

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission hearing on
“China’s Global Influence and Interference Activities”

Panel III: “China’s Interference in Foreign Academia, Media, and Other Elements of the ‘Knowledge Base.’”

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The government of the People’s Republic of China and its surrogates employ a range of overt and covert methods to manipulate the ecosystem of knowledge, the flows of information, and the source bases that inform decisionmakers and public opinion around the globe. Their aims include cultivating good will, propagating official narratives and disinformation, countering adverse perspectives, and supporting other policy goals such as technology transfer and China’s new global security, development, and civilization initiatives. Coercive and corrupting tactics remain key parts of their toolkits, but increasingly they also possess the capacity to incentivize and engineer favorable outcomes by offering propositions that are attractive simply on the merits. The combination of these approaches, licit and illicit, represents a potent formula for authoritarian success, and foreign academia and media have been principal targets for its application.

How do we counter that? While it is fashionable of late to speak of bans and prohibitions, we cannot prevail through denial alone; we must also offer practical alternatives that satisfy the needs and aspirations of those whose hearts and minds we seek to win over and whose behavior we wish to change.

For more than forty years, liberal democracies welcomed deeper ties with the PRC and its people, and in the interests of practicing our own principles of transparency, openness, non-discrimination, and fairness, we treated the PRC much like any other nation. Those relationships were premised on a wishful assumption of trust: that China would behave or could be induced to behave much like our other key partners around the world. The problem is that in fundamental ways the PRC is not like these other partners. It is a proud, self-declared Leninist dictatorship, and much as we have learned with regard to Russia, such confessions matter and it is dangerous to downplay them no matter how inconvenient they may be.

Beijing has leveraged the opportunities afforded by open access to academia, think tanks, and media in free societies to its advantage without extending reciprocal privileges in its own tightly policed and censored domain. While not strictly a one-way street, we are swimming against a powerful tide managed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to ensure that China meets the world on the CCP’s terms, and that everything from market access to trade, capital, immigration, and political influence flow asymmetrically in the Party’s favor. Buoyed by the fall of the Berlin Wall, for decades Western governments and civil society institutions tolerated this state of affairs confident that its deeply embedded structural asymmetries were temporary, that the CCP was fighting a losing battle, and that history was ultimately on our side. While I believe that it is, that outcome depends in large measure on what we do, and the road is less certain, bumpier, and more hazardous than many might have supposed.

Academia:

By any measure, US institutions of higher learning have been extraordinarily open to students and scholars from the PRC. In the 2021-22, academic year, Chinese students accounted for 31 percent of all

foreign students in US higher education: that's 290,000 individuals, of which a slightly higher proportion are graduate students than undergraduates. When COVID began in 2019, the share was even higher, a peak of nearly 35%, and while there are a lot of theories about why this number has fallen, they are speculative and say more about the prior commitments of the speakers. COVID scrambled everything, and I believe that we need a couple of more years of data to venture a solid explanation about what is happening and why.

During the same academic year, 13.4 percent of all PhDs in the United States in the fields most often associated with national competitiveness, namely STEM, were awarded to students from the PRC. Year after year, about 80% of them indicate a desire to remain in the US after graduation, where they contribute to our society and our research enterprise. It's a generally positive story, though there are serious problems that require attention, but these problems are not necessarily the ones that you may be thinking of. For instance, data points to an alarming fact: we are as a nation importing much of the human capital on which our future depends, and this amounts to a serious supply chain vulnerability. Sourcing STEM talent from abroad papers over our shortcomings at home. It works well until it doesn't, leaving us exposed to disruptions that would take far, far longer to recover from than the desperate scramble for PPEs, ventilators, and semiconductors that we so recently experienced.

