

THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL OF CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

BY JIAO GUOBIAO

China's students face many challenges in developing their knowledge of human rights—not the least of which is the highly restrictive oversight of their academic advisors.

In recent years, the title “graduate advisor” has become increasingly common on Chinese university campuses. One of the advisor's most important responsibilities is to offer guidance to graduate students as they write their theses. A key aspect of this job is to approve the thesis based on its “standpoint.” What exactly needs to be approved? According to the Ministry of Education's graduate student training norms, what needs to be ensured is the thesis' conformity to a Marxist standpoint. In practice, this means making sure that the thesis avoids sensitive questions and does not clash with current official ideology. The Central Committee's Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Education enjoin students to “develop the main theme” and “accentuate the positive.” If a student does this of his own accord, so much the better; he will have nothing to worry about.

What does it mean to conform to Marxism—indeed, what is Marxism? There are as many answers to this question as to the questions of what is Confucianism or what is Christianity. Arguments between Western and Eastern Marxism as well as among individual Marxists have caused great confusion from the earliest days.

If we can say that a thousand theatergoers see a thousand Hamlets, we can likewise speak of a thousand different Marxisms. Marxism encompasses Wang Ming¹ and Kang Sheng,² the orthodox opinions published in the *People's Daily*, the *PLA Daily* and *Red Flag*, as well as “Practice Is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth,” the *Guangming Daily* article that rallied supporters of Deng Xiaoping. This shows how ludicrous, both in theory and in practice, it is to require students to “solve problems from a Marxist standpoint.”

The thesis defense

Although Marxist theory is open to countless interpretations, at least it is based on written texts. Injunctions to avoid sensitive questions and toe the Party line, on the other hand, cannot

be traced to any specific source, but can still cause deep and damaging intimidation. I know this from personal experience as a student and then as a graduate advisor. I obtained my Ph.D. in 1996. My thesis topic was the portrayal of prominent historical figures in the news media. I examined a number of heroic and exemplary figures in the history of the Chinese Communist Party since the days of the early guerrilla bases in Jiangxi and Yan'an, such as Zhao Zhankui,³ Li Suli,⁴ Wang Jinxi,⁵ Jiao Yulu⁶ and Han Suyun.⁷ I reexamined these figures from a modern perspective, and evaluated the value system and outlook on life communicated through them. My hope was that China's social exemplars could be brought into better accord with human and legal values.

During my thesis defense, the members of my committee thought that some of the opinions expressed in my thesis were unacceptable, and told me that I would have to rewrite two of the chapters. These happened to be the two most fact-filled chapters, as well as the ones I was most satisfied with and which I was confident could make a meaningful contribution to Chinese journalism. But I had to bow to the committee's decision. After I rewrote the chapters, my thesis was no longer my “child”; it had become an episode in my life almost too painful to recall. How could a doctoral committee destroy a graduate student's enthusiasm for scholarly research? How can a Ph.D. student reconcile himself to having the work he is proudest of rejected by his committee like a crooked nail that has to be extracted?

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One doctoral student in my year was treated even worse than I was. He passed his thesis defense without a hitch, but afterward, when his thesis was reexamined, the graduate school dean thought it contained a number of problematic “standpoints” that had to be rewritten. The dean arbitrarily overturned the joint decision of the five members of the thesis committee. What made the thesis problematic was its political

incorrectness. The members of the thesis committee were completely cowed by the dean's decision and failed to stand by their initial conclusion. Ideology continues to be the handiest tool at the disposal of the "academic mafia"; it enables them to intimidate and silence anyone at will.

One of my tasks as a faculty member was to advise M.A. students who were writing their theses. Almost every year, a student would ask me, "What's the line I'm not allowed to cross in my thesis?" What they were actually asking me is what falsehoods they were supposed to write. Every time I was asked this question, I was filled with bitter sadness. I don't need to explain what it feels like for a student advisor who still has a conscience to tell his students something he knows to be false.

Student advisors as thought police and enemies of truth

The general public sees graduate student advisors as academics invested with honor and dignity. In the eyes of students, they are esteemed and respected figures of authority. But the fact is that as regards certain thesis topics, graduate advisors are subverters of truth and licensers of falsehood. It cannot be stressed too strongly that today's student advisors are more shameful than the Prussian book and newspaper censors Karl Marx scorned and assailed more than a century ago.⁸ The job of censors was to censor, but graduate advisors are thought police charged with compromising students' truth-seeking spirit and perverting their innocent sense of right and wrong. Our job is to kill truth. That students must write what their academic

advisors tell them to at the expense of truth and facts is a tragedy and a disgrace.

Graduate students must fulfill two formal requirements for their thesis to be passed: the first is the thesis proposal and the second is the thesis defense. The thesis proposal, which is presented to the graduate advisor, is a brief outline of the thesis topic, the sources the student plans to use and the general orientation of the thesis. Based on this, the adviser offers guidance, makes suggestions and approves or rejects the proposal.

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In 2005, we had a graduate student who presented a thesis proposal on freedom of the press in Hong Kong. Having completed a six-month internship at an English-language newspaper in Hong Kong during the SARS outbreak, she was deeply moved by the independence enjoyed by its journalists, and spoke of the powerful appeal exerted by a newspaper that reported facts and truth. Having presented her proposal at some length and with visible enthusiasm, she became timid and melancholy and asked the one question that had been weighing on her mind: "Do you know how far I can go with this topic?"



