

Kowtowing to China

A new report details how Beijing influences American academics.

BY GARY SCHMITT
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One of the best kept secrets in Washington is the continuing valuable service provided by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. The commission, established by Congress in late 2000, reports to Congress annually "on the national security implications of the bilateral trade and economic relationship" between the U.S. and China. Composed of a dozen government outsiders who are appointed by the minority and majority leadership in the Senate and the House, the commission is a forum intended to provide an on-going report card on the costs and benefits associated with the U.S. giving the People's Republic permanent "most favored nation" trade status and opening the door to its entry into the World Trade Organization.

Every year, the commission's report has policy nuggets that those who follow China and Asian economic and security issues come to rely on. This year's report, published just recently, is no different. While the report covers a rich variety of topics--such as Chinese trade practices, industrial policy, military modernization, intelligence, cyber-security and Chinese regional policies--the 2009 report also includes an important new section on the PRC's efforts to control "information" about China not only inside its borders but abroad as well, including in the United States. There is interesting data on PRC's use of American lobbying firms, public relations teams, think tanks, and print and electronic media.

But there is also an important discussion of Beijing's efforts to influence Western academic work on China, with an eye of course to putting a positive spin on China's own foreign and domestic policies:

As stated by one academic economist, "Academics who study China . . . habitually please the Chinese Communist Party, sometimes consciously, and often unconsciously . . . the incentives for academics all go one way: one does not upset the Party."

One of the punitive tools that the Chinese government may employ to intimidate foreign academics is the denial of visas to enter China to conduct research. Although the PRC will not officially acknowledge doing so, elements within the Chinese government have clearly placed a number of foreign academics on a visa denial "blacklist" due to their publishing on topics that hit a nerve with Beijing. One example may be seen in the case of several authors who contributed to a 2004 collection of articles about Xinjiang and subsequently found themselves denied visas to enter China. As described by one of the affected authors, no official explanation was given, other than, "You are not welcome in China. You should know why."

As another scholar quoted in the report points out, "[t]he problem is most salient . . . for political scientists who study the Chinese government and need to nurture their contacts among Chinese officials. The effects are hard to measure, because people are reluctant to speak about them [and] no scholar likes to acknowledge self-censorship."

But, more corrosively, the self-censorship may be a product not only of wanting to sustain one's scholarly work and retain access to key contacts but also "to cash in." According to testimony before the commission, academics and government officials may at times be inclined to engage in self-censorship by the prospect of

making money through doing consulting work outside the classroom or after leaving government. And the cost to the United States may, in turn, be significant. As Professor Perry Link noted in his remarks before the commission, "the U.S. government might not always receive the best or most objective advice on U.S.-China policy as a result of the 'subterranean economic interests that are at play.'"

Indeed

In some respects, the commission's report picks up where Jim Mann's *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* left off, with Mann raising the specter of an interlocking league of elites (academics, business people, and former government officials) who for reasons low and high continue to suggest that all is going well in China--or, in a more sophisticated vein argue that, if we don't embarrass China's leaders now, they will slowly but surely address the concerns we have with them.

Both Democrats and Republicans made a bet more than a decade ago: Give China MFN trade status, membership in the WTO, and market forces and the resulting economic growth would inevitably increase the systemic pressures on China to liberalize politically. The argument at the time was that the market and the WTO would "corrupt" one-party rule from within China. But, if the commission's findings on the behavior of former government officials and academics studying China are close to being true, one has to ask: Who's corrupting whom?

Gary Schmitt is director of AEI's program on advanced strategic studies.