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SPOTLIGHT

The New Censorship, the New Academic Freedom: Commercial Publishers and the Chinese Market

Nicholas Loubere

Lund University, Sweden
nicholas.loubere@ace.lu.se

Since 2017 the international Chinese Studies community has been shocked to discover that many of the major commercial academic publishers have been actively working with the Chinese censors to limit access to 'politically sensitive' books and articles within the country in order to maintain access to the lucrative Chinese market. This essay examines these incidents and the responses of the publishers upon being discovered—arguing that the convergence of China's increasingly assertive information control regime and the commercial academic publishers' thirst for ever more profits has resulted in a new form of institutionalised commercial censorship.

自 2017 年以來，國際漢學界震驚地發現，許多主流商業學術出版社為了維持自身在利潤豐厚的中國市場的地位，積極與中國審查機構合作，限制中國國內學者和學生對"政治敏感"書籍和文章的獲取。本文剖析此類事件以及出版社在問題曝光之後的回應，進而論證在中國日益嚴格的信息管控與商業出版社對利潤最大化訴求的結合下，一種商業審查制度化的形成。

Keywords: China, academic publishing, censorship, academic freedom

關鍵詞：中國、學術出版、審查制度、學術自由

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Since mid-2017 the international Chinese Studies community has been successively rocked by revelation after revelation that major commercial publishers are not only acceding to the Chinese censorship regime, but also actively cooperating with the censors to block certain content within the People's Republic of China (PRC) in order to retain access to the Chinese market.

The assault on academic freedom began in August 2017 with the discovery that Cambridge University Press (CUP) had blocked 315 articles on 'sensitive topics' from the *China Quarterly's* Chinese website at Beijing's request (Phillips 2017). The academic community reacted with immediate shock and outrage that the world's oldest scholarly publisher would agree to censor one of the most prestigious Chinese Studies journals. In the face of boycott threats and petitions, CUP reversed the decision and made all the previously blocked articles freely available, stating that the decision was necessary to 'uphold the principle of academic freedom on which the university's work is founded' (Kennedy and Phillips 2017).

Opening the Floodgates

In the wake of CUP's reversal, the Chinese Studies community revelled in its seeming victory over the forces of censorship; however, the self-congratulatory atmosphere was to be short-lived. In the months that followed, the extent of Beijing's efforts to limit what international publishers make available in China came into clearer focus, indicating that the CUP incident was just the tip of the iceberg. In anonymous interviews at the Beijing International Book Fair just days after the revelations about CUP, a number of publishers admitted to engaging in self-censorship to ensure they did not lose access to the Chinese market (SCMP 2017). At nearly the same time LexisNexis—which provides access to media, legal, and regulatory documents—revealed it was pressured to remove content by the Chinese government and had withdrawn two of its academic products from China (Reuters 2017a).

This was shortly followed by even more disturbing revelations that Springer Nature—the largest academic publisher in the world—had removed more than one thousand articles at the behest of the Chinese censors. Unlike CUP, Springer Nature was defiant

and refused to reverse the decision, declaring: ‘We do not believe that it is in the interests of our authors, customers, or the wider scientific and academic community, or to the advancement of research, for us to be banned from distributing our content in China’ (Reuters 2017b). After the burst of outrage over the CUP incident, the academic community seemingly had little remaining appetite for holding publishers to account. While a peer-review boycott was organised, it garnered only around one thousand signatures. Springer Nature was able simply to wait out the news cycle and in short order their ongoing censorship efforts largely faded into the background.

However, publishers’ censorship would come into full view again less than a year later. In early October 2018 the editors of the ‘Transcultural Research’ book series released a public complaint that Springer Nature had been removing articles on sensitive subjects at the request of the Chinese censors without even informing authors (MCLC 2018). Despite this public confrontation with high-profile academics, Springer Nature again remained defiant, not only refusing to reverse the decision but continuing to justify it as being in the best interests of the global academic community and necessary for the advancement of research (Redden 2018a).

In order to justify the decision to continue their censoring activities, Springer Nature falsely claimed that CUP had suffered blanket bans on journals and books in retaliation for their decision to reinstate the *China Quarterly* articles. CUP responded denying the allegations, saying that their entire catalogue remained available, but that subscriptions had fallen and that ‘Chinese importers decide which publications they will purchase for dissemination within China’ (Redden 2018a). This response inadvertently revealed how the Chinese censors’ tactics were evolving and diversifying. Instead of demanding that CUP remove specific articles, the censors were now working through the commercial paywall system to achieve their goals.

