

## *Academic Freedom under Siege: Higher Education in East Asia, the U.S. and Australia*

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Academic freedom has almost become an emotive word. Reports about cancel culture, political correctness in universities, or sanctions and pressure on academics for extramural speech raise serious concerns, and these concerns are not limited to authoritarian systems. The academic freedom index suggests a decline in academic freedom in 2021 in many systems compared with 2011 while improvements are barely observable (Kinzelbach *et al.* 2022). Authoritarian influences on campuses in democratic systems are reported widely as well. For example, there are media reports about canceled book presentations or censored publications due to pressure by the Chinese side. The Confucius Institutes, funded by the Chinese government, have also made headlines as being propaganda instruments of the Party-state (Scholars at Risk 2019). Indeed, the long arm of the Party-state has prompted academics to question the feasibility and moral responsibility of research collaboration with Chinese actors (Ahlers and Heberer 2021). However, discourses about academic freedom are often polarized. Therefore, more nuanced scholarly debates on this topic are needed. *Academic Freedom under Siege* provides an insightful and timely window into challenges of academic freedom in different systems, including the examination of universities in East Asia, the U.S., and Australia. Published in 2021, one major theme of the twelve-chapter volume focuses on the implications of academic capitalism, resulting in commercialization and corporatization (C&C), for academic freedom. As a commonality across all systems, C&C come along with budget cuts that lead to marketization, an increasing lack of tenure, the pressure to publish indexed journal articles, and thus a devaluation of teaching. Education becomes an economic activity, and academics and universities exist not so much to pursue the truth but to serve political ends. Another major theme of the book is the impact of political factors on academic freedom, including the roles and identities of academics and institutional structures in various systems.

In the introductory Chapter 1, Zhidong Hao defines academic freedom and provides an “ideal” of it, a goal that only a few systems have indeed achieved, regardless of their political systems. The subsequent chapters depict the many challenges to achieve such an ideal. Hao mentions various indicators for academic freedom, including shared governance, tenure, extramural speech, and some stressors like the rankings game and student evaluations of teaching. Hao uses these indicators to demonstrate the extent to which academic freedom is under threat in numerous systems. Later chapters build on these indicators and zoom in on aspects of academic freedom in different systems, showing why systems have failed to achieve this ideal.

Chapters 2 and 3, as well as 6, 7, 8, and 11, look at C&C in their respective systems and demonstrate that regardless of the system there are many similarities in terms of challenges and impact. In Chapter 2, Zhidong Hao offers a comparative study of the adverse impact of C&C on academic freedom and the roles of academics in the U.S., mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Hao argues that C&C erode academic freedom in all these systems, distinguishing between full democracies, semi-democracies, and autocracies. The management of universities as businesses (commercialization)

prevents academics from assuming a critical role, as they are silenced by the funding source. Moreover, the top-down management (corporatization) weakens shared governance, i.e., the faculty role in governance. Hao argues that the Chinese system is “‘corporatization’ in its extremist form” due to the tight control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over higher education institutions (p. 46). In Chinese discourses, this governmental supervision is described as “administrationization.” In fact, the control of the Party-state over higher education has far-reaching implications for academic freedom in Chinese universities. As such, C&C arguably is not the main concern in terms of academic freedom.

In Chapter 3, Zhaohui Hong examines the case of an American university and sheds light on the impact of C&C in the U.S. since the 1980s. C&C have adversely affected the quality of faculty work in terms of research, teaching, and service. Furthermore, Hong concludes that C&C have increased faculty strain, reduced faculty morale, and weakened shared governance. In particular, they have been detrimental to the humanities and social sciences, as these are less practical and less economic development-oriented disciplines. C&C therefore come with a devaluation of the humanities and social sciences, and this is worrying. These disciplines are marginalized in terms of university governance, and the quality of scholarship appears to play a subordinate role as compared to other disciplines that produce more measurable outcomes. As rightly pointed out in a recent newspaper article, “If education is all about getting a job, the humanities are left just to the rich” (Malik 2022).

