

The Japan Times

Chinese professors given chilling warning

By JACK CHANG

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BEIJING (AP) — Over two weeks, the Communist Party-run Liaoning Daily newspaper sent reporters to sit in on dozens of university lectures all over the country looking for what the paper said were professors "being scornful of China."

During visits to more than 20 schools, the regional paper wrote last week, it found exactly what it said it was looking for: Some professors compared Mao Zedong, first leader of China's communist government, to ancient emperors, a blasphemy to party ideology upholding Mao as a break from the country's feudal past. Other scholars were caught pointing out the party's failures after taking power in 1949. Some repeatedly praised "Western" ideas such as a separation of powers in government.

"Dear teachers, because your profession demands something higher of you, and because of the solemnity and particularity of the university classroom, please do not speak this way about China!" implored the article, since widely distributed on social media throughout China.

Chinese professors have long endured monitoring and some degree of political interference, but this kind of public shaming was unprecedented in China's recent history, said Zhang Wen, a journalism professor at the University of Science and Technology Beijing. For some, it evokes memories of the bloody political purges of the Cultural Revolution 40 years ago.

Since taking power last year, President Xi Jinping's government has tightened controls over a wide range of society, from artists to churches. And while academics have traditionally been held up as respected voices of authority in Chinese society, many view the public investigation as an order to watch what they say in classrooms, Zhang said.

"I think this is a very bad thing," he said. "Teachers need some freedom to interpret facts. If not, why have teachers then? Students can just read books. I think this is definitely a warning to us."

Just months after Xi took power last year, Chinese authorities outlined seven topics that professors shouldn't talk about in their classes, including judicial independence, civil society and the wealth of government officials, according to Xia Yeliang, a former Peking University economics professor who was fired last year for supporting democratic reforms in China.

In addition to Xia, at least two other Beijing-based professors have been disciplined for their teachings about sensitive topics such as the Arab Spring uprisings and constitutionalism in China, Zhang said.

Economics professor Ilham Tohti was even sentenced to life in prison in September on separatism charges in part for championing the rights of the country's Muslim Uighur minority during his lectures at Minzu University in Beijing. That sentence was upheld by a higher court Friday.

"I don't think there's any question we're in the midst of a renewed crackdown on dissent," said David Bandurski, a researcher at the University of Hong Kong-based China Media Project, which studies the practice of journalism in the country. "It seems there is a broader attempt to limit discussion on a whole range of issues in academia and in the press that the party regards as sensitive."

The growing pressure hits as several U.S. universities, including Duke and Stanford, open campuses in China, hoping to tap into the country's enormous and growing pool of students.

Last year, more than 130 faculty members at Wellesley College in Massachusetts signed a letter warning that firing Xia would jeopardize a new academic partnership between the college and Peking University.

Several U.S. institutions, including the University of Chicago and Penn State, have ended their relationships with the Chinese government-run Confucius Institute, which has opened branches in hundreds of universities and schools around the world. U.S. professors have complained that instructors at the institutes have promoted a rosy, state-approved vision of China and are trained to avoid discussion of sensitive subjects such as Tibet and the 1989 massacre of pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

Bruce Lincoln, a University of Chicago religious studies professor, said he and others there objected to the Confucius Institute independently running its program and offering classes for school credit.

"If they're partnering with an American university and ... are supplying the teachers and the curriculum, and the university calls it one of their courses, I think something terrible is going on," Lincoln said. "It's as if we let the tobacco industry offer its course in health sciences."

In China, the Liaoning Daily article has also sparked furious debate on Chinese social media about the need for intellectual autonomy versus patriotism in academia.

Zhang Ming, a politics professor at Renmin University in Beijing, noted in a rebuttal that the story doesn't cite specific professors or schools, only saying reporters visited classrooms in Beijing, Shanghai and three other cities, during which "they listened to nearly 100 expert classes."

"They didn't say who said what, they just said the problem was big," Zhang said. "It's a very strange thing."

Also, Chinese professors asked why the story came out in a northeast Chinese branch of state media rather than the People's Daily or another national publication. Liaoning Daily declined Thursday to comment on their story.

In its article, the paper said it was responding to reports that many professors were "blackening" the country in their lectures.

"We felt we had to write this open letter so that our teachers could better consider questions like these: How should China be taught objectively and accurately in the classroom?" the article read. "How can students be taught all at once with expert knowledge and a bright attitude?"

According to Xia, now a visiting fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian U.S. think tank, the article showed the Chinese government was no longer hiding what had always been private or unspoken pressure on academics. It was an unmistakable move by the government, he said, to rein in public discourse in a corner of Chinese society that has up until now enjoyed more freedom.

"The way they're doing it, they're trying to terrorize Chinese academics," Xia said. "This is like in the Cultural Revolution. If you have foreign connections, they can say you're anti-Chinese. They can treat you like enemies."