

The New York Times

China Tells Schools to Suppress Western Ideas, With One Big Exception

By Dan Levin

Feb. 9, 2015

BEIJING — They are out there, hiding in library stacks, whispering in lecture halls, armed with dangerous textbooks and subversive pop quizzes: foreign enemies plotting a stealthy academic invasion of Chinese universities.

So says China's education minister, Yuan Guiren, who has been issuing dire alarms about the threat of foreign ideas on the nation's college campuses, calling for a ban on textbooks that promote Western values and forbidding criticism of the Communist Party's leadership in the classroom.

"Young teachers and students are key targets of infiltration by enemy forces," he wrote on Feb. 2 in the elite party journal "Seeking Truth," explaining that "some countries," fearful of China's rise, "have stepped up infiltration in more discreet and diverse ways."

But the government's latest attempts to tighten controls over the nation's intellectual discourse have raised concerns — and elicited rare open criticism — among teachers and students who reject the idea that foreign pedagogy and textbooks pose a threat to the government's survival. Indeed, they note, one of the most vocal arguments against such controls came from the education minister himself.

Four years ago, he told a prominent government advisory panel that restricting the use of Western teaching materials was wrongheaded. "No matter how many foreign resources we import, we won't be at risk, because we're on Chinese soil," he said, according to a March 2011 article in the state-run Jinghua Times newspaper.

Referring to the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students who have gone overseas to study, he added, "We even sent so many people abroad and they weren't affected in the nest of capitalism, so why fear they would be affected here?"

His stark reversal highlights the growing tension between academics and party officials over the future of Chinese scholarship, and has given ammunition to his critics.

“I’m just disappointed that the education minister doesn’t have any backbone, and is simply saying what his superiors want him to say,” said Helen Wu, 25, a graduate student at Shantou University in the southern province of Guangdong.

To gird China’s impressionable young minds, Mr. Yuan has been championing new guidelines, issued last month, that call on the country’s higher education institutions to prioritize the teaching of Marxism, ideological loyalty to the party and the views of President Xi Jinping.

He recently described Chinese schools as the “ideological front line” in a battle against concepts like rule of law, civil society and human rights. Any “wrong talk” in social science and philosophy forums, he said, must be silenced.

His colorful speech, which amplifies the talking points of internal documents that have been circulating over the past two years, appears so far to have had little concrete impact on the nation’s college campuses. Still, some academics expressed concern that such pronouncements would affect the quality of their teaching.

“Professors personally feel that they’re unable to properly explain things to their students,” said a faculty member at Yunnan University in China’s southwest, who asked not to be identified to avoid political repercussions. “They think, ‘Oh, these university students, it’s such a pity they won’t be able to learn anything good anymore. No wonder so many Chinese people are willing to go abroad to study.’”

Others warned that Mr. Yuan’s remarks were reminiscent of the ideological purification campaigns of the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, the decade of chaos and violence unleashed by Mao that scarred a generation of Chinese intellectuals.

The notion that Western ideas are potentially subversive has been greeted with widespread incredulity, especially among Chinese intellectuals who note that Communism itself is a Western import. Xia Yeliang, a visiting fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, said the campaign to vilify Western values was hypocritical.

“Was Karl Marx an Eastern person?” asked Mr. Xia, who was an economist at Peking University until 2013, when he was fired for what he says were his anti-establishment political views. “Weren’t Marxism and socialism adopted from the West?”

Both teachers and students, noting the growing surge of Chinese students studying abroad, say that China only stands to benefit from foreign ideas. In three years, the number of Chinese studying at American colleges soared 75 percent to more than 274,000 in the last academic year, making them the largest contingent of foreign students in the United States, according to the Institute of International Education. Among them was the president’s daughter, who attended Harvard University, arguably the world’s most renowned bastion of liberal Western learning.

Until recently, Mr. Yuan appeared to be an ardent supporter of such exchanges. “We can learn from the outside,” he said in 2011. “Whether they’re rich or poor, socialist or capitalist, as long as they’re beneficial to our development, we can learn from all of them.”

Though many academics have kept their frustrations private to avoid losing their jobs, some have openly expressed concern that limiting the availability of foreign textbooks and stifling classroom discussion would undermine China’s quality of education.

In the wake of the education minister’s protest of Western textbooks last month, Shen Kui, a professor at Peking University Law School in Beijing, one of the nation’s pre-eminent institutions, published a letter online challenging the minister “to clearly delineate the line between ‘Western values’ from Chinese values.”

Mr. Shen also warned the education minister not to violate China’s constitution or law in implementing the latest political decree, providing several handy constitutional quotes for easy reference, including the guarantee of “freedom to engage in scientific research, literary and artistic creation, and other cultural pursuits.”

Party ideologues have counterattacked in the state media in recent days, demanding harsh punishment for would-be liberal enemies, including prominent entrepreneurs, lawyers, artists and professors. In an editorial on Wednesday, Zhu Jidong, an official in the National Cultural Security and Ideology Construction department at the China Academy of Social Sciences, argued that the authorities must “eliminate the teachers who often publish criticism attacking the party and socialism before we can truly uphold virtue and condemn evil.”

On Feb. 2, Peking University pledged fealty to the party’s latest directives in an online commentary and warned students not to be “led by the wrong values from the West” in the classroom.

“Chinese universities are universities with socialist quality, so of course we should stick to socialist education,” it said on the school’s website.

Yet when asked about the presence of hostile foreign forces on campus, several students said they had seen nothing to raise suspicion.

Jimmy Bai, 23, acknowledged using foreign textbooks in the university’s journalism graduate program but said he had encountered nothing subversive. “As a regular college student,” he said, “I haven’t noticed anything.”