

**WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY MS MICHELLE SHIPWORTH
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This submission is of my experience of what I believe to be transnational repression at my UK university, although I am not the main victim. My submission understands my story through reference to relevant literature and ends with doable steps the committee could take now.

The most physically and psychologically vulnerable victims of this repression are Chinese students studying in the UK and their families in China. Most Chinese are silenced by their fear of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Link 2025). A tiny percentage of overseas students speak out and suffer serious harassment and the pain of their families in China being punished for the student's actions (Amnesty International 2024a, Human Rights Watch 2021). Many students have been educated to believe the CCP's version of history, where it has always acted benignly (Tsang & Cheung 2023); they too suffer if they learn painful truths about their authoritarian government while they are with us. Some Chinese students act as CCP informants, so others remain silent rather than say something that may get them reported.

But perhaps the most consequential victim in this story is our system of higher education. The content and methods of teaching in UK universities is being shaped by spoken demands and unspoken expectations of the CCP, with consequences for the knowledge and skillset of the half of the UK population that attends university.

The initiating incident is insignificant. But events unfolded so strangely that I sought to understand them through reading publications of human rights charities, parliamentary and government committees, academics, and other experts.

I am an Associate Professor in the UCL Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources and the first in that department to be recognised as a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, which required demonstrating the application of pedagogy to teaching. I have won a UCL Education Award, been on the shortlist for the UCL Provost Education Award, and been nominated for other teaching awards. I have been departmental Director of Ethics for over ten years and worked for years in Australia's government aid agency.

I developed and taught, for eleven years, a "Data Detectives" half-module, teaching around eight hundred Masters students, including about two hundred Chinese students, to be critical consumers of factual claims and secondary data. External examiners praised the module as "innovative" and "particularly valuable for MSc students". The content includes many lectures sharing a factual claim or secondary data, before revealing methodological and other problems.

Students are not easily motivated to critique research methods, so I tried to make the content engaging. Every year from 2014-2023* I included a teaching exercise with the question "Why

does China have so many slaves?” I showed a Global Slavery Index 2014 map which coloured China medium-low but ranked it number 2 in the world for modern slavery. This was the only module content singling out China. The intention was to especially help Chinese students develop critical thinking skills, which are largely omitted from Chinese education, but essential for success in UK degrees.

In 2023 I asked this question, the class suggested likely problems with the claim, and I gave a lecture on the many methodological flaws. At the end of the lecture, a Chinese student asked why I had posed a horrible question. I praised his question and explained that psychologists have found that people will put more effort into disproving a claim when they disagree with it; I was trying to motivate students to think of methodological reasons why the claim was likely to be wrong.

Days after the class I was told that one student had complained, then that several were upset, then I was locked out of my own module’s teaching platform and told to submit draft emails to less-experienced colleagues for vetting, ostensibly to avoid the situation being escalated beyond the department. In over thirty years of communicating with international students, no one has ever asked to edit my communications. At my insistence, my teaching rights were restored. The following week, the “upset” student entered the classroom laughing with all his mates; they sat together at the front, grinning at me, not evidently “upset”.

I was told that students were distressed about the teaching exercise and had requested the matter be escalated, including to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion staff. I was puzzled at the claimed distress, given the class was devoted to disproving the question’s implied claim, and puzzled that students raised under an authoritarian regime that ruthlessly suppresses ethnic minorities (Amnesty International 2024b) would think to involve EDI staff. I was repeatedly told to change the teaching exercise for future years, even though this was the first complaint about the ten-year old teaching exercise, and I had written evidence from every student that demonstrated that the vast majority benefitted.

Nonplussed at the turn of events, I did some exploring, finding a Scholars at Risk (2023) report which noted increasing surveillance of Chinese scholars by student informants. I told colleagues of this, saying we needed to discuss how to maintain academic freedom and teaching quality in the face of possible student actions on behalf of the Chinese state. I was told that the main issue was not academic freedom, but how Chinese students in the current global environment might perceive such a teaching exercise.

At the time, I was oblivious to credible claims of substantial modern-day slavery in Xinjiang. Colleagues did not tell me about these, nor that our Chinese students are unlikely to know about human rights abuses in their country but are likely to have been told that the West falsely claims such abuses (Tsang & Cheung 2023). If colleagues had pointed this out, I would have dropped

* During the pandemic, when many students were based in China, I modified the exercise.

the teaching exercise because it would not have made sense, and I do not want my Chinese students *unnecessarily* exposed to the reality of their authoritarian government for the first time in my classroom.

A few months after my department's response to the incident, I told senior UCL colleagues, who agreed that departmental colleagues had restricted my academic freedom; I told my departmental colleagues this. Two days later, colleagues submitted reports claiming that the ten-year old teaching exercise was evidence of my bias against Chinese students. My colleagues know I have excellent working relations with Chinese students and teaching assistants.