The US and PRC are each other's top destinations for international research collaboration. For the US, 30 percent of all such collaborations in the sciences in 2022 included partners in the PRC. This is more than the next two countries -- the UK and Germany -- combined. Simply put, US academic institutions, firms and government funding agencies are addicted to PRC talent, and this has systemic consequences far more powerful than the Confucius Institutes and discrete donations and gifts that have garnered the lion's share of attention. As a thought experiment, consider that any contingency that interrupted this pipeline suddenly, along the lines of what we experienced a year ago with Russia as a result of its invasion of Ukraine, would plunge the US research enterprise and the hundreds of thousands of PRC nationals who work or study in it into crisis, to say nothing of the broader diaspora community to which they belong. We need to think hard about those possibilities and engage in scenario planning exercises around them.

The openness of our academic sector, its business model, and the foundations of institutional autonomy, freedom, and trust on which it operates make it a very soft target, and the CCP has exploited that vulnerability. For instance, the PRC government is projecting its domestic restraints on free inquiry and expression beyond its borders, exposing us to transnational censorship and repression. In recent years, prominent Western academic presses were caught removing articles from their online repositories at the behest of PRC authorities for fear of losing access to the lucrative Chinese market. They have also accepted joint publishing arrangements with Chinese academic presses subsidized by the PRC state. This facilitates a practice called "borrowing boats," a kind of product placement strategy through which Chinese content appears in English under a prestigious Western masthead. In principle, it's a great idea since it shares work from China with a larger global audience. But the Western half of these relationships has frequently failed to appreciate how different China is from our traditional, democratic research partners and then adopt appropriate safeguards to protect the integrity of their products.

Standard peer review has generally kept these joint publications from turning into vehicles of crude propaganda, but more subtle problems have emerged. Because of state subsidies and a favorable cost structure, final layout and production of these joint publications often takes place in China. This has allowed the partners there to unilaterally remove or alter content at the last minute, projecting their censorship regime into our knowledge base. Entire articles have been spiked without consultation. Furthermore, maps and place names are highly policed in the PRC because they can implicate contested national borders. This presents American academics and journals with difficult choices: should they conform to PRC conventions? Remove the controversial content? Pull the plug on the whole publication? Stand firm and watch their PRC co-authors withdraw to avoid repercussions? If in the interests of moving

forward the publication adopts official PRC maps and names, then the PRC state and media cite this as evidence that the international community in fact accepts China's disputed claims on territory and history. Whatever the choice, the CCP wins.

Even before COVID, the PRC state tightened restrictions on the freedom of its academics to travel to international conferences, for example, by confiscating and locking their passports in a safe and using that control to reward or punish behavior. For the last two years, certain PRC panelists scheduled to present work virtually or in person at North America's premier conference in Asian Studies failed to appear at the last minute, blocked by their own schools or government. Again, the implications are subtle but important. By silencing some topics or voices, and permitting others, PRC authorities distort the discourse in our spaces in their favor and generate an artificial binary in which our dissent from their orthodoxy can be portrayed as an ill-informed and ill-intentioned attack on China. This poisons the atmosphere and, rightly or wrongly, casts a cloud over all those who participate.

The leading online repository of academic articles in the PRC, a platform called CNKI that scholars from around the world rely on in their research, also censors its content. Articles from past Chinese publications that document events or points of view that challenge today's orthodoxy have been scrubbed from this digital archive as if they had never existed. Likewise, whole categories of cases have disappeared from the China Judgments Online (CJO) database, which provides legal scholars and practitioners a window into the operation of the PRC's legal system. By tampering with the source base, we use in ways that are invisible to the end user or difficult to detect, these measures corrupt our scholarship and hijack our tongues with the aim of enlisting them to inadvertently propagate official narratives. They seek to distort our understanding of China and the knowledge that informs US public opinion and policy.

Furthermore, starting on April 1, 2023, CNKI has announced that it will temporarily suspend full-text downloads of dissertations, patents, statistics, and conference proceedings pending new rules from the PRC government. It's unclear what lies behind this development but permit me to speculate. A new genre of research has emerged that uses bibliometric analysis of the material on online platforms such as CNKI or CJO to document censorship and the manipulation of our knowledge base; the transfer to China of basic and applied research that has implications for US national security, economic competitiveness, research ethics or human rights; the unauthorized patenting of US technology in foreign jurisdictions; and the architecture and operation of the vast apparatus through which the PRC government seeks to acquire and dominate the technologies of tomorrow: think civil-military fusion, AI, hypersonics, synthetic biology, and quantum computing. These platforms carry the hard data that demonstrate how active international collaboration with China, for all its benefits, also has a dark side that compromises the security and integrity of our research enterprise. This data illuminates for instance how an authoritarian government perverts even seemingly benign research in fields like medicine to ends like submarine warfare and the state repression of minority populations, and it exposes our unwitting or heedless complicity in that.

