

Chapter 16

Internationalization, the Securitization of Knowledge, and Trans-National Repression within and beyond the Classroom

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Abstract: Trans-national repression, governments reaching beyond their borders to attempt to threaten and silence their citizens abroad, is a growing challenge within increasingly internationalized university environments. However, it remains a critically under-recognized threat. This report focuses on the ways TNR poses distinct challenges not only for research but also for teaching, and the need to recognize its role in the wider securitization of knowledge and the information wars. It uses the case study of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an illustrative example, before turning to key recommendations for universities and governmental institutions.

Keywords: Trans-national repression (TNR), Chinese Communist Party (CCP), information wars

Introduction

The internationalization of universities presents diverse challenges for the securitization of knowledge. While there has been a wider turn of attention to the dangers to academia of the likes of data mining, academic/industrial espionage, cyber-attacks, and “post-truth”/“fake news,” the challenge of trans-national repression (TNR) regularly goes unmentioned. Yet it is a critical area in need of recognition and response. It is indelibly linked to “internationalization,”

the increasing recruitment of staff and students from multiple origin countries, as well as the likes of foreign funding of research institutes or positions or scholarships. But it is also escalating due to the affordances digital technologies give to surveillance and trans-national communication. It is part of the wider “information wars,” but carried out through forms of direct or indirect personal threat and violence. Universities are in fact extremely vulnerable to being sites of TNR and are in need of being part of the response to it. Turning a focus toward TNR highlights how much teaching—not only research—is in need of nuanced securitization.

Drawing on a variety of recent research, as well as more than ten years’ personal experience teaching at universities in Europe, the United Kingdom, and China, I use a recurring focus on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), not because they are unique, but are illustrative of some of the techniques and challenges.¹ I begin with defining and discussing TNR, before situating it in the wider securitization of knowledge, and finishing with a discussion of some of the recommendations given by others, focusing specifically on university responsibilities and responses.

Universities’ Vulnerabilities to Trans-National Repression

Trans-national repression (henceforth TNR) is defined as:

“[G]overnments reaching across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles, including through assassinations, illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, Interpol abuse, and family intimidation. ... Transnational repression is no longer an exceptional tool, but a normal and institutionalized practice for dozens of countries that seek to control their citizens abroad.”²

And while there has been longer-term research and attention to the experiences of the likes of exiled journalists or human rights activists as victims

¹ See: The Freedom House case studies: they identify that at least six countries are currently operating highly active campaigns of TNR, their cases being China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Rwanda (“Freedom in the World,” *Freedom House*, 2024).

² Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe, “Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict,” *Freedom House*, 2024. See also: “World Report 2024: Events of 2023,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2024.

of TNR,³ it has only more recently been identified that one of the most vulnerable groups are in fact international students.⁴

Indeed, universities are a *key site* of TNR⁵ and it is precisely because they are spaces of communication that they are sensitive. They bring together students and staff—and others, we might consider guest speakers here—and, at least in places guaranteeing freedom of expression, encourage the discussion of diverse opinions and perspectives. But universities are inherently porous, all the more so as digital technologies mean that what is said or done is visible online.⁶ One reason why there has been less attention to student experiences is that much of the TNR experienced by this group is far more “low-level” than the likes of assassination or abduction: nevertheless both human rights’ groups and academics have increasingly pointed to the need to recognize the significance of surveillance, threat, and intimidation being carried out against students, staff, and others, at universities.⁷

The Case of the CCP

The CCP has long been criticized for curtailing both academic freedom and freedom of expression within China, particularly around sensitive or political issues—but it has also regularly attempted to impact upon academic and public debate beyond its borders.⁸ It has appealed to other governments to

³ Gerasimos Tsourapas, “Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics,” *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa061>.

⁴ “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024,” *Amnesty International*, 2024. It is also worth noting that the likes of activists, or exiled journalists, regularly depend on student scholarships or research positions to leave their home countries, and thus such examples often also regularly fall within the broader university environment.

⁵ Vanessa Frangville, “Constraints on Academic Freedom in the People’s Republic of China: A Transnational Issue,” in *Academics in a Century of Displacement*, edited by Leyla Dakhli, Pascale Laborier and Frank Wolff (Springer, 2024).

