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Is Academic Freedom Threatened by China's Influence on U.S. Universities?

*House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and Int'l Organizations
Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Excerpts of remarks
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I want to welcome everyone here today. This hearing is the second in a series probing the question of whether maintaining access to China's lucrative education market undermines the very values that make American universities great, including academic freedom.

The hearing is timely for three reasons:

- 1) The growing number of "satellite" or "branch" campuses started by U.S. universities in China;
- 2) The record numbers of Chinese students (275,000) enrolling in U.S. universities and colleges in China each year, bringing with them nearly ten million dollars a year in tuition and other spending; and
- 3) The recent efforts by the Communist Party of China to regain ideological control over universities and academic research.

Official Chinese government decrees prohibit teaching and research in seven areas—the so-called "seven taboos:"

- universal values;
- press freedom;
- civil society;
- citizens' rights;
- criticism of the Party's past;
- neoliberal economics; and
- independence of the judiciary.

All of the "seven taboos" are criticized as "Western ideals."

Which begs the question: *Are U.S. colleges and universities compromising their images as bastions of free inquiry and academic freedom in exchange China's education dollars?*

Some may defend any concessions made as the cost of doing business in an authoritarian state such as China.

Maybe a university decides that it won't offer a class on human rights in China, maybe they won't invite a prominent dissident as a fellow or visiting lecturer, maybe they won't protest when a professor is denied a visa because of his or her work is critical of a dictator. Maybe such compromises are rationalized as necessary to not offend a major donor or for the "greater good" of maintaining access.

If U.S. universities are only offering Chinese students and faculty a different name on their diploma or paycheck, is it worth the costs and compromises?

Perry Link, the eminent China scholar, argued during our last hearing, that the slow drip of self-censorship is the most pernicious threat to academic freedom and undermines both the recognized brands of a major universities and their credibility.

Self-censorship may be the reason NYU terminated the fellowship of world class human rights activist and hero, Chen Guangcheng. As the NYU faculty said in their letter to the Board of Trustees, the circumstances surrounding the launch of NYU satellite campus in Shanghai and the ending of Chen's residence created a "public perception, accurate or otherwise, that NYU made commitments in order to operate in China." Did NYU Make any such commitments?

Let the record show that we have invited NYU's President and faculty sixteen times to testify before this committee, without success. We are very pleased that Jeffery Lehman, the Vice-Chancellor of NYU-Shanghai campus, is here today.

On a personal note, I spent time with Chen when he first came to the United States. Though NYU offered him important sanctuary, he was treated very rudely at times, particularly when it was clear that he would not isolate himself on campus. NYU officials and others worked to cordon off access to Chen and to keep him away from Chinese dissidents and there was a belief, reported by Reuters and the Wall Street Journal, that Chen was too involved with anti-abortion activists, Republicans, and others.

We may never know if NYU experienced "persistent and direct pressure from China" to oust Chen from his NYU fellowship or whether they sought to isolate him in order to keep Chen's story out of the 2012 Presidential elections as Prof. Jerry Cohen has said in an interview at the time. Certainly there is some interest here as Hillary Clinton spent a whole chapter in her book detailing the events of Chen's escape and exile in the United States.

Or maybe there wasn't any pressure at all, just self-censorship to keep in Beijing's good graces during the final stages of opening the NYU-Shanghai campus.

We are not here to exclusively focus on the sad divorce of Chen Guangcheng and NYU. But his ousting begs the question: ***Is it possible to accept lucrative subsidies from the Chinese government, or other dictatorships for that matter, operate campuses on their territory and still preserve academic freedom and the other values that make American's great?***

I'm sure those here today will say that they can—and reference an oral assurance they received from the government or an agreement they signed—which is often kept secret—with the host government. The real answer is much more murky.

Foreign educational partnerships are important endeavors—for students, collaborative research, cultural understanding, and maybe even for the host country in some sense. The U.S. model of higher education is the world's best. American faculty, fellowships, and exchange programs are effective global ambassadors. We must all seek to maintain that integrity. It is in the interests of the U.S. to do so, particularly when it comes to China.

Nevertheless, if ***U.S. colleges and universities are outsourcing academic control, faculty and student oversight, or curriculum to a foreign government can they really be “islands of freedom” in the midst of authoritarian states or dictatorships? Are they places where all students and faculty can enjoy the fundamental freedoms denied them in their own country?***

The questions we ask today are not abstract. The Chinese government and Communist Party are waging a persistent, intense and escalating campaign to suppress dissent, purge rivals from within the Party, and regain ideological control over the arts, media, and the universities.

This campaign is broader and more extensive than any other in the past twenty years. Targets include human rights defenders, the press, social media and the Internet, civil rights lawyers, Tibetans and Uyghurs, religious groups, NGOs, intellectuals and their students, and government officials, particularly those allied with former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin.

Chinese universities have been targeted as well, the recently issued Communist Party directive “Document 30,” reinforces earlier warnings to purge “Western-inspired notions of media independence, human rights, and criticism of Mao [Zedong].

In a recent speech reported by the *New York Times*, President Xi urged university leaders to “keep a tight grip on...ideological work in higher education...never allow singing to a tune contrary to the party center, never allowing eating the Communist Party's food and then smashing the Communist Party's cooking pots.

Will anyone at NYU or Ft. Hays St or John Hopkins or Duke for that matter—be allowed to smash any cooking pots?

It's a serious question, because if your campuses are subsidized by the Chinese government, if your joint-educational partnerships are “majority-owned” by the Chinese

government, aren't you eating the Communist Party's food and then subject to its rules, just like any Chinese university?

There are nine U.S. educational partnerships operating in China. New York University (NYU) Shanghai opened its doors to students in September 2013. Three other similar ventures have started since 2013: a Duke University campus in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province; a University of California-Berkeley School of Engineering research facility in the Pudong District of Shanghai; and a Kean University campus in Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province. In addition, since 2006, Fort Hays State University in Kansas, has partnered with Zhengzhou University/SIAS International School, a U.S.-based educational non-governmental organization, to provide degrees for thousands of Chinese students.

China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), issued in July 2010, provided Chinese partners with a strong incentive to enter into such ventures. The plan exhorted Chinese universities to become "world-class," in part by establishing "international academic cooperation organizations" and setting up research and development bases with "high quality educational and scientific research institutions from overseas." Among the attractions for U.S. universities entering into such ventures are generous funding from the Chinese government, typically covering all campus construction costs and some or all operating costs; revenue from full fee-paying Chinese students on China-based campuses, who may later become wealthy alumni donors; the potential for a higher profile in China translating into the recruitment of more full fee-paying Chinese students to home campuses in the United States; opportunities for new global research collaborations with Chinese scholars and universities; and, opportunities for American students to study abroad.

I have also initiated a GAO study to review the agreements of both satellite campuses in China and of Confucius Institutes in the U.S. I know some agreements are public others are not. In fact, some schools made their agreements public after our last hearing. We are looking for complete transparency and will be asking all universities and colleges to make their agreements with the Chinese government public.

We need to know if universities and college who are starting satellite programs in China—can be islands of freedom in China or in other parts of the world. We need to know what pressures are being placed on them to compromise fundamental freedoms, and what compromises, if any, were made to gain a small slice of the China educational market.

These are important questions. Can they be handled by the universities, their faculties, and trustees themselves or if there is something the U.S. Congress and or State Department can do to ensure academic freedom, and other fundamental freedoms are protected.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witnesses today.