China's university students: intellectual baggage. Photo: Reuters

I immediately sensed the student's sudden change of mood and shared her emotional pain. She was presenting her proposal to a panel of three thesis advisors, of whom I was the youngest. I was supposed to let my two senior colleagues speak first, but feeling compelled to do the right thing, I said, "You're in your early twenties. We're past 40 and 50. The future is yours. Say what's on your mind without mincing words. Don't hold back!"

In fact, I too was holding something back: If a teacher's responsibility is to prevent his students from expressing their own understanding of truth, of right and wrong, of what they hold in high and low esteem, he might just as well be chopping rotten wood. Don't teachers who force students to adulterate the truth and tell carefully measured falsehoods deserve divine retribution? A society in which 50, 60, 70 and 80-year-olds decide what truths 20-year-olds can speak is a stagnant and stultified society. If 20-year-olds are made to be just like 80-year-olds, then 20-year-olds a hundred years from now will be no different from 20-year-olds a hundred years ago. If generation after generation of teachers and students form an endless chain that fetters thought, can one even begin to talk of intellectual and scholarly progress?

The backwardness of humanities and social science research in China

Browsing in a bookstore the other day, I came across a recently published translation of a book entitled *The End of Sovereignty*.⁹ Chinese scholars simply cannot write this sort of monograph. If a graduate student picked this thesis topic, he might just as well give up the idea of ever earning his degree. The Chinese Foreign Ministry is constantly harping on the sacredness and inviolability of national sovereignty. Who would dare research the end of sovereignty? It is simply unthinkable. That's why, when we come across books on taboo topics, they are invariably written by foreigners. Under these circumstances, won't China's humanities and social science research inevitably take on an increasingly Third World quality?

A book entitled *A History of Foreign Translations of Chinese Books*,¹⁰ which surveys the field up to the last few years, reveals that almost no Chinese humanities and social science books have been translated. Most translations are of Chinese classics and a few works of literature. We were told several decades ago that "Chinese people must make a great contribution to humanity." Yet for the past several decades almost no works of Chinese scholarship have been translated into foreign languages. Is this the contribution made by China—a fifth of the world's population—to humanity? We ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

If our university professors, graduate student advisors and graduate school directors, who are responsible for approving student theses, continue to emasculate truth and endorse falsehood, our scholarship will always remain at a feeble Third World level, and we will always be consumers of foreign schol-

arship and producers of trash. To China's graduate student advisors I say this: When you advise your students with your airs of self-importance, do you realize that you are killing their creativity and committing a crime against our national spirit? Are there any advisors left who are not playing this role? This cannot go on!

Translated by Paul Frank

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TRANSLATOR'S AND EDITOR'S NOTES:

1. Wang Ming, alias Chen Shaoyu (1904–1974), was a senior leader of the early CCP who rivaled Mao Zedong in the 1930s. He was ousted in the 1940s for "left-wing" deviation and again in the 1950s for "right-wing opportunism."
2. Kang Sheng (1898–1975) was the head of the PRC's security and intelligence apparatus at various points until the end of his life. During the Cultural Revolution, he played a leading role in a series of political purges and witch-hunts.
3. Zhao Zhankui was a "labor hero" in the Shanganning border region during the "War of Resistance Against Japan" (1937–1945). After the war he was appointed a labor union leader in northwest China and Shaanxi Province.
4. Li Suli was a Beijing bus conductor and national model worker who was featured prominently during the 'spiritual civilization' campaign that sang the praises self-sacrificing workers in 1997.
5. Wang Jinxi (1923–1970), known as the "Iron Man," was hailed for his indefatigable spirit in braving sub-zero temperatures as well for being a driller at the Daqing oil fields.
6. Jiao Yulu, a county Party secretary who reportedly worked himself to death in 1964 serving the people, regained prominence during a media campaign in the early 1990s.
7. Han Suyun was eulogized by the Chinese press as a labor hero who supported her husband's extended family while he was a PLA soldier. For a panegyric published by the *People's Daily* in 2002, see <http://www.women.org.cn/allnews/06/632.html>.
8. In his *Critique of the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction*, Marx wrote, "Who is to grant authority? Kant would not have admitted Fichte's authority as a philosopher, Ptolemy would not have admitted that Copernicus had authority as an astronomer, nor Bernard of Clairvaux Luther's authority as a theologian. Every man of learning regards his critics as 'unauthorised authors.' Or should the unlearned decide who should have the authority of a man of learning? . . . The censorship holds us all in subjection, just as under a despotic regime all are equal, if not in value, then in absence of value; that kind of freedom of the press seeks to introduce oligarchy in the sphere of intellectual life." <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1842/free-press/index.htm>.
9. Jiao is probably referring to *The End of Sovereignty?: The Politics of a Shrinking and Fragmented World*, by Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk, which was published in Chinese translation by the Zhejiang People Publishing House (Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe) in November 2001.
10. Ma Zuyi and Ren Rongzhen, *Hanji Waiyi Shi*, Hubei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1997.