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“Animal Farm” was taught in university courses. Many students identified with Benjamin, the donkey who is skeptical of the new farm but keeps his thoughts to himself. *Illustration by Josh Cochran*

A Teacher in China Learns the Limits of Free Expression

How had the country experienced so much social, economic, and educational change while its politics remained stagnant?

By Peter Hessler
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At Chinese universities, when a student reports a professor for political wrongdoing, the verb that’s used to describe this action is *jubao*. It happens rarely, but the possibility is always there, because potential infractions are both undefined and extremely varied. A student might *jubao* a teacher for a comment about a sensitive historical event, or a remark that seems to contradict a Communist Party policy. Ambiguous statements about Xi Jinping, the President of China, are especially risky. In 2019, during a class at Chongqing Normal University, a literature professor named Tang Yun offhandedly described the language of one of Xi’s slogans as coarse. After students complained, Tang was demoted to a job in the library.

Other problems can involve class materials. In the fall of 2019, I started teaching at Sichuan University, in southwestern China, where I met a law-school teacher from another institution who had developed a syllabus with some sensitive content. The course included “Disturbing the Peace,” an Ai Weiwei documentary about the artist’s encounters with the

Chinese judicial system. For two years, the teacher used the film in class without incident, but then, when he was partway through another semester, some students decided to *jubao*. Within a week, the teacher had been replaced with a substitute instructor. But the process can be slower, and much less predictable, if an initial complaint is made on social media, which was how it happened to me.

One evening in mid-December of 2019, I was about to leave my office for class when my wife, Leslie, called. A friend had just sent her a message copied from Twitter:

> *American writer and journalist Peter Hessler, under Chinese name Ho Wei . . . who moved to China with his family in Aug. 2019 to teach Non-fiction writing at Sichuan University, has possibly been reported for his behavior/speech.*

The tweet was by a Chinese academic in the United States. She had included a blurry screenshot from Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. People in China often distribute such images, because original Weibo posts can be removed by censors, who have more trouble monitoring screenshots. Leslie's friend said that the report was spreading quickly on Chinese social media. "I wanted to warn you before you started class," Leslie told me.

That evening, I was teaching nonfiction; on other days, I had two sections of freshman English composition. The freshman classes were currently reading "Animal Farm," but my department had assigned that book as a required text, and I couldn't think of other materials that might have triggered somebody to *jubao*. There wasn't enough time to search for the original comment. I decided to start the evening class as normal, hoping that the report hadn't come from this group.

My office and the classroom were in a wing of a new building on Sichuan University's Jiang'an campus, in the southwestern suburbs of Chengdu. Walking to class took little more than a minute, but I passed six surveillance cameras along the way. The cameras were among the many things that had changed since I'd last taught in China, more than twenty years earlier. In the nonfiction classroom, another camera was mounted on the wall behind me. When I stood at the lectern, the camera was positioned above my right shoulder, pointed at the students.

I heard some whispering while I called roll. It was the fourteenth week of the term, and the class of about thirty students had developed a good rapport. But tonight they seemed unsettled. Finally, a girl sitting near the front said, "Mr. Hessler, have you seen this?"

She handed me her phone. She had pulled up screenshots of the Weibo posts, which consisted of seven comments. The first one read, in Chinese:

> *To have Ho Wei teaching in our institute is truly treasonous.*

I scanned the other posts. "I know where this is coming from," I said. "It's from another class. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

Hoping to change the subject, I began the evening's lesson. The students had been writing profiles and feature stories, and I asked an engineering major named Tim to read his draft aloud. Tim had researched an online community that called itself the Federation of Stingy Men. Federation members were obsessed with living entirely off the interest from their savings and investment accounts, even though many of them were well employed. They shared strategies: one person explained that three millimetres is the minimum amount of toothpaste necessary for brushing your teeth, and a millionaire documented how he travelled to the airport, with all his luggage, on a ride-share bike. Tim wrote, "There are some people who have been living this kind of abnormally thrifty life . . . because of the habits they developed when they were poor."

The students' off-campus research had been a highlight of the semester. I had already decided that the following week we would proceed to a local Porsche salesman, the profile subject of a student named Anna. The salesman told Anna that it was pointless to try to rip off his customers, because of everything a Sichuanese person must have gone through in order to accumulate enough money for a Porsche. "The people who are capable of buying luxury cars have exhausted every means to earn profits and they have coped with all kinds of people," he said. "It's impossible to deceive them."

