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Expelled Peking University professor warns US universities over educating China's elite

By Matthew Pennington

Friday, 28 February, 2014, 11:45am

Democracy advocate and economist Xia Yeliang warns US colleges they may be putting their academic principles at risk by educating the children of China's elite

A Chinese economist and champion of free speech who was recently expelled from Peking University said on Thursday American universities are putting their academic principles at risk by co-operating with China.

Democracy advocate Xia Yeliang also said that top US universities may unwittingly help China's authoritarian system by educating its elites.

Xia was speaking at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank where he took up a job this month after his expulsion in October from a leading Chinese university where he had taught for 13 years. His removal was widely seen as sign of the ruling Communist Party's efforts to tighten controls on public discourse and suppress discussion of democratic values.

"Maybe it's not a good example, but if Hitler was here he would try to co-operate with Western universities," Xia said. "Some people will say you can't compare with that, but some aspects are quite similar."

"I don't mean I want to encourage universities to cut off the co-operation or any type of contacts but you have to keep those principles in your mind. Maybe those people just want to borrow your good name and ruin that name," he said.

Xia has been an outspoken voice in favour of democracy and critic of the Chinese government in recent years, where the new government of President Xi Jinping has tightened ideological controls. In 2008, the economist helped draft Charter 08, a bold call for sweeping changes to China's one-party political system that landed its main champion, Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, in prison.

Now Xia is feeding into a debate about the lucrative opportunities for US universities in catering to the tens of thousands of students from China who come to America, and by establishing campuses in the mainland, as New York University has done in Shanghai.

He contended that top Chinese officials send their children abroad because they distrust China's own educational system and want the country's next generation of leaders to have a comparable education to their Western peers. President Xi Jinping's own daughter attended Harvard.

"I have a warning for all those top universities in the USA. You think you got some benefit through co-operation with China but who will win in the future? It's hard to tell," Xia said.