

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

House Panel Plans to Scrutinize U.S. Universities' Ties With China

By Karin Fischer
December 3, 2014

Until now, the impact of China on American universities has largely been a subject of discussion for college campuses, not the halls of Congress.

No longer. A U.S. House subcommittee will hold [a hearing on Thursday](#) about whether American colleges' Chinese connections could compromise academic freedom in this country. Scholars from both the United States and China will testify.

"The Chinese educational market is a lucrative one, but we have to ask if there are any hidden costs for American schools and colleges seeking access to that market," said Rep. Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations. "By rushing to build campuses in China and signing agreements to have Chinese-government entities on American campuses, are universities and schools accepting restrictions on foundational principles of American higher education?"

Here are a few topics likely to come up in front of Mr. Smith's subcommittee:

Restrictions on American scholars in China. One speaker at the hearing is Perry Link, a professor of comparative literature and foreign languages at the University of California at Riverside who has been barred from China for nearly two decades. Mr. Link, who was blacklisted by the Chinese government probably because of [his writing on the Tiananmen Square protests](#) and human rights in China, has spoken out about [the corrosive effect](#) of Chinese pressure on foreign academics and institutions.

Too often, he says, China scholars self-censor, avoiding politically sensitive topics, for fear they will also run afoul of authorities and lose access to libraries, archives, and other research sites in China.

Controversy over Confucius Institutes. There are now more than 80 of the Chinese-sponsored language and culture centers on American campuses, part of an effort to expand China's diplomatic and cultural reach. But faculty members at several colleges have pushed back against the institutes, saying colleges and universities with such programs risk becoming dependent on Chinese funds and [susceptible to pressure](#) from Beijing to stifle speech it opposes, such as support for Tibetan independence.

Although there has been little evidence of direct meddling by the Chinese government, the [American Association of University Professors](#) and the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#) have urged colleges to either scrap the partnerships or renegotiate them to promote transparency and protect academic freedom. This fall, two institutions, [Pennsylvania State University](#) and the [University of Chicago](#), announced they were closing their Confucius Institutes.

Scrutiny of overseas ties. More and more American colleges are establishing programs or even satellite campuses in China, raising questions about whether they can work in authoritarian countries without [compromising their academic integrity](#).

Representative Smith's interest in the topic stems from his support of Chen Guangcheng, a blind Chinese dissident who was asked [to leave New York University last summer](#) after a year as a visiting fellow. While NYU maintained that the appointment was always meant to be temporary, Mr. Chen himself suggested that the university, which was about to open a campus in Shanghai, was bowing to pressure from Chinese authorities.

More recently, faculty discontent at Wellesley College's international engagement was stirred after Peking University, with which Wellesley had a nascent partnership, fired a politically outspoken professor, Xia Yeliang. Both Mr. Xia, now a scholar at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, and the leader of Wellesley's protests, Thomas Cushman, a sociology professor, will testify at Thursday's hearing. The two men have called for a [broader national debate](#) about American colleges' overseas ties in places such as China.