The tentacles of the PRC state reach deep into colleges and universities in liberal democracies. In addition to the anti-Asian discrimination and violence that springs from our own pathologies, there is another scourge to be aware of on our campuses. Human rights organizations have documented numerous cases of intimidation by certain students from the PRC against others. The perpetrators import PRC conventions of conduct and seek to enforce PRC political orthodoxy here in the US by threatening their peers, outing them on Chinese-language social media, or reporting them to local PRC consulates for the opinions they express. This creates an atmosphere of fear, impairs the ability of PRC students to enjoy equal access to the privileges and benefits of the US education for which they are generally paying full freight, and starves our campuses of the full range of ideas and perspectives that Chinese students can contribute to our classrooms, affecting the education that everyone receives. It is simply wrong to attribute this activity

solely to the machinations of organizations like Chinese Students and Scholars Associations or their contacts in Chinese consulates; it also involves healthy doses of individual opportunism and socialization in the values and behavioral norms of a Leninist political system, and we must combat it there as well.

The importation of norms and the extension of transnational repression from the PRC to our campuses extends further than many realize. The 2020 National Security Law adopted in Hong Kong applies extraterritorially anywhere in the world. It literally criminalizes mainstream coursework on Chinese history and politics in US classrooms and exposes our students and faculty to extradition, trial, and punishment wherever PRC prosecutors can reach them. Although it has yet to be invoked in that way, the law is on the books and the prosecution of dozens of Hong Kong residents under it is having a chilling effect on free association and expression there.

There is a courageous historian from China who participated in the student protests that swept that country and were crushed with deadly force in 1989. Now a professor based in Hong Kong, they once taught a popular course on those events at one of America's most prestigious universities. This year, they are in the United States lecturing to students across the country and working on a book. A few weeks ago, one of Hong Kong's leading pro-Beijing newspapers tried to intimidate this professor into silence by running a hit job against them, a vituperative op-ed denunciation worthy of the Mao era that singled them out by name and called them a traitor and worse. This amounts to a target painted on their back and it is frightening to contemplate what might happen when the fellowship ends should this professor leave the US to return to Hong Kong. The lesson of this story and others like it is that what happens in China no longer stays there. The phenomena discussed above are having corrosive effects on our academic spaces, and we are failing roundly to counter them. Moreover, our democratic allies and partners around the world are experiencing the same challenges. We must answer them collectively.

Media:

The asymmetry at the heart of the PRC's relationships with free and open societies manifests in traditional journalism as well, but the results for China have been decidedly mixed. Within the PRC, foreign correspondents and their local staff have experienced intensifying surveillance, physical intimidation, and restrictions on their ability to travel and report on stories. For over a decade, the PRC government has pushed a crescendo of experienced foreign journalists from the country by methods such as withdrawing their press credentials, expelling them outright, and shortening the duration, delaying the renewal, or blocking the issuance of visas. Affected organizations include Al-Jazeera, Bloomberg, CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. At the same time, draconian COVID lockdowns, stricter Party control and purges of domestic media, and an increasingly repressive political environment have had chilling effects on the local journalists who bring many stories to light. As a consequence, reporting in China is far more challenging that it was in the years before Xi Jinping came to power and the Foreign Correspondent Club of China has marked that deterioration in its annual reports. Yet, if the goal was to silence informed, critical perspectives on China in major US media and make the tone of US reporting more favorable to the PRC government, then it has been an abject failure.

