Open Letter to Cambridge University Press about its censorship of the China Quarterly

Cambridge University Press’s decision to censor the journal China Quarterly as it is viewed online in China is a craven, shameful and destructive concession to the PRC’s growing censorship regime. It is also needless.

As recently reported, and admitted after the fact in a corporate statement, CUP has culled some 300 articles and reviews from a flagship journal on Chinese affairs after receiving a demand from some relevant organ in Beijing. (Possibly more alarming, but as yet unclear, is CUP’s admission that it has removed 1000 book titles from,
apparently, its sales website in China at the behest of the PRC party-state.) The works CUP is now censoring from China Quarterly were researched and written by scholars from around the world who believed that upon acceptance these works would actually appear in the journal and not be removed willy-nilly. The articles were published in China Quarterly only after peer-review and expert editing; books in its book-review section were also originally peer-reviewed and selected by knowledgeable editors. CUP is thus, in response to pressure from Chinese authorities and without consulting its authors, countermanding the peer-review process and overriding the journal’s own editors about content in the journal. This comprises a clear violation of academic independence outside as well as inside China.

Some book authors have recently agreed to allow limited censorship of their own books so that they might be published in Chinese translation. Often that censorship happens in the translation process itself, and can involve simple rewording as well as cutting whole sections.[1] Even where wholesale chopping of content has happened, however, this differs from what CUP is doing now. First of all, those have been the authors’ own decisions. Secondly, it is Chinese-language versions, not the original English text, that is affected. CUP is censoring the original English-language version of the China Quarterly as it is available in the Chinese market.

Cambridge University Press’s current concession is akin to the New York Times or The Economist letting the Chinese Communist Party determine what articles go into their publications—something they have never done. It would be unimaginable for these media to instead collaborate with PRC party censors to excise selected content from their daily or weekly editions. Rather, NYT and The Economist are banned in their entirety—but they remain whole. There are no incomplete, scissored-up, CCP versions of the New York Times or The Economist online in China. In a similar fashion, Google chose to pull out of China rather than let its searches be CCP-screened and selectively blocked.

Cambridge University Press, on the other hand, is agreeably donning the hospital gown, untied in the back, baring itself to the Chinese scalpel, and crying “cut away!” But even this metaphor fails, since CUP is actually assisting, like a surgical nurse, in its own evisceration. The result is a misleading, neutered simulacrum of China Quarterly for the China market. And as my colleagues Greg Distelhorst and Jessica Chen Weiss have written, “the censored history of China will literally bear the seal of Cambridge University.” This is not only disrespectful of CUP’s authors; it demonstrates a repugnant disdain for Chinese
readers, for whom CUP apparently deems a watered-down product to be good enough.

What is particularly chilling about Cambridge’s acquiescence in this case is that the list of pieces it cut seems to have been generated with a simple search on keywords and tags for Tian’anmen, Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Uyghur and the like. Does anyone think Chinese censors are actually reading this stuff? No. That blacklist of banned articles and reviews probably took less than an hour to compile with a few simple searches. Hey CUP, why don’t you and your CCP partners just create a bot to do the same thing? That way future editions of China Quarterly can be auto-expurgated without a human even having to glance at the tables of contents.

But the still greater concern is that if China Quarterly and then other journals published by Cambridge (such as the Journal of Asian Studies)—powerful institutions with global clout, not vulnerable individuals—just go along with this request to censor scholarship on these topics, will scholars inside or outside China still be eager to work on Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, the Uyghurs, Tian’anmen, Taiwan independence advocates, Liu Xiaobo, the Dalai Lama, Chinese dissidents, Falun Gong and so on? Or will they chose safer subjects? And how should the people who are the subject of these articles feel about Cambridge’s decision to airbrush them from the record? CUP may hide behind the excuse that this is a “pragmatic” decision to preserve “Chinese” access to its less sensitive material, but who the hell gives Cambridge University Press the right to decide that Tibetans, Uyghurs, Hong Kong activists and dissidents of all sorts are less worthy than other content? It is noteworthy that the topics and peoples CUP has so blithely chosen to censor comprise mainly minorities and the politically disadvantaged. Would you censor content about Black Lives Matter, Mexican immigrants or Muslims in your American publication list if Trump asked you to do so? So why do you think it’s fine to cut the oppressed and disenfranchised out of China Quarterly?

CUP’s passive self-bowdlerization is unlike individual authors’ decisions for another reason. There have been several cases in recent years of top-ranked universities doing little or nothing when their own faculty are denied Chinese visas—when these scholars are, in effect, personally “censored.” When universities throw their own faculty under the bus or restrict campus activities related to topics the PRC deems too “sensitive,” university administrations claim to do so in order to preserve their overall access to or initiatives in China. But when upstanding universities have actually called China’s bluff, China has
reversed itself, as it did after it attempted to sanction University of
Calgary for a Dalai Lama honorary degree or when it offered to endow
a chair in China studies at Stanford—with the stipulation that the
professor filling it would never mention Tibet. (Original article here.)

