



# Why China's crackdown on academic freedom will backfire

[www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com)

5 mins read

## Chinese

academics and intellectuals should not have been enraged by the communist leadership's move to drop a written statement about academic freedom from the charters of a handful of universities. Not only has there rarely been such freedom in China since the founding of the people's republic in 1949, this rarity is commonplace in communist-ruled nations.

**B**ut when the government's decision to drop the statement from the charter of Shanghai's Fudan University came to light on December 17, it sparked a rare act of defiance. Students gathered in a cafeteria during their lunch break and joined

in a rendition of school's official anthem, which extols "academic independence and freedom of thought". Professors and educators continued to show their discontent by joining in a chorus of the anthem on December 21, when they gathered to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the school's world economics department.

A

[video clip of the protests](#)

that went viral on social media triggered not only alarm among faculty and students alike, but also an explosive proliferation of critical and satirical comments before the government's ever-vigilant censors acted to delete the clip.

A sign at the Fudan University campus in Shanghai. Photo: AFP

The education ministry said it had approved alterations to the charter for three universities. The key word "independently" was removed from the original, which reads "the school independently and autonomously runs the university" and "teachers and students independently and autonomously conduct academic studies". The revised version says that the university needs to "equip its teachers and employees" with "Xi Jinping Thought", which was enshrined in the party's constitution in 2017.

Advertisement

Established in 1905 by Ma Xiangbo, a famous Chinese Jesuit priest and educator, Fudan is considered one of the most prestigious and liberal campuses in China. Fudan got its name from the Confucian quotation "Its light shines heavily day after day", committing its members towards undertakings that will brighten society.

Student protests have been rare in China since the bloody military crackdown on the student-led democratic movement in 1989. Though academic freedom is scarce in any communist-ruled nation, between 1978 and 1989 there had been some progress under the stewardship of reformist party leaders Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Two of China's post-1989 leaders, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, showed a limited tolerance towards freedom in classrooms, despite rejecting any meaningful political reform.

SUBSCRIBE TO This Week in Asia

Get updates direct to your inbox

By registering, you agree to our [T&C](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

Since coming to power in 2012,

[Xi Jinping](#)

has revived Marxist orthodoxy and tightened the party's grip on every corner of society, particularly in university campuses. He has moved to further restrict academic activities, strengthen the Great Firewall to block all foreign information, punish liberal scholars for spreading "Western ideas" and jail activists who advocate political liberalism. Xi has declared on several occasions his intention to turn universities into a "stronghold of the party's leadership" and make Marxist orthodoxy paramount in the mind and soul of scholars and students. The move to alter the charter has sparked anxiety among Chinese intellectuals, as they see it as the latest development in the party's efforts to tighten control on campuses following the deterioration of academic freedom in recent years.



Students are seen on the campus of Fudan University in Shanghai.

Photo: AFP

However, the academic clampdown contradicts the leadership's efforts in recent years to boost Chinese universities' global competitiveness and ensure high rankings in global university league

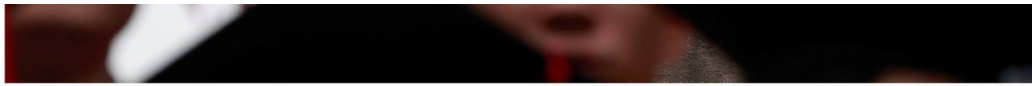
tables. The government sees such endeavours as a key strategy to promote the nation's competitiveness in a knowledge economy.

Theoretic study and historic experiences have suggested that academic freedom is vital both for creating the best universities and scientific discoveries. The idea has been deeply rooted in free societies since it was first written into the charter of Leiden University in the Netherlands in 1575. Today the university's motto is "*Praesidium Libertatis*" – bastion of freedom. The concept is enshrined as the *raison d'être* of academic life by universities around the world, including many of China's oldest, which were founded before communist rule.

The United States has offered the best example of how the unfettered search for truth by scholars is essential for any first-class academic institution to excel. Universities from the world's sole superpower make up the vast majority of the world's top 100 and the lion's share of the top 25. In sharp contrast, China, which runs the world's largest higher-education system, has had only a few schools – such as Peking and Tsinghua Universities – ranked among the world's top 100.

The historic lesson from the suppression of Galileo's championing of heliocentrism – the theory that the Earth and other planets revolve around the sun, a model developed by the mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus – has proved the critical importance of academic freedom in scientific research and discoveries.





Graduates pose for a picture in front of the statue of late Chinese leader Mao Zedong after their graduation ceremony at Fudan University in Shanghai. Photo: Reuters

When it comes to the Nobel Prize in science and economics, mapping the winners by university affiliation also proves the close relationship between academic freedom and achievements. All of the world's top 70 universities, each with at least a dozen laureates, come from free democracies – in Europe, North America and Japan.

Among them, Harvard University tops the list with 160 Nobel laureates, followed by the University of Cambridge's 120, University of California, Berkeley's 107, University of Chicago's 100, and Columbia University and MIT's 96.



## **The academic clampdown is undermining the government's effort to attract high-quality, overseas-educated talents to take up jobs in Chinese universities.**

When it comes to laureates' country of origin, China – which has had only one Nobel Prize winner in science – lags far behind even small nations, like Sweden's 32 laureates, Switzerland's 28, and Austria's 22. These three countries each have a population of 10 million or fewer – China has 1.4 billion people.

The Chinese leadership's effort to tighten its grip on campuses comes as a growing number of Chinese youth head overseas for education, as

a result of their increasing disappointment over the country's politically dictated education system.

In China, some professors of ideologically related social sciences are forced to give up their academic pursuits due to the fear of being punished, and shift to non-academic jobs. The academic clampdown is undermining the government's effort to attract high-quality, overseas-educated talents to take up jobs in Chinese universities.



A banner on the campus of Fudan University in Shanghai calls for institutions to adhere to the political philosophy of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Photo: AFP

This political suppression also runs counter to Xi's cherished programme of "national rejuvenation", as an academic clampdown would undermine the country's embrace of the knowledge-based economy – which is characterised by a dependence on a highly skilled, well-educated, and technically minded workforce, and driven by innovation and scientific findings.

Tertiary education is broadly defined as a key driver of growth, prosperity and competitiveness in a knowledge economy. It also plays a pioneering role in creating a better world, as it helps promote the dissemination of knowledge, upheld law and order, bolster social ethic and harmony, and shore up good governance.

Academic freedom to universities is as significant as water to fish and air to human beings – as Albert Einstein once asserted, academic freedom is the right to search for truth and to publish and teach what one holds to be true. “It is evident that any restriction on academic freedom acts in such a way as to hamper the dissemination of knowledge among the people and thereby impedes national judgment and action,” said the greatest physicist and scientist of the 20th century.

China’s ongoing campaigns are intent on legitimising the party’s monopoly on knowledge and truth, amid the bankruptcy of communist ideology. However, the party should focus on efforts to deliver prosperity and promote social and political advancement to prop up the legitimacy of its rule, rather than resorting to political suppression and backtracking to revive rotten ideologies at the expense of the nation’s economic development and social advancement. ■

*Cary Huang is a veteran China affairs columnist, having written on the topic since the early 1990s*