⁶ Noura Al-Jizawi, Siena Anstis, Sharly Chan, Adam Sen, and Ronald J. Deibert, “Annotated Bibliography Digital Transnational Repression,” *The Citizen Lab*, The University of Toronto. 2021. <https://citizenlab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Annotated-Bibliography-Digital-Transnational-Repression-May-2021.pdf>.

⁷ “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024,” *Amnesty International*, 2024; “World Report 2024: Events of 2023,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2024.

⁸ Vanessa Frangville, “Constraints on Academic Freedom in the People’s Republic of China: A Transnational Issue.”

prevent speakers at academic conferences,⁹ and numerous academics working on sensitive topics or who publicly criticize Chinese government policy have experienced forms of anonymous online intimidation or ambiguous threat from Chinese representatives. However, the CCP's systematic targeting of Chinese students has only more recently become a focus of attention. Some of this was an outgrowth of increased attention to specific cohorts of Chinese students—such as Uyghurs, Tibetans, or other ethnic minorities, as well as students from Hong Kong—who sought support from human rights groups and/or universities as they experienced increased surveillance due to political tension back home.¹⁰ Yet the likes of Amnesty International reports identify a much wider policing of students beyond these groups.

Be they undergraduates, Masters, or PhD candidates, Chinese students must navigate a banal and pervasive context of a sense of surveillance and political sensitivity,¹¹ feeling judged for what classes they attend, what opinions they voice (or remain silent on) in class, what topics they choose to research, what search terms they put into personal computers, and even what conversations other students have on the likes of collective class WhatsApp groups. Posts on non-Chinese social media—such as Facebook, X, even encrypted apps such as Telegram—are also monitored. Many students self-censor what they say in class, but also what they include in assessments, under the impression that that may be monitored (e.g., via spyware on their computers), or held in accessible university repositories. Students who choose to actively engage with sensitive topics, or join student groups seen to do so, regularly experience forms of intimidation. But the awareness of the danger of being monitored and threatened is endemic across all Chinese students, an extension of the level of political control within China felt far beyond its borders.

⁹ See, for example: “The Independent Tribunal into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience in China,” *The China Tribunal*, 2020, 15. The PRC pressured the Israeli Ministry of Health via the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prevent human rights lawyer David Matas from speaking at an international academic conference on the ethical challenges around human organ transplants in 2007, where China's organ transplant procedures were to be discussed.

¹⁰ See: David Tobin and Nyrola Elimä, “‘We Know You Better Than You Know Yourself’: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghur Diaspora,” *University of Sheffield*, 2023.

¹¹ Vanessa Frangville, “Constraints on Academic Freedom in the People's Republic of China: A Transnational Issue.”

Forms of intimidation vary. Many students are warned against expressing criticism of the CCP, or to discuss sensitive topics, told in vague terms that this may impact their careers, or that they are putting themselves in danger. It is clear that there is extensive digital surveillance,¹² tracking online communication, as well as forms of physical monitoring in host countries: students have been followed, photographed, or directly approached. In many cases, it is their family members back in China who receive direct threats—told that they may fail ‘political background checks’ necessary for employment or promotion or pensions because of what their children are studying or engaged in, in other cases family members have been detained by police. Students have been financially cut-off, sometimes willfully by their parents, or when parents are detained. In other cases, students themselves have been detained by the security services upon returning to China, for example for having a VPN.¹³ In some cases, fellow classmates or friends, including non-Chinese students, also experience forms of intimidation, either anonymously online, or in some cases being followed on campuses or to their homes.¹⁴

A number of reports have identified that students experiencing this often receive little support from their universities, even though it is the university environment that partially creates the very circumstances they find themselves in.¹⁵ This is partly because many universities have paid little attention to the growing phenomenon of TNR, and the way it impacts both students and staff. Amnesty International notes cases of non-Chinese university staff actively distancing themselves and not responding to politically active Chinese students or those experiencing TNR, “fearing the association might im-

¹² Noura Al-Jizawi, Siena Anstis, Sharly Chan, Adam Sen and Ronald J. Deibert, “Annotated Bibliography Digital Transnational Repression.”

¹³ Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (Duke University Press, 2022).

¹⁴ Amnesty International, *The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024* (Amnesty International, 2024), 36.