China's media crackdowns have coincided with a more assertive and combative posture before the world, including its practice of wolf warrior diplomacy, its suppression of civil society in Hong Kong, its military pressure on Taiwan, its lack of transparency regarding COVID, its tilt towards Russia and unwillingness to criticize the invasion of Ukraine, its arrest and detention of prominent foreign citizens such as the two Canadian Michaels, and serious allegations of interference in foreign elections and political systems. Against this background, public opinion surveys indicate that the credibility of the Xi regime and positive sentiment towards it have nosedived in the US and other liberal democracies. No amount of so-called positive energy spread overtly through paid inserts in US newspapers and content sharing deals with media organizations, or covertly through social media and disinformation campaigns,

which for all the bot activity they generate actually register trivial engagement among real human beings, none of that has been able to overcome the burden of China's actual behavior in the world or Xi Jinping's graceless aloofness. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has created what German Chancellor Scholz calls a *zeitenwende* or epochal turning point, making the stakes in resisting revisionist authoritarian powers more palpable in countries that previously regarded the PRC primarily as a trading partner and as otherwise very far away. In the minds of the American public, a single spy balloon may matter more than the toil of one hundred now shuttered Confucius Institutes.

The Global South is where the media competition is up for grabs, but even here PRC gains may owe more to neglect by penny-pinching Western governments and media than to the brilliance of Chinese information operations. The Chinese government pours resources into the media sectors of developing countries and has a plan. It floods the zone with content that showcases China's achievements and its commitments to local partners and denigrates Western political values and systems. It generates good will by donating equipment and teaching technical skills to improve production values, by providing pro-Beijing news wires at little or no cost, and by bringing journalists by the hundreds to China for short training programs. Afrobarometer surveys, for example, indicate that this effort is bearing fruit in that African publics admire China for its rapid economic and technological development and what it might be able to do for them but not for a great deal more. Admittedly, the PRC promotes corruption, elite capture, and authoritarian models of media governance, but when African publics have a choice they tend to choose local providers or CNN over China's flagship CGTN. Promoting diverse local media markets, reputable alternative sources of information such as independent newswires, transparency, and the ability of journalists to practice their trade in safety and make a secure living is key. That requires a coherent vision, investment and persistence and the West is not providing adequate levels of any of those. In their absence, the CCP fills the vacuum, cultivating ties that yield public support and governmental votes in international organizations. We can't win that competition if we don't put in the time and resources.

Recommendations:

To a great degree, malign PRC influence over international academia and media owes its gains to our myopia, neglect, and self-inflicted errors. But this also means that improvements are within our grasp, and there are at least eight that would address urgent needs in short order.

1. The Congress should increase funding to enhance the implementation and enforcement of Section 117 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which requires the reporting of foreign gifts and contracts valued at \$250,000, and to enhance the government's capacity to analyze and openly publish that data.
2. State governments should fund educational programming that will satisfy the niche formerly filled by Confucius Institutes so that their closure will not exacerbate our nation's shortage of skills in Chinese language, history, and culture.
3. Federal funding agencies and state governments should couple prohibitions on participation in foreign talent programs with increases in the resources available domestically to replace lost opportunities and incentivize desirable behavior.
4. Universities should educate all international students as part of their initial orientation about campus norms of free academic inquiry and expression and create formal resources and procedures to assist students and faculty in maintaining a climate free from intimidation.
5. States and the federal government should redouble efforts to foster domestic human capital in STEM disciplines, particularly in underserved communities.
6. The Congress should accelerate its decisions on ambassadorial appointments to avoid leadership vacuums in diplomatic posts that must contend with energetic local influence operations by the PRC.

7. The Executive should accelerate rulemaking and the issuance of authoritative interpretive guidance pursuant to National Security Presidential Memorandum 33 to establish a clear and consistent baseline for security and integrity across the research community.
8. The federal government should establish a continuing line of funding for the Research Security and Integrity Information Sharing and Analysis Organization proposed in Section 10338 of the CHIPS Act to promote trusted ecosystems of international collaboration by identifying, assessing, and developing best practices to mitigate risks to the research enterprise. To combat malign foreign influence, the scope of this organization should embrace the humanities, social sciences, and professional schools in addition to STEM disciplines.