In December 2018 this censorship-through-paywall tactic came into full view as it was discovered that publishing giant Taylor & Francis had agreed to exclude more than 80 journals from subscription packages at the request of the Chinese import agency. Included in this targeted wave of subscription cancellations was the *Asian Studies Review*—which the publisher distributes on behalf of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA)—apparently because of an objection to six articles published in the

journal. Remarkably, when the ASAA asked for details about the specific articles that were objected to the publisher refused, stating that it was ‘commercially sensitive’ information—an ostentatious claim of ownership over a journal for which they are supposedly just the distributor (Redden 2018b; Shepherd 2018).

Finally, the first half of 2019 revealed other insidious patterns of censorship, this time undertaken by Brill journals. In early April, Timothy Grose accused the new journal *China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies* of attempting to censor a discussion of the mass internment camps in Xinjiang in a book review of Tom Cliff’s *Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang*. The editor of the journal, Han Xiaorong, denied the cuts constituted censorship and Grose ultimately published the review elsewhere. Brill reacted by initiating an investigation, issuing a statement that the journal ‘does not take any specific political viewpoint’, and committing to adding a clause on censorship to their publication ethics (Grose 2019; Lange 2019; Redden 2019b).

Later in the month, Lorraine Wong and Jacob Edmond penned an essay outlining their experience editing a special issue of *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* (FLSC), in which an entire article was removed from the final proofs by the editorial office in Beijing (Wong and Edmond 2019). As Wong and Edmond came to discover, FLSC is jointly published by Brill and Higher Education Press, which is owned by the Ministry of Education of the PRC and thus subjected to the full censorship regime—a fact obscured by Brill’s involvement and an editorial board populated by established scholars based at Western institutions. More worryingly, when FLSC editor-in-chief Zhang Xudong was informed of the censorship he justified it as necessary and invoked his editorial prerogative to reject the excluded article. Wong and Edmond ultimately decided to move the entire special issue to the journal *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, and Brill has since terminated its relationship with Higher Education Press effective from 2020 (Redden 2019a).

While this was a welcome move, Brill nevertheless continues to have extensive dealings with a number of Chinese presses through their recently-opened branch office in Beijing (Brill 2017). And they are far from the only commercial press to seek (seemingly lucrative) partnerships with Chinese publishers. Indeed, unperturbed by the FLSC fiasco, Springer Nature continues to have a co-publication agreement with

Higher Education Press (*Frontiers of Education in China*), the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*), and Southwestern University of Finance and Economics (*Financial Innovation*), to name just a few of the titles listed in their Belt and Road Initiative Collection.¹

These incidents occurring over the past couple of years—which, it must be stressed, are only the ones that have been made public—highlight some seriously disturbing trends. For one, the Chinese censors are becoming much more assertive in their attempts to subject international publishers to the PRC’s censorship regime. Secondly, they are achieving their goals by exploiting the normal business operations of the major commercial publishers—through threats of restricted market access, the targeted cancellation of subscriptions, and the establishment of lucrative partnerships with Chinese institutions. This is serving to embed Chinese censorship within the commercial academic publishers themselves and blur the lines between what is a censored Chinese publication and an uncensored Western one. Finally, with each successive incident, the collective outrage seems to become more muted, media coverage dwindles, and scholars continue to submit articles to, and review for, the offending publishers. As such, it has now become evident that active censorship undertaken by the major commercial publishers on behalf of the Chinese government—something that would have been unimaginable to most just a few years ago—is the new normal state of affairs.

