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Hot Air at Harvard

Even in academia, no one is telling China what it needs to hear

THREE WEEKS AGO, HARVARD INVITED THE PRESIDENTS OF seven Chinese universities to meet in Cambridge with five American counterparts. Over two days they held a series of discussions aimed at teaching the Chinese educators how to lift their institutions to world-class status. But it's no mystery why Chinese academia trails the Western variety: there's not much freedom of thought on China's campuses.

The Harvard gathering didn't emphasize that critical point, however. According to a published agenda of the meetings, the topics were limited to the standard issues that preoccupy American universities: fund raising, financing, faculty staffing, relationships with industry and government. Two simple words—academic freedom—were conspicuously missing.

By not stressing the issue of academic freedom, Harvard president Neil L. Rudenstine apparently wished to avoid embarrassing his guests. And China's elite no doubt appreciate his sensitivity. It's unclear, in fact, whether the American educators even raised the topic in private, let alone whether it was emphasized. (A Harvard spokesperson declined to comment.) But ducking the topic does nothing for China's quest for academic greatness. Concerns like endowment management or admissions policy pale in comparison.

China's top scholars need to hear the truth. The country's educational system cannot compete with the West's when scores of topics are deemed off limits. Because university presidents in China are servants of the state, their first priority is to implement decisions of the Communist Party, the country's supreme governing body. The president of Peking University, Chen Jia'er, is a member of the party's Central Committee.

What constitutes academic freedom? Consider Harvard historian Cornel West's popular course on American democracy. In his lectures, West, an African-American, routinely questions whether U.S.-style democracy can cope with the economic and racial problems that continue to divide the country. He wonders aloud, in a classroom filled with future leaders of the nation, whether there might be something fundamentally wrong with American institutions. Would Peking University allow a professor to question whether communism and the ruling party are part of the country's problems? Could a university president tell official superiors that his institution can't be first-rate as long as Marxist ideology continues to set the parameters of what can be taught? Tolerance of radical or unpopular ideas is an integral element of what makes a good university.

Harvard officials should know better. Founded in 1636, the university is the oldest, richest and most powerful institution of higher learning in America. It has a long tradition, to paraphrase Marxist jargon, of being the incubator of America's ruling class. Its very name is a metaphor for excellence, creativity and intellectual freedom. It sets standards for others to follow. So where were those ideals when China's educators came to visit?

The silence was reminiscent of what transpired at the Fortune Global Forum in Shanghai in September. Although the forum addressed the sensitive issue of human rights, a number of American captains of industry thought it best to refrain from commenting on the subject since, as guests, it would be impolite to make waves. Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin

felt no such restraint. Bluntly and publicly he reminded the visitors of the differences between Western and Chinese values. As host of the event, Jiang had the right to say what he wanted. Harvard's host, however, abandoned that privilege and deferred to his visitors' perceived sensitivities by not speaking out publicly. It seems that no one is willing to tell China what it needs to hear.

An appalling encounter occurred when Wang Dan, a leader of the 1989 student movement at Tiananmen Square and now a history graduate student at Harvard, was prevented by a fellow student from entering the hall where president Chen was to speak. The female "gatekeeper" was a Harvard graduate and former student at Peking University, which Wang once at-

tended. An assistant to president Chen had asked her to dissuade Wang from entering, as both Chen and his aide would be "embarrassed" by Wang's presence and subjected to criticism when they returned to Beijing.

Wang, hardly the firebrand portrayed in Chinese propaganda, meekly obliged. None of the 20-odd Harvard students and alumni of Peking University who were present protested. In a Chinese academic context, it is unthinkable for a student to refuse a "request" from a superior, even a former one. As for Harvard, it considers the incident a private matter between Wang and Peking University's leaders, even though Chen was an official guest and the incident took place on Harvard property.

Communist China unflinchingly demands that others respect its internal values. Yet when they are overseas, China's leaders too often show scant respect for values precious to other nations. What's troubling is how willing the rest of the world is to exercise self-restraint, even at the cost of bending its core values. Even at fair Harvard. ■