¹⁵ Tim Pringle and Sophia Woodman, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Academic Freedom in Globalising Chinese Universities,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 26, no. 10 (2022); Vanessa Frangville, “Constraints on Academic Freedom in the People’s Republic of China: A Transnational Issue.”

pair ... access to research opportunities in China.”¹⁶ Such cases of disengagement are directly complicit with the isolation and marginalization that are integral to the types of threat deployed against such students. Universities have not only a duty of care towards their students (and staff), but they also need to see TNR as part of a broader threat to academic freedom and something they should increasingly be aware of and actively respond to.¹⁷

It is crucially important to differentiate different agents here. Other Chinese students sometimes play an active role, asserting pro-CCP opinions on- and offline, and at times arguing with or threatening Chinese students (or others) perceived to be critical. This can include confrontations with staff researching or teaching on China, particularly those actively criticizing the government or its narratives. Crucially: some of this must be respected as *genuine opinion* and thus their own freedom of expression, and when they are not receiving direction from state bodies they should not be considered state agents, although institutions may demand that they respect others’ rights to freely express criticism.¹⁸ This does however create a challenging environment when the relationship between the Chinese state, other organizations (such as the CSSA: the Chinese Scholar and Student Association, or Confucius Institutes), and Chinese citizens generally, can be difficult to disentangle, particularly when the state actively uses the latter.¹⁹

The Coercive Side to Information Wars

Some of this must be situated in the wider context of political tension and “information wars.”²⁰ That is the reason why such practices of intimidation

¹⁶ Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/>. See also: “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024,” *Amnesty International*, (2024): 55.

¹⁷ Fung Tsui and Shui Yu, “Activism in the Face of Repression: UK Universities as Allies for Hong Kong Activist Students and Academics,” *UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space*, 2023; “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024,” *Amnesty International*, 2024; Vanessa Frangville, “Constraints on Academic Freedom in the People’s Republic of China: A Transnational Issue.”

¹⁸ “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024,” *Amnesty International*, (2024): 35.

¹⁹ Kennedy C.-P. Wong, “Sowing Hate, Cultivating Loyalists: Mobilizing Repressive Nationalist Diasporas for Transnational Repression by the People’s Republic of China Regime,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 12 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241267931>.

²⁰ Vanessa Frangville, “Constraints on Academic Freedom in the People’s Republic of China: A Transnational Issue.”

are happening: this is an attempt to control what is communicated, how, and to whom. It is thus inextricable from wider discussions of academic freedom and human rights such as freedom of expression and association. It should also turn our attention toward the fact that “information wars” are already being fought within the academy.

Others have written about tackling “post-truth” or “disinformation” in educational settings such as through increased “critical literacy” or “inoculation against dis-information” curricula.²¹ But it is crucially important to recognize that the problem of disinformation is not confined to “crazy conspiracy theorists” posting on YouTube. State actors, and expert bodies, are also actively disseminating disinformation.²² The CCP disseminate factually inaccurate or contested information not only regarding contemporary issues (e.g., numbers of COVID-19 fatalities, BRI statistics, or more “sensitive” topics such as accusations of human rights abuses), but also across a range of other topics such as history.²³ These are disseminated via outlets as diverse as YouTube videos, news aggregation sites, academic mailing lists, as well as ostensibly neutral international organizations such as UNESCO.²⁴ The CCP is also actively manipulating search engine results on platforms such as Google and Bing, and through open-access academic publishing. Indeed, Vrije Universiteit in the Netherlands shut down a research center (Cross Cultural Human Rights Center (CCHRC)) funded by a Chinese university from Chongqing after it was revealed that academics associated with the center had been on trips to the Xinjiang region and appeared on state broadcasting denying there were any issues around discrimination for Uyghurs, or that “western” concepts of human rights were applicable to China.²⁵ But this example illustrates that the-

²¹ Josh Compton et al., “Inoculation Theory in the Post-Truth Era: Extant Findings and New Frontiers for Contested Science, Misinformation, and Conspiracy Theories,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 15, no. 6 (2021).

²² Vigjilence Abazi, “The European Union Whistleblower Directive: A ‘Game Changer’ for Whistleblowing Protection?” *Industrial Law Journal* 49, no. 4 (2020).

²³ This must be recognized as geopolitical, since this is often linked to territorial claims in the present.

²⁴ Melissa Shani Brown and David O’Brien “The silk roads and shared heritage in Europe: Beyond ‘China to Rome’” *China Information* 39, no. 3 (2025), DOI: 10.1177/0920203x241281989.