In a similar vein, Chapter 8 examines C&C in Australia. Linda Hancock’s findings are largely reminiscent of the challenges posed by C&C in the U.S. and elsewhere. Chapter 11 explores the impact of C&C in Taiwanese universities. Interestingly, Emily Jin-Jy Shieh and Sheng-Ju Chan found that despite some tangible effect of C&C on academic freedom in Taiwanese higher education, especially in teaching and service, effective counter-measures such as limiting tuition fees increases help to contain the impact of C&C and thus protect academic freedom.

In addition to C&C, Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the distinctive variable of “mainlandization,” which affects academic freedom in both Hong Kong and Macau. Chapter 6 shifts the focus on educational sovereignty in Hong Kong’s academic capitalism, which refers to professional autonomy – a notion discussed in the context of academic freedom. The authors examine changes in the academic profession of Hong Kong, including academic excellence, accountability, and educational sovereignty against the backdrop of academic capitalism. They argue that performativity and “mainlandization” erode Hong Kong’s educational sovereignty. The variable of “mainlandization” stands out, as it is a distinctive variable that shows changes to the educational system in Hong Kong, while the other variables affect academic freedom in this system as they arguably do elsewhere.

In Chapter 7, Zhidong Hao explores the professional identity of academics in Macau. Given its short history of higher education, Hao argues that “faculty professionalization has never developed in Macau as it has in the West” (p. 147). Since 1999, Macau has also been under the arrangement of “One country, Two systems.” According to Hao, the political system of Macau is “semi-democratic and predominately authoritarian,” and political factors, particularly the “mainlandization,” influence academic freedom in Macau. Besides the educational system being characterized by academic capitalism, political factors have affected academic freedom in Macau. The governance structure of the universities resembles the structure of mainland Chinese universities, meaning deans have great powers and can decide on personnel matters; the decision-making process is top-down with a very weak faculty. Beijing’s increasing political control over higher education has affected the formation of a professional identity, and Hao concludes that academics largely obey those political imperatives, without showing much resistance.

Chapters 4 and 5 illuminate the situation of academic freedom in mainland China. These chapters focus on individual academic freedom, i.e., the practice of academic freedom in an authoritarian system, in particular the control of research and teaching by the Party-state. In Chapter 4, Zhidong Hao and Zhengyang Guo explore the multifaceted roles of professors as intellectuals in China and ask how they engage with this role by using different attributes associated with different identities. While establishment/organic intellectuals are considered to have very limited academic freedom due to their status and dominant role as organic to the state, which shapes their political identities as intellectuals,

non-establishment/professional have more academic freedom, and contra-establishment/critical intellectuals exercise their academic freedom to the fullest extent possible in teaching and research. However, Hao recognizes that “[t]here is little manoeuvre room for contra-establishment/critics” under Xi Jinping, while “[e]stablishment/organic intellectuals dominate the official discourse” (p. 86). Yet, the latter may also occasionally assume the role of contra-establishment/critical intellectuals. The empirical findings based on a case study of a Chinese university (i.e., interviews) of the authors are particularly intriguing. It is an important account because it captures the strategies how individuals cope with this apparently hostile environment. Academics are very conscious of what they can say and how to frame topics in the classroom within the limits of political and ideological control, without crossing red lines. Hao describes this as obedient or limited academic freedom. The chapter highlights the politicized nature of the educational sector. Often research projects aim to keep academics busy, that is, to prevent them from doing sensitive research and thus to channel research directions and serve the needs of the state. In 2020, Perry, for example, argued that higher education could contribute to authoritarian persistence. She used the concept of “educated acquiescence” to show how academics in China are being made uncritical to ensure “political compliance” (Perry 2020).

