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Censorship in China, and How Western Scholars Can Easily Dodge It — A Modest Proposal

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Recently there has been a heated debate in academic circles about censorship in China and the problems that foreign scholars face when trying to publish in the country. I am not going to go into the details of cases like Cambridge University Press or Springer Nature here; suffice to say that they were (or still are) willing to commit to self-censorship in order to gain access to the Chinese market. Apart from that, Chinese campuses of European or American Universities are also facing increasing pressure and interference from officials as well as alleged ‘non-governmental’ groups. Whoever needs more examples may simply refer to the ‘China section’ of the ‘Annual Report of the Network of Concerned Historians 2017’.

In essence, this is not a brand-new phenomenon; censorship has always existed under Communist rule, but there have been certain periods when it was enforced less strictly. The last years of Jiang Zemin’s rule, for example, or most parts of Hu Jintao’s, witnessed some degree of lenience towards dissidents, authors and artists. Certainly, some individuals were arrested and put in prison during those years, so one of course cannot claim that there has ever been an overall trend towards ‘liberalization’ in Chinese society. Perhaps we can say that for some years the Chinese government drove a zigzag course when it came to censorship. Maybe they did not even want to draw a clear line between the allowed and the forbidden, thereby leaving the task of censorship to the intellectuals themselves – always keeping them aware of the potential dangers that they might face once they had crossed the invisible line.

This system, with its combination of external threats and the installation of internal self-censorship, came to an end after 2012. Obviously, Xi Jinping wants absolute obedience and does not tolerate any deviation, let alone dissent – and that includes from foreigners who wish to stay, work or publish in China. All those who claimed that increasing contact with China (be it economical, academic or political) would help the country to develop in a more democratic direction have been proven terribly wrong. It does not really matter if they actually believed in their argument or if they just used it as a convenient excuse for making money in China – such a ‘strategy’

was in any case unrealistic from the very beginning. This conclusion should not come as a surprise; just remember that, back in 2007, James Mann aptly entitled one of his books *The China Fantasy. How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (a later edition bore the added subtitle *Why Capitalism Will Not Bring Democracy to China*) – while Carsten A. Holz published his article ‘Have China Scholars All Been Bought?’ in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Unfortunately, both are still very much relevant arguments even today.

Personally, what worries me much more than censorship inside China is the fact that the country is trying to export its censorship worldwide. Australia has recently become the most visible example of this, so much so that there is sufficient reason to believe that academic freedom in Australia has come under substantial threat from Chinese influence. Up to now, the countermeasures to which the Australian government has resorted seem to aim mainly at warding off Chinese influence in the political sphere; it is to be hoped that Australia will also vehemently strive to defend its academic freedom. There are other examples, of course, such as China punishing the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Calgary for having had close contact with the Dalai Lama.

This is not to say that censorship inside China itself does not worry me at all, but in my view it is not such a significant problem for Western scholars as many people seem to believe. Take Jacob Edmond, for example, who published his piece ‘Poetry and Translation in Times of Censorship; or, What Cambridge University Press and the Chinese Government Have in Common’ on the Critical Inquiry Blog (13 December 2017). In this article, Edmond recounts the typical problem that he (and everyone else) faces when wishing to publish in China:

[One can] refuse to change anything and so lose the possibility of addressing a Chinese audience, or make the changes and hope that one’s translated words and the mute marks of censored omissions might communicate better than the total silence of refusal. [...] For an individual researcher working on Chinese poetry, however, there’s little to be gained and much to lose by refusing to modify one’s work to satisfy the censors.

Edmond argues that sometimes a certain price has to be paid in order to make a particular book (or article) available to a large Chinese audience:

[Maghiel] Van Crevel’s [*Chinese poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*] is an excellent book on contemporary Chinese poetry: I stand by my review’s description of it as the ‘definitive sourcebook’. It therefore deserves a wide audience in China, where its insights are most relevant. Cutting one chapter was the price of that audience.

But even Edmond himself clearly sees that this solution is unsatisfactory, especially since his own ‘translated review discusses advantages that [van Crevel’s] book, in the version published in China, no longer possesses’. Truly, this state of affairs is saddening and frustrating – but on the other hand there is a solution:

You wish to publish in Chinese, but without being pestered by censorship? — Then just do it in Taiwan!

Despite its small size, Taiwan is home to a wide range of journals covering all areas of expertise. Many of these are published by academic institutions enjoying a high international reputation, and above all the working atmosphere in Taiwan is starkly different from that in China. This is mostly because there is absolute freedom to discuss and write.

Some people may object that Taiwanese journals only possess a very limited readership, but that is not the case. Even if they are usually not publicly available inside China, Chinese scholars (and officials) nevertheless not only read Taiwanese journals closely but they also cite them very often in their own articles! If you are lucky, you can even witness Chinese interest in Taiwanese journals first hand: I have seen Chinese scholars browsing through the magazines on the bookshelves at Eslite 誠品 or Kingstone 金石堂, and the shimmer in their eyes reminded me a little of children unpacking parcels under the Christmas tree...

Besides, there is another factor to consider: when publishing in Taiwan, you are supporting a free society and a democratic system sharing our academic values. When publishing in China nowadays, you collaborate with a dictatorship that is rapidly becoming harsher and stricter; or, to put it more bluntly, you willingly turn yourself into a tool of their United Front tactics.

It is your choice.