

May 13th, 2020

CONCERNING THE THREAT OF AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE AND THE DEFENSE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS.

In response to calls from within Chinese civil society, and in light of the continued struggles of Hong Kongers, Mongolians, Taiwanese, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and others,

We are compelled to voice our concerns over the present state of academic freedom, and bring to light the continued exploitation of liberal, democratic academic institutions by authoritarians. We have prepared this appeal so you may understand the scope of this threat, the need to counter it, and the precise actions demanded by our circumstances. We further seek to condemn, in the most unequivocal terms, all anti-Asian sentiment, violence, and hateful acts.

We, as students, scholars, and others faithfully committed to the fundamental dignity of the human person, reaffirm:

That academic institutions exist for the general well-being of society;

That it is the function of academic institutions to facilitate the transmission of knowledge, pursue the truth, and provide instruction to students;

That the proper exercise of this function necessitates that we defend the basic rights on which the existence of academic freedom depends;

That, for the instructor, these rights include the freedom of inquiry, the freedom to teach within the university, and freedom of extramural utterance and action;

That, for the student, these rights include the freedom of expression, the freedom to learn, and the freedom of association;

That efforts by authoritarian governments to subvert the proper function of academic institutions must be faced honestly and without prejudice;

And that, when these rights have been massively and unjustly infringed upon, and continue to be eroded by the malicious efforts of an external authority, it is the civic and moral duty of anyone aware to act in defense of academic freedom, academic institutions, and liberal democracy.

These principles draw upon the American Association of University Professors' 1915 Declaration of Principles,<sup>1</sup> the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,<sup>2</sup> the 1967 Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students,<sup>3</sup> Charter 08,<sup>4</sup> and the Prague Appeal for Democratic Renewal.<sup>5</sup> It is from this basis that we write to call attention to the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party. This regime, which has been described by constitutional law professor Xu Zhangrun as representing a form of "Legalistic Fascist-Stalinism,"<sup>6</sup> represents an affront to the fundamental belief in the dignity of the human person. It is a totalitarian state which has carried out countless depravities against the Chinese people.<sup>7</sup>

Immediate action in defense of academic freedom is necessitated not only by these concerns but by a long and growing list of offenses adding up to a long-term campaign undeniably aimed at expanding the reach and power of the Chinese state's apparatus of oppression. We have compiled a list, based on documented facts and the admissions of that regime's own officials, that clearly illustrates the scope of that campaign:

- The Chinese Communist Party has established programs at universities, especially Confucius Institutes, which are proprietary outlets of soft power<sup>9</sup> that promote self-censorship,<sup>10</sup> arbitrarily censor discussion of issues "sensitive" to the Chinese Communist Party,<sup>11</sup> utilize discriminatory hiring practices,<sup>12</sup> and propagate blatant disinformation.<sup>13</sup>
- It has illegitimately coerced student organizations, such as Chinese Students and Scholars Associations,<sup>14</sup> in order to restrict the rights of students and discourage their expression of political views,<sup>15</sup> and retaliating harshly against students--such as a UMD valedictorian in 2017--who express dissenting or independent beliefs.<sup>16</sup>
- It has interfered with the rights of students to freely organize and join associations.<sup>17</sup>
- It has deprived students, through intimidation, from exercising their rights to examine and discuss questions and express their own opinions.<sup>18</sup>
- It has prevented students from, and retaliated against students who, by orderly means, freely support causes that do not disrupt the regular and essential operations of the institution.<sup>19</sup>
- It has interfered and prevented students from inviting and hearing speakers of their own choosing.<sup>20</sup>
- It has discouraged students from developing their own capacity for critical judgment, and engaging in the sustained and independent search for truth.<sup>21</sup>
- It has undermined the integrity of higher-learning institutions by seeking to bribe and intimidate academics.<sup>22</sup>

Concerns over these matters have been raised through legitimate means for over two decades, but the Chinese Communist Party and its proxies (e.g. the *Global Times*, a state-controlled tabloid newspaper) have responded by issuing statements which are factually misleading and propagandistic

<sup>23</sup> or by ambiguously using the threat of financial pressure against universities.<sup>24</sup> In light of this, we respectfully demand:

- The immediate and permanent closure of all Confucius Institutes in the United States.
- The revocation of any organizational and/or club status afforded to the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, barring the prohibition of all instructions from consulates or embassies with regard to political advocacy or protest, and the banning of all funding from all proxies and agencies of the Chinese state or the Chinese Communist Party without explicit university approval.
- The full and public disclosure of all ties, both financial and academic, between centers of higher learning and all Chinese state agencies and proxies.
- The creation of policies and mechanisms which allow students and faculty to report violations of their rights and general encroachments upon academic freedom, and to annually consider additional measures to protect the rights of students and faculty.

We further recommend that colleges, universities, non-governmental organizations, and representatives of vulnerable groups implement practices and policies to protect academic freedom from authoritarian interference in any form.

The Chinese government's flagrant attempts to coerce and control discourse at universities in the United States and around the world pose an existential threat to academic freedom as we know it. It is a civic and moral imperative that we protect that freedom.

The Chinese Communist Party tries at every turn to silence citizens, environmentalists,<sup>25</sup> labor advocates,<sup>26</sup> feminists,<sup>27</sup> LGBTQ activists,<sup>28</sup> Christians,<sup>29</sup> Muslims,<sup>30</sup> Buddhists,<sup>31</sup> and countless others. It has expelled journalists for challenging its version of the truth,<sup>32</sup> it has manipulated the world's multilateral institutions in times of crisis,<sup>33</sup> it has compromised our entertainment, news, and business communities,<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> and it is committing crimes against humanity against Tibetans and Uyghurs.

The Chinese Communist Party's actions pose an immense threat to academic freedom and to human dignity. It is imperative that we distinguish this totalitarian regime from the Chinese people, whom we must steadfastly defend from abhorrent acts of xenophobia, racism, and hatred. We must act to give voice to the long-oppressed, be they Chinese, Hong Konger, Mongolian, Taiwanese, Tibetan or Uyghur. We must condemn in the most unequivocal terms any and all anti-Asian sentiment wherever and whenever it arises.

Let this action be the start of a broader, independent effort by academic institutions to counter wherever it arises. In the fight against authoritarianism, universities can continue to benefit from

the largesse of an emboldened authoritarian state, or they can stand on the right side of history. They cannot do both.

The world is watching, and the fate of liberal democracy--based on the fundamental dignity of the human person--depends on our success.

Signed,

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# Endnotes

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