During breaks in class, a number of students said that they hated the *jubao* behavior. I told them not to worry, and that we would meet the following week. But in truth I wasn't certain. The Weibo posts had claimed that I was "finished," a term that, in Chinese, could also be read as a death threat. One Twitter user translated the last line:

> *[Ho Wei] spoke w/o restraint only b/c he considered himself a big writer; I think he's gonna die soon.*

I came to Sichuan in 1996, as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was sent to a small college in Fuling, a remote city on the Yangtze River, where I taught English language and literature. My students had been born in the mid-nineteen-seventies, when the nation's population was more than eighty per cent rural. Most of them had grown up on farms, and often they were among the first in their village to receive a higher education—only six out of every hundred young Chinese made it to college. My students tended to be shy, quiet, and traditionally minded. In class, when they wrote about public figures they admired, about two-thirds selected Chinese political leaders. The most popular choice was Mao Zedong:

> *Though he is responsible for the Great Cultural Revolution, we mustn't deny his achievements. As everyone knows, no gold is pure, no man is perfect.*

> *I think Mao Zedong fully deserves to be a worthy in the world's history. I am afraid only Lenin and Churchill can compare with him.*

In truth, their generation was connected most closely to Deng Xiaoping, who, in 1978, initiated the policies that became known as Reform and Opening. Since then, more than eight hundred million Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, according to the World Bank, and the population has become majority urban. Virtually all my Fuling students have entered the new middle class, and we've stayed in close touch over the past quarter century. Sometimes they write about struggles that I was oblivious of in the classroom:

> *For three years [at the college], I did not eat well and sleep well. I remember in 1996, for half a year, I just had one meal a day. I was a sad man. But now I am happy about my life.*

I moved back to Chengdu in order to reconnect with these former students, but I was also curious about the next generation. Most of the people I taught in Fuling came from relatively large families, because they were born before the institution of the one-child policy. In 1997, during my second year in Fuling, I asked a class of twenty freshmen about their families, and just one was an only child. In 2019, when I posed the same question to a section of fourteen freshmen, only one had siblings. Among all my students that fall, nearly ninety per cent were only children. I learned that when asking this question I had to clarify what I meant by the word "sibling," because otherwise students might include cousins in their responses. As families shrank, the term broadened—for many young people, a cousin was a kind of substitute brother or sister.

With such sweeping social changes, there's always been concern about how younger generations will turn out. Since the mid-eighties, the foreign and Chinese media have reported on spoiled only children, known as Little Emperors. Like American millennials, young Chinese are digital natives, but their online world is sharply delineated by the Great Firewall, the government's system of Internet censorship and site-blocking. Patriotic education has intensified under Xi Jinping, who has consolidated power to a degree not seen since the days of Mao. In 2018, the constitution was changed to abolish Presidential term limits, making it possible for Xi to become President for life. Some young people who have come of age in this climate are known as *xiao fenhong*, Little Pinks, because they are rabidly nationalistic.

After the Weibo posts about me appeared, the majority of social-media responses seemed critical of the attack. "This generation of young people is impossible," one Weibo user wrote. Another responded, in English, "Real problem is big brother." A number of people referred to Xi Jinping, although, in the dance of Chinese censorship, they avoided writing the President's name:

> *The main reason is not that the teacher cannot disagree with the student's thinking, it's that no one can disagree with.*
>
> *I took a poetry appreciation class in my sophomore year. In the class, the teacher satirized *** in front of more than 100 students, and nothing happened. Later, microphones were installed on the ceiling of each classroom.*

Early the following morning, the head of my department telephoned. He sounded worried, and he asked me to come to campus to meet with the dean. I was teaching in the English department at the Sichuan University–Pittsburgh Institute, or SCUPI. This kind of program is known as a hybrid: Chinese engineering students spend two or three years on the Chengdu campus, taking courses in English, and then can apply to complete their degrees at the University of Pittsburgh or at another American or foreign institution. All my freshmen were in SCUPI, although my nonfiction class also included undergraduates from other departments.

There are currently about forty hybrid programs in China, reflecting another major shift in education. In the nineties, Chinese students rarely went abroad: out of the more than two hundred young people whom I taught in Fuling, I knew of nobody who went on to study outside the country. By the time I went to Chengdu, millennials constituted two-thirds of China's passport holders. In 2019, there were three hundred and seventy-two thousand Chinese studying at American institutions, and most of them paid full tuition. On the American side, money has become a prime motivation for hybrid programs.

SCUPI, though, is not a hybrid in terms of politics. The University of Pittsburgh cannot establish political guidelines for the Chengdu program, which, in terms of legal status, is entirely under the umbrella of Sichuan University. Recently, when I contacted the University of Pittsburgh and asked to talk about SCUPI, the response reminded me of a Chinese institution: initially, a Pittsburgh spokesman seemed helpful, but then, after a number of delays, he declined the request.

At SCUPI, Students are required to take the same mandatory political courses as other undergraduates, and instructors are subject to the oversight of the Communist Party. After the Weibo posts appeared, I knew that Party officials at the university would investigate, and I located the materials that had triggered the attack. They were editing comments I had made on the draft of a freshman's argumentative essay, which I now sent to the department head.

As a teacher in China, I had a special fear and loathing for the argumentative essay. In the nineties, my students were provided with "A Handbook of Writing," a state-published text whose section on "argumentation" featured a model essay entitled "The Three Gorges Project Is Beneficial." The counter-argument paragraph listed some reasons to oppose the

Three Gorges Dam: flooded scenery, lost cultural relics