Creating excellent universities, which requires the promotion of critical thinking, while maintaining political control over higher education in authoritarian systems, is a delicate balancing act. However, it reflects the Party-state’s expectation of the dualistic function of higher education in China. In Chapter 5, Xiaoxin Du explores this dichotomy in relation to China’s higher education system. Her findings are based on fieldwork conducted in 2014 (a case study of a Chinese university). Since higher education institutions in China are responsible for the indoctrination of young people, teachers are central figures in maintaining political control. In terms of academic freedom, interview data suggest that academic staff do not receive instructions about a list of topics (like the “Seven No’s”) or even words (like the Party-state) that they are not allowed to use and discuss in the classroom, but they “had a mental list of topics they could not touch upon without crossing the CCP’s bottom line” (p. 111). The interviews moreover revealed that minor violations of the “bottom line” did not lead to serious consequences at the university. However, the academic staff’s primary responsibility is “to create *Red* graduates” (p. 112), while pursuing academic freedom plays a secondary role. Some forbidden zones are arguably obvious, including the leadership of the CCP or specific historical events that might challenge the legitimacy of the Party; then there are edge zones, including “Western” values and democratic values. Having such forbidden zones in mind, academics from all disciplines have developed self-censorship strategies, e.g., the use of metaphors to avoid using sensitive words or expressing their own political opinions. The case study indicates that Western ideas are still taught at the case study university and classroom discussions can indeed be critical. Du’s key takeaway is that “[...] political control is not a simple either/or issue in Chinese higher education, but a complex interaction and negotiation involving academic staff’s dual roles” (p. 119). Du’s insightful and rich empirical findings date back to fieldwork done in 2014. In recent years, however, the Party-state has issued a number of documents that stress the need for strengthening the ideological and political work of universities. Furthermore, political compliance is demanded on the pretext of strengthening professional ethics. The tendency toward re-ideologization deserves further studies on how academic staff today handle their dualistic role and whether even those edge zones have become forbidden zones.

Chapter 9 by Edward Vickers and Chapter 10 by Jae Park examine academic freedom in Japanese and Korean universities, respectively. Notwithstanding distinctive features of each system, both educational systems are characterized by science-dominance, while the humanities and social sciences are traditionally devaluated and under-resourced disciplines. New education policies that foster academic capitalism, state control, and conservative politics have led to intensified attacks on these disciplines in both systems. The governments try to suppress and control research that is considered sensitive, such as the issue of the “comfort women” in Japan (Chapter 9). In South Korea, the government has direct control over higher education, and ministries have established their own research institutes serving as advisory bodies for the government in the formulation of higher education policies (Chapter 10). Both

chapters conclude that academic capitalism is only a partial explanation for the erosion of academic freedom. In Japan and South Korea, political factors are also detrimental to the humanities and social sciences, which is true for other systems as well.

This book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the present threats to academic freedom in different systems. The authors convincingly demonstrate that many challenges arise from C&C; indeed, as discussed, here we can find many similarities among the different systems. Political factors, on the other hand, shed light on the distinctive features of the different systems. As shown in the case of China, the combination of authoritarianism and academic capitalism poses a particular threat to academic freedom.

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## Island Encounters: Timor-Leste from the Outside In

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Lisa Palmer's *Island Encounters: Timor-Leste from the Outside In* is a travelogue, memoir and experiential ethnography of Timor. The book revolves around a family trip from the western tip of West Timor to the eastern tip of East Timor, undertaken over several months in 2018. Palmer, her Timorese husband and two children stayed in township hotels or with the husband's family, from where they visited origin houses, sacred sites, rituals, shamans, local "royals" and so on. In collaboration with an NGO, Palmer also led a study-tour of students from an Australian university. She approaches Timorese tradition as a confrontation with modernity, which she addresses through various development interventions including a mining project in the Baucau area and a government mega-project in the enclave of Oecusse. At the same time, she recounts aspects of the politics and history of the island.

*Island Encounters* is published by an academic press in a series titled "Monographs in Anthropology" and it is under review for *IJAS*, which publishes reviews of academic books only. And yet, the book has no references, no footnotes, no bibliography and no index; it does not meaningfully consider any of the scholarship on East Timor – including the abundant English- and