

The Economist

Academic freedom

Don't think, just teach

The party purges free thinkers but can it contain free thinking?

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A MOTTO of Peking University, one of China's leading academic institutions, is "freedom of thought and an all-embracing attitude". But in recent months it was not all-embracing enough to allow Xia Yeliang, an outspoken economics professor, to keep his job. Economics was not the subject on which Mr Xia was most forthright. He was a signatory of Charter 08, a petition drawn up in 2008 that called for sweeping political change, and he was known for his liberal political views. (Another signatory of the charter was Liu Xiaobo, who won the Nobel peace prize in 2010 and is now serving an 11-year jail term for subversion.) Mr Xia was dismissed in October, accused of being a poor teacher. Unable to find another post in China, this month he took up a position as a visiting fellow at the Cato Institute, a think-tank in Washington, DC.

Mr Xia's case is part of a wider clampdown on free-thinking intellectuals. In December Zhang Xuezhong, a legal scholar, was dismissed from East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai after he published a series of articles defending the provisions of China's constitution. State media called such views a Western plot to overthrow the party. Also in December, Chen Hongguo, an academic at the Northwest University of Politics and Law in Xi'an, resigned. The university had objected, among other things, to his holding salons that discussed texts by Western philosophers such as John Stuart Mill.

China's continued modernisation has meant that students are more open to Western influences and have more social and economic freedoms than ever before. They tweet, blog and talk freely about all but the most sensitive topics. That has made the clampdown on their teachers even more jarring. The Communist Party, concerned that it is losing control, has issued a number of political directives banning liberal topics in the classroom. "Since Xi Jinping came into power [as party chief] he has tried to control everything, learning the means from Mao Zedong," said Mr Xia. "It is a great regression."

The crackdown has also been aimed at activists among ethnic minorities. Ilham Tohti, an economist at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, was detained on January 15th. Mr Tohti is a member of the ethnic Uighur minority, a Muslim group in China's north-west, many of whom believe their land has been occupied by the Chinese. He is accused of spreading separatist thought and inciting ethnic hatred. On February 7th Radio Free Asia, a radio network sponsored by the American government, released an interview with Mr Tohti from before he was detained. In it he denied any association with a terrorist group and spoke of his fears, asking for the interview to be released if he were detained: "The number of police officers around me has gradually increased," he said. "I am almost confident that the Chinese government is trying to get rid of me this time." He said he had only ever advocated human and legal rights and equality for Uighurs.

Mr Zhang, the legal scholar, sees his own dismissal as a scare tactic that will fail in the long term as the dissonance grows between politics and everyday life. "When there are many people who are...waiting to stand up, crackdown measures will only make people angry," he says. That may be so, but for now, on the surface at least, the party appears to be in control.