Although my Head of Department found no evidence of bias, he took the module off me, claiming the department needed to retain a good reputation among future Chinese applicants to remain commercially viable. I know of no other case in my department of a module being taken from an academic without their discussion and agreement. Not only was the module content highly innovative, but it was also considered departmental best practice for online content, which I had spent thousands of hours creating, in the expectation of teaching it for many years.

With this confluence of concerns, I went public with help from the Free Speech Union. The Telegraph put my story on the front page (Mendick 2024). Many national and international news and media outlets featured the story. UCL investigated, but did not give me my module back, instead changing it to no longer teach students to be Data Detectives. I lost my module and experienced emotional difficulties and security issues but gained the acquaintance of extraordinary Chinese dissidents and human rights champions.

Awaiting the outcome of UCL's investigation, I read reports, articles, books and papers by many China experts, and realised I had unwittingly activated actors supporting the CCP, and that my story illuminated how our universities are being manipulated to serve CCP ends.

“The Chinese government has grown bolder [in recent years] in trying to shape global perceptions of the country on foreign university campuses, influence academic discussions, monitor students from China, censor scholarly inquiry, or otherwise interfere with academic freedom” (Human Rights Watch 2021 p. 1). Narratives about Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang at odds with the CCP's are particularly suppressed (Hamilton & Ohlberg 2022, Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2023, Office of the [US] Director of National Intelligence 2024).

Months after the initial furore, I become aware of credible allegations of substantial human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including forced labour - slavery (Amnesty International 2024b). I realised that simply asking a question about slavery in China unwittingly aggravated an authoritarian government, notwithstanding my intention, to help Chinese students especially, and that the teaching exercise unwittingly supported the CCP narrative of “nothing to see here”.

Professor Zhao, a member of the US National Committee on US-China Relations, argues that “Xi Jinping...has nurtured a new generation of nationalists who are intolerant of any criticism of the CCP regime and...hypersensitive to any perceived insults to China.” The complaining student may have believed that simply asking the question insulted China.

However, Hamilton & Ohlberg (2022) add that students are increasingly encouraged to report on professors who have said something the CCP might disapprove of. Jiang (2022) documents how this is increasingly institutionalised and overtly rewarded in China. Indeed, “nationalists who engage in patriotic attacks overseas are lauded in China and rewarded for their patriotism” (Hamilton 2019). Unsurprisingly, clashes between nationalistic Chinese students and their teachers and peers in Australia have become frequent, albeit rarely publicised (Bochner 2020).

The student only complained about the initial question *after* we had spent an entire class problematising the implied claim, of many slaves in China. Moreover, he and his mates entered the next week’s class laughing before sitting at the front of the class, grinning directly at me. I now think the student was pleased to have caused trouble and may have received some reward for his actions.

Only recently did I realise that some students could have been genuinely upset. Students educated to believe in the CCP’s beneficence (Tsang & Cheung 2023) would suffer upon learning the truth. Some Chinese students in my class may have first learned, during student discussions, the upsetting truth that the slavery claims were credible.

Moreover, I now think that other Chinese students were likely pressured, via the UCL Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), to support the complaint. That would account for the number of complainers apparently increasing each time a colleague communicated with me. CSSAs do not just support overseas Chinese students; they mobilise them to object to narratives at odds with the CCP’s (US Department of State 2020, Hamilton & Ohlberg 2022) and, chillingly, monitor and control them (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2023, Hamilton & Ohlberg 2022). Moreover, if challenged, CSSAs operationalise role ambiguity and highlight their student welfare role (Parton 2019).

CSSAs are part of a “network of agencies responsible for managing the CCP’s influence over and relationships with key non-Party sectors, groups and individuals” including “Chinese students studying abroad” (Joske 2023). This network is linked to the United Front Work Department (Kwong 2023) which leads on CCP work to control the narrative about China abroad (Parton 2019). They often conceal formal links to the Chinese government (Hamilton & Joske 2018), especially on English-language versions of their websites (Bowe 2018). The Chinese-language section of UCL’s CSSA website notes that it is under the guidance of, and supported by, the Chinese Embassy, whereas the English-language section claims that it is “non-political”.

Chinese embassies threaten universities with loss of Chinese students, and thus fees, if universities fail to respond to embassy “guidance”, according to SOAS Professor Steve Tsang (2023), Hamilton & Ohlberg (2022) and former PRC diplomat, Yonglin Chen (2020). Since Chinese students contributed 40% of UCL’s total fee income in 2021-22 (Jack 2024), UCL is vulnerable to such pressures in a marketised education system. However, the CCP prefers to

create dependencies and induce self-censorship (Parton 2019). I do not know if the Chinese Embassy threatened to curtail the number of students taking our courses, or if my Head of Department responded proactively to perceived preferences, or if significant educational decisions were “simply” made based on claimed student upset, despite clear evidence of teaching efficacy.