¹ The Collection can be found here: https://www.springernature.com/gp/researchers/campaigns/belt-road-initiative?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_content=organic&utm_campaign=SRCN_IL_L_bri19_en_stw

International Academic Publishers and Censorship

Date	Publisher	Incident	Outcome
2017 August	Cambridge University Press	315 articles blocked from the Chinese website of the <i>China Quarterly</i>	Articles reinstated and made freely available
2017 November	Springer Nature	Over 1,000 articles blocked from Chinese websites of journals	Articles still blocked
2018 October	Springer Nature	Articles blocked from the Chinese website of the 'Transcultural Research' series without authors being informed	Springer Nature refused to reverse their decision so the editors of 'Transcultural Research' discontinued their agreement with the publisher
2018 December	Taylor & Francis	Over 80 journals excluded from subscription packages at the request of the Chinese import agency, including the <i>Asian Studies Review</i>	Taylor & Francis have continued to provide packages excluding the journals
2019 April	Brill	Editor of <i>China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies</i> is accused of trying to censor a review of the book <i>Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang</i>	Brill has initiated an investigation and promised to add a clause on censorship to their publication ethics guidelines
2019 April	Brill	Entire article cut from final proofs of a special issue of <i>Frontiers of Literary Studies in China</i> by co-publisher, Chinese government-owned Higher Education Press	Brill cut ties with Higher Education Press effective from 2020 (other publishers, including Springer Nature, continue to co-publish with Higher Education Press)

Censorship, Who Me?

Few readily admit to participating in censorship, and the commercial publishers are no exception. As such, once discovered they have gone to great lengths to spin and evade responsibility for their actions. It is instructive to examine their responses when confronted, as they shed light on how these commercial publishers understand their own involvement in censorship and, more broadly, how they perceive their role within academia.

Publisher responses to revelations of censorship broadly fit into three categories. The first, typified by Brill's reaction, is dismay and confusion over how it could happen, followed by assurances that something will be done. To their credit, Brill cancelled their collaboration with Higher Education Press and have promised to address censorship explicitly in their publishing ethics guidelines—substantial actions in comparison with Springer Nature and Taylor & Francis. However, Brill took these steps only in response to being publicly called out and the approach seems to have the hallmarks of a PR strategy aimed at limiting damage to the business. These are reactions to symptoms rather than serious attempts to address the root causes of the problem. In the words of Jacob Edmond, the co-editor of the censored FLSC special issue, this is merely 'a small win in what is an ongoing battle against censorship creep However, I do not see this win as any particular cause for celebration... . I feel saddened that we should have had to speak out publicly before Brill chose to take this step' (Redden 2019a).

The second type of response is characterised by an appeal to consumer choice or legalism. For instance, Taylor & Francis issued a statement saying: 'To be clear, Taylor & Francis does not participate in censorship in China, or anywhere else. The ability to sell publishing services, or any other services, into China is controlled by import agencies. They have the right to select what they would like to import' (Taylor & Francis 2018). Springer Nature described their censorship as simply 'limiting' content, stating: 'This is not editorial censorship and does not affect the content we publish or make accessible elsewhere in the world. It is a local content access decision in China done to comply with specific local regulations' (Reuters 2017b). In both of these cases, the

publishers misrepresent and downplay their actions, presenting them as ‘normal’ business operations or legal imperatives. However, as the editors of the ‘Transcultural Research’ series point out: ‘There is no “law” in China that bans treatment of these topics but only an informal unpublished directive from the Communist Party’s Propaganda Department that discussions of the topics mentioned should be “managed” in the sense of being kept from the public’ (MCLC 2018). Cutting out specific journals from subscription packages is also uncommon and the Association of University Presses specifically warns against it, saying: ‘AUPresses encourages university presses generally to withhold their consent to any such request, whether made directly or via a third-party aggregator, even if doing so results in the unavailability of the entire digital collection within that market’ (Redden 2018a).

If we are considering the importance of following rules and regulations, it is worth pointing out that most Western—and some Chinese—academic institutions and societies have committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom that are undermined by this type of censorship. For instance, the Association of American Universities, the Australian Group of Eight, the League of European Research Universities, and the Chinese 9 Universities have signed onto the Hefei Statement, which declares that research universities must be committed to the ‘responsible exercise of academic freedom by faculty to produce and disseminate knowledge through research, teaching and service without undue constraint...’ (Association of American Universities et al. 2013; Pils and Svensson 2019). Arguably, disseminating research through publishers that engage in censorship contravenes this commitment. Ultimately, the appeals to consumer choice and local regulations are nothing more than a morally-bankrupt crutch that these publishers lean on to justify pursuing their own narrow self-interest at the expense of the core principles of academic freedom that they purport to support.