²⁵ Jon Henley, “Dutch university gives up Chinese funding due to impartiality concerns,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/25/dutch-university-gives-up-chinese-funding-due-to-impartiality-concerns>.

re are serious questions for academia regarding what counts as disinformation. Politically propagandistic narratives, spurious statistics, and obscured data are to be found in traditionally credible sources, such as peer-reviewed articles in ranked journals in mainstream publishers and reports from apparently credible research institutes. China is not unique. Russia is also engaging in similar techniques to sculpt public opinion beyond their borders, as are other states.²⁶ This means that both students and staff work in an environment where the credibility of information needs incessant questioning, where “truth” is highly politicized, and this will become more difficult to navigate with the increased use of AI making it harder to discern fakery.

TNR is a part of these wider issues, and should more readily be presented among them, as the use of fear, coercion, and force alongside more amorphous censorship or propaganda. Importantly, it highlights that there are high personal stakes involved in the content of university curricula and encouragement of freedom of expression within internationalized university settings. While this is certainly a significant challenge, universities need to recognize that they are not necessarily safe places for students or staff to engage in direct discussion of sensitive topics and turn to the question of how they may be made more so.

Recommendations

Although the crucial first step is the need to recognize that TNR affects the security of universities, it is worth turning to the question of what might be done in the face of this. Amnesty International offers a series of recommendations for national governments, international bodies (e.g., the EU), as well as academic institutions.²⁷ Recommendations for universities include the need to formulate explicit policies (e.g., explicitly establishing codes of conduct related to TNR), as well as procedures: mechanisms for reporting and supporting those experiencing it (e.g., anonymous reporting mechanisms, emergency financial aid, IT support for suspected cases of spyware,

²⁶ Gabriele Cosentino, Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: *The Global Dynamics of Disinformation*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²⁷ See full recommendations: “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024,” *Amnesty International*, (2024), 55–58.

clear guidelines for reporting to local police, and seeking support from other agencies). Such recommendations should be considered, and universities should also broaden their understanding of whether or what forms of TNR their own communities (staff and students) may be experiencing—including through cross-university dialogue and practice sharing.

But in tackling TNR, universities and governments should recognize that it is a part of a many-pronged approach to controlling knowledge and communication by diverse states. And in light of this, forms of response need to connect it to other forms of securitizing knowledge within academies and research institutions. But a lesson from TNR is an important one: blanket suspicion of students (or staff) hailing from particular backgrounds cannot address these problems, because it is often people among their number who are most in need of protection and most vulnerable to having their families or futures threatened because of what they say or do. Any approaches must therefore recognize the fact that solidarity and sensitivity, not simply suspicion, must inform responses to the security challenges brought by internationalization.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for Scholars

More academic research is needed to document and explore the nuances of TNR. This includes:

- Generating more nuanced vocabularies to discuss the diversity of ways TNR operates both on- and offline and discussing different agents and forms of vulnerability and complicity (e.g.: people may simultaneously be “victims” and “perpetrators” of TNR, experiencing pressure and exerting it on others). Simplistic terms, such as blanket approaches, cannot but fail to address this complex issue justly.
- Researching experiences of TNR: across different university contexts (i.e., in different countries beyond the UK/USA which have hitherto been the main focus), across different national groups, comparing experiences between different groups within university contexts (e.g., staff, students, undergraduate vs. postgraduate, etc.), researching roles

of wider diaspora groups both in offering support to those experiencing TNR but also at times being complicit with it, as well as exploring different responses being put into practice by universities, and perceptions of their effectiveness or shortcomings.

Recommendations for Universities

There needs to be wider recognition that TNR is affecting university communities. Forms of response should include:

- The formulation of clear policies that cover TNR. These could be in the form of Codes of Conduct, focusing on the respect for academic freedom, integrating other forms of academic ethics (e.g., misconduct), applied across the student body. Such an approach would avoid targeting specific groups of students based on nationality and provide a flexible framework.
- The establishment of procedures to respond to allegations and to support those experiencing TNR.
- Awareness raising among both staff and students.

Recommendations for Government Institutions

There needs to be wider awareness of TNR and how it affects universities and university communities within educational ministries in order to support cross-institutional policies and procedures.

Government institutions already dealing with TNR (e.g., police, immigration etc.) should work in concert with educational institutions and relevant ministries in order to tailor responses.

Please note that the Amnesty International report “On my Campus, I am Afraid” (2024) offers extensive recommendations to universities, governments, and other institutions.

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