Another strategy employed in my case is a favourite one – claiming that any criticism of China is based in racial prejudice (Hamilton & Ohlberg 2022). Fitzgerald (2019) claims that Chinese officials purposefully blur the boundaries between the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people, to attack criticism of the PRC or CCP as being anti-Chinese or Sinophobic.

Nearly all the ‘slavery’ class was spent discrediting the study’s methodology and undermining the implied claim that there were many slaves in China, thus unintentionally buttressing the CCP narrative. So, I was still puzzled that Chinese nationalists would object. Only recently did I realise that another module exercise would have annoyed CCP supporters and Chinese “nationalists”. Two weeks before the upset, I required students to consider how COVID-19 deaths are counted, document their country’s method and, in small international groups, develop a method for measuring COVID-19 deaths that captured each country’s best elements. This exercise assumes all measurement and estimation methods are improvable, and that no one government should be the final arbiter. This assumption is profoundly at odds with the CCP’s. When Zhejiang province statistics contrasted with official government claims of few COVID-19 deaths by showing a 73% surge in the number of cremations during the first quarter of 2023, the central government scrapped the release and then the collection of such data across the nation (Williams 2024).

Indeed, according to Hoffman & Hoja (2024), the CCP believes it will only retain power if it *defines* truth and reality. So, it manipulates statistics and shuts down independent evaluation of secondary data, to the extent of terminating auditors for examining supply chains for signs of forced labour in Xinjiang (Williams 2024). The entire point of my Data Detectives module - to teach students to be critical consumers of factual claims and secondary data - stood in unwitting opposition to the CCP. Moreover, the module was grounded in Western liberal traditions of freedom of inquiry, whereas Xi requires party and state staff to fiercely combat exactly such Western “false ideological trends” (Tsang & Cheung 2023).

So, a UK Masters module grounded in freedoms and teaching skills that the CCP do not want Chinese students to have, has been cancelled by UCL academics eager to please a handful of students who claim to be upset. Other academics have told me of UK human rights and law degrees avoiding topics that the CCP might object to. All students in UK universities – not just Chinese – are having their knowledge and skillsets constrained by universities’ inclination to oblige the CCP.

Even more direct threats to Western liberal education are growing; at a CCP Politburo (2023) study session on building an education superpower, Xi Jinping emphasised that that China must actively participate in *global* education governance. Economist Beijing bureau chief, David Rennie (2022) argues “under Xi Jinping...China is working to reshape the world order from within...at the expense of individual freedoms.”

Despite these threats, “in terms of tackling Chinese influence over, and interference in, many of our academic institutions”, observed the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (2023) in apparent despair, “the only step that was pointed to [by universities and the minister] was the championing of the importance of freedom of speech and academic freedom in our academic institutions...the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill was introduced in the House of Commons...and is making progress.” The Act passed in 2023, but the new Minister announced plans to remove provisions that would help protect both liberal education and our Chinese students.

First, the Minister plans to remove Act provisions requiring student unions to take reasonably practicable steps to secure free speech. CSSAs are student union societies, despite being ‘guided’ by the Embassy of an authoritarian state. Hamilton & Ohlberg (2022) document many examples of CSSAs trying, and often succeeding, to censor or cancel speech, events or appointments that the CCP might oppose. If implemented, the new Act’s student union provisions would require them to take reasonable steps to prevent CSSA censoring activities.

Second, the Minister plans to remove the Act’s only teeth - provisions allowing individuals to bring civil proceedings if they sustain a loss due to a university or student union breaching their duties. These teeth could allow a Chinese student to take their university to court if its failure to fulfil free speech duties contributed to their harassment by classmates. The student will lose this option if the Minister removes the Act’s teeth. Chinese students are the main victims of PRC-CCP activity on Western campuses; their academic freedom and safety, and the safety of their families is severely threatened (Amnesty International 2024, Human Rights Watch 2021).

Finally, the Minister plans to remove Act provisions that would increase transparency around foreign funding and influence. This is because of potential overlap with the new Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS). However, the government also seems reluctant to implement that scheme, and unwilling to place China in the highest threat level, despite urging from human rights organisations (Hong Kong Watch 2025) and warnings from its own security services (Johnston 2024). The Act provisions would increase transparency in the Confucius Institutes based in many universities; these institutes have also been involved in many censorship attempts on topics sensitive to the CCP (Hamilton & Ohlberg 2022). UCL’s Confucius Institute, opened by Xi Jinping in 2015 (RFA 2023) runs the UK government’s Mandarin excellence programme in schools (Hazell 2022). Parton (2019) argues that the downsides of Confucius Institutes could be managed through ensuring they cannot influence university matters and insisting on transparency, especially in contracts.

Nearly all Amnesty International's (2024a) and Human Rights Watch's (2021) recommendations for reducing the repression of overseas Chinese students focus on securing their academic freedom and freedom of speech. Recognising universities' ongoing failure to secure such freedoms on campus, parliament passed the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. To reduce transnational repression in our UK universities, I urge committee members to press the government to implement the Act 2024 in full now.

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