Kausikan", in *Channel News Asia*, 12 July 2018, <http://po.st/qavtzt>.

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