CUP may be worried about its English-language pedagogical materials
and other enterprises being banned in China, but it should not be. Even
outside of Chinese universities, vast numbers of non-academics know
and respect the name “Jianqiao.” China is not going to ban everything
branded “Cambridge” from the Chinese realm, because to do so would
turn this into a big, public issue, and that is precisely what the
authorities hope to avoid. To do so would, moreover, pit the CCP
against a household name that every Chinese person who knows
anything about education reveres as one of the world’s oldest and best
universities. And Chinese, probably more than anyone else, revere
universities, especially name-brand ones. Cambridge University, like
Stanford—or Calgary, for that matter!—can safely afford to say, “Sorry,
China Quarterly is a package deal. Take it or leave it.” And if China
chooses to leave it, we can trust resourceful Chinese colleagues and
students to find workarounds to get and distribute the material, as they
do for lots of English-language publications already (though that will
be harder if good VPN’s disappear. #Thanks, Apple).

In recent years China has invested billions of yuan in a so far very
successful effort to make its universities world-class. Professors with
foreign Ph.D.’s are welcome in Chinese universities. Chinese scholars
are encouraged and funded to go to conferences and spend semesters
abroad as visiting scholars at foreign universities. Chinese libraries
acquire foreign books and databases, which are especially useful in the
many English-language global programs Chinese universities now run
for domestic and international students. Chinese scholars eagerly strive
to publish in foreign, peer-reviewed journals like China Quarterly and
others in the Social Science Citation Index, and receive positive work
evaluations by their Chinese employers for doing so. With this
globalization of the Chinese academy, the field of China studies, once
bifurcated between scholarship in China and that in the West, is
increasingly integrated: we talk to each other in Chinese and in English
at conferences, in publications and on platforms like Douban and
WeChat (Weixin).

The PRC party-state has long censored publication in Chinese, but
generally has let English and other foreign-language materials through,
perhaps as a gesture to intellectuals and the educated, globalizing
middle class whom it successfully co-opted. Now, by blocking VPNs, the
PRC is more severely limiting the access of this trusted elite to the world at large. The party-state has intensified controls on publication and scholarship in China, and restricts Chinese access to scholarly tools from the world at large (Youtube, Wikipedia, Medium, Academia.edu, Google Scholar and other services are blocked in most of China). But in doing this, the PRC is reneging on its deal with these internationalized, sophisticated elites and pursuing policies directly contradicting those building up its universities. How long can this contradiction stand?

I have been periodically prevented from going to China for some 15 years now because I have written about Xinjiang. (A number of other scholars of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Chinese politics have likewise seen their visa access restricted.) This hurts China as much as it hurts me, since not only am I cut off from China, but the field of Xinjiang studies now carefully avoids interactions with Han scholars from the PRC. With reason, we hesitate to invite them to international conferences and seldom attend conferences in China or share our ideas with them. Chinese scholars and diplomats are quite aware of this problem. A number of Chinese academics, including highly-connected scholar-officials from Beijing think-tanks who directly advise the government, seek me out in Washington D.C. to ask about the newest English-language scholarship on Xinjiang—because they can’t easily get it, or learn about it, in China! Cambridge University Press should not abet this creeping constriction of Chinese access to the intellectual world at large by letting the party-state have its cake and eat it too. If the PRC authorities want to cut off their own access to what the world's scholars are saying—precisely about those thorniest problems where you’d think PRC would be most interested in fresh ideas—so be it. If they want to try to keep their own scholars ignorant of international scholarship, so be it. They are building a bubble akin to that of a certain American president who consumes only Fox News propaganda. It's a safe bet that most Chinese academic and political leaders are not so stupid, and will not continue along this academic cul-de-sac unless CUP and other publishers enable them.

Just say “no” to China’s self-defeating censorship demands, CUP, and I'll happily continue to review books and manuscripts for you, essentially for free, as I do now. That's the bargain you have with us, your readers and contributors from the scholarly world outside as well as in China. You maintain your press's academic integrity, and we work to produce and review your content for only symbolic remuneration (a few hundred dollars for a book that takes 10 years to write, or $150 for 2–3 days' work reviewing a book manuscript). We are not in this business for the money. If you, an established, world-renowned
educational institution sacrifice your academic integrity on venal or faux-pragmatic grounds, you cannot rely on our continued respect and cooperation.

The author received his MA from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where the journal China Quarterly is housed. He received his Ph.D. at Stanford and published his first book with Stanford University Press. He has published a chapter, an article and reviews in books and journals published by Cambridge University Press, and is a frequent peer-reviewer of manuscripts submitted to CUP publications. A review by Nicolas Becquelin of Millward’s book, Eurasian Crossroads, is among the pieces cut from China Quarterly in China by Cambridge University Press.

[1] I have myself acquiesced to a bit of censorship in the “Acknowledgements” section of one book of mine recently published in China. For another volume, one directly concerning Xinjiang history, I instead published the Chinese translation in Hong Kong, where there remains more academic freedom than in the PRC proper. Mainland scholars can access and read the Hong Kong addition, but it is not sold in the PRC.