The third type of response seeks to justify the censorship of the few for the benefit of the many. Springer Nature’s defiant refusal to reverse course is emblematic. The publisher has attempted to downplay its capitulation by noting that the censorship only constitutes ‘a small percentage of our content (less than 1 percent)’. They go on, saying

that it was ‘a highly regrettable situation... but if we had not complied with this requirement we were facing very real and significant risks to our ability to distribute all our content in China – something we did not feel to be in the interest of the advancement of research and the academic community, both in China and world-wide’ (Redden 2018a). This response is disturbing, as it unapologetically jettisons the concept of academic freedom altogether. After all, academic freedom requires the defence of precisely that small ‘less than 1 percent’ of critical scholarship that is under threat by the powers that be. Springer Nature suggests that it is preferable to sacrifice this commitment to academic freedom in order to ensure their ability to distribute content, even suggesting that their decision is in the best interests of the global academic community. In reality, however, Springer Nature is doing nothing more than making a cynical rationalisation for censoring content on behalf of the Chinese government to ensure their own access to the Chinese market. This can in no way be seen as benefiting academia—rather, it represents a dangerous discursive shift aimed at hollowing out the concept of academic freedom, ultimately rendering it meaningless.

Recommitting to Academic Freedom

So, how do we effectively challenge this insidious censorship creep—one that is undertaken by the world’s largest publishers in their search for higher profits, is justified through the language of ‘expanding access’, and which functions through the normal operation of the commercial publishing system?

Perhaps most importantly we need to speak with clarity about what is happening in order to cut through the various forms of obfuscation aimed at rationalising the current state of affairs. It is necessary to reject unequivocally the Orwellian doublespeak employed by publishers to deny their actions are censorship. Blocking articles for political imperatives, allowing paywalls to be used as a way to restrict access to certain types of ideas, and partnering with entities that fall under the purview of institutional censorship regimes constitutes censorship, full stop. Publishers engaging in these practices cannot be considered free and open—nor can they claim to uphold the principles of academic freedom—regardless of how they contort themselves to justify the behaviour. This must

be stated clearly over and over again, and the ways in which we conceptualise and define the act of censorship in academia must be expanded to include this type of corporate censoring of content in the pursuit of profits.

It is also necessary to push back forcefully against the publishers' attempts to justify abandoning their duty to uphold basic guarantees of academic freedom in order supposedly to provide wider access to research findings. Firstly, this is laughable, as the commercial publishers and their 'great paywall' are the primary impediment to public access to academic knowledge (Loubere and Franceschini 2017). Secondly, this represents an insidious subordination of academic freedom to a narrow neoliberal framing of academic knowledge as a commodified good, with researchers creating 'knowledge products' that are made available on the 'marketplace of ideas' to consumers and users. This subtle, but seriously damaging, reconceptualisation equates academic freedom with market access and consumption, and is antithetical to the task of producing critical work that speaks truth to power. As such, we need to recommit to upholding a definition of academic freedom that is not reduced to commercial considerations, but rather is rooted in the pursuit of the common good. In the words of Joan Wallach Scott: 'the defense of academic freedom also means the defense of the covenant on which it rests, a belief that there is something we conceive of as a public good and that public good cannot do without critical thinking...' (Scott 2019, 13). In this sense the struggle against profit-driven censorship by commercial publishers is part of the wider struggle against the neoliberalisation and degradation of contemporary academia more broadly.

Practically, this struggle requires us to reclaim the machinery of academic knowledge dissemination from the profit-hungry—and currently dominant—commercial publishers. Those in the Chinese Studies field can find natural allies in the Open Access movement, as censorship in the service of profits is just one of the ways that the large commercial publishers are diminishing academic freedom and seriously harming academic research across disciplines and fields (Monbiot 2018). The fact that these massive commercial publishers are actively engaged in censoring content can serve as one of the many justifications for pushing universities and consortia to cancel the costly subscriptions to their journal packages. We can take inspiration from the recent, albeit

temporary, termination of agreements with Elsevier by Sweden, Germany, California, and others, which allowed struggling university libraries to retain crucial resources (Kwon 2018; McKenzie 2019). Subscription cancellations should be accompanied by strategies to flip key journals (i.e. make them open access), start new journals to replace those remaining under corporate control, and channel funding and other support to truly open-access, non-profit university presses. Only in this way can we remove the impetuses that have made capitulation to, and cooperation with, the Chinese censors the normal state of affairs in academic publishing, and reinvigorate a commitment to academic freedom as a common good that is the necessary foundation of truly free and critical academic inquiry.

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