

Chinese Students Aren't Simply Tools of the Party-State



MERRIDEN VARRALL

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Many Australians are becoming increasingly concerned about China's growing influence in their country. Media reports such as the Four Corners/Fairfax joint investigation aired in June this year argue that Chinese money is being funneled into our political processes. Others show that Chinese state-run newspaper inserts are promoting the official Chinese view on local and regional issues. There is also coverage about Chinese companies buying Australian farmland and natural resources.

This anxiety extends to Australia's universities, where, according to some media reports, Chinese "embassy stooges" monitor and report on Chinese students who fail to toe the Party line.

Concerns about spying within universities reflect the more complicated matter of how mainland Chinese students approach their academic life in China, and how that may be subtly being transferred to their Australian education.

With almost 150,000 Chinese students currently studying in Australia, up from some 125,400 in 2016, this importing of Chinese academic culture has potential to disrupt the openness and critical analysis valued in Australian universities.

In 2008-9 I taught international relations to undergraduates at a Chinese university in Beijing. My teaching approach drew on my own experience at universities in Australia and Europe. I structured the course so that students were given weekly readings which we would discuss together in class.

My time teaching in Beijing gave me a window into Chinese students' attitudes and behaviour. One thing that particularly struck me was the tendency for students to align themselves with the Chinese

government view.

When I began teaching, I was not given any guidance or warnings about the topics I could cover in the classroom, or the way I should teach. But throughout the year, I was given strong hints that my approach was inappropriate.

For example, at my midyear review, I was advised by my department leadership that my approach of "trying to teach through rumor and hearsay" was unsuitable. When I refused to change my methods, I was told that I would not receive my bonus and that my contract would not be renewed.

Those warnings came not only from the administration but from the students themselves.

On several occasions, my students – always very respectfully – suggested I use a different style of teaching. They did not like sitting in a circle and discussing ideas. They told me they would prefer a lecture-style format where I "drew on my expertise" to teach them what was necessary for them to know.

Overall, many of my students were uncomfortable with my approach to teaching, based as it was on critical analysis and picking apart expert opinion. This was particularly true for readings and class discussions that could be construed as critical of China.

Most students, for example, would reject any suggestion that China had not always been, and would therefore always be, peaceful. The majority would react angrily to anything implying that Japan was not an inherently aggressive and expansionist country.

Some students did tell me in private that they were afraid to express their real views in class. They said that they feared their peers would report on them and that they would receive a black mark on their record, if not now,

then some time in the future.

Those students who did engage in critical discussion were usually shut down by classmates who stuck firmly to the standard officially-accepted line.

In one session, two students gave a presentation that painted the Japanese in a negative light. One of their classmates wondered aloud whether Chinese people still needed to hate Japan. Another suggested that China may also publish textbooks with self-serving interpretations of history, as Japan does. Outrage erupted. One student furiously accused the two of "not loving China enough."

Students from mainland China tend to bring their learning experiences and preferences with them when they come to Australian universities.

In Australia, some Chinese students have said they fear speaking up in class because they worry their compatriots will report them to Embassy authorities. Some students ask to be placed in tutorial groups without other Chinese citizens so they can speak openly.

The recent ABC-Fairfax report gave the example of Lupin Lu, head of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association chapter at the University of Canberra. Ms. Lu said she would not hesitate to inform officials at the Chinese Embassy if she heard of Chinese students organizing, for example, protests against Beijing.

Sally Sargeson, an associate professor at the Australian National University, told Forbes magazine that every Chinese student she asked about this problem "said they know they are being monitored and adjust their speech so they will not get into trouble." It should be noted, however, that several Chinese students in Australia whom I

have spoken to say they have never experienced this.

The issue is a very complex one. When Chinese students self-censor or monitor and report on their peers, it is not necessarily because the Chinese state is bearing down on them. Rather, many Chinese students believe that speaking out against the officially approved view, on any topic, is inappropriate. Monitoring and reporting on peers who diverge from the party line is seen as the right thing to do. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are automatons blindly following the Chinese state.

Universities have not adequately addressed this threat to debate and openness. Officials may be reluctant to take action because overseas students bring a lot of money to underfunded Australian universities. Because many Chinese students have internalized the importance of being aligned with official views, maintaining Australia's standards for free and open debate could be a challenge. There are a number of ways this situation can be addressed, the first of which should be for Australian universities to focus on understanding the problem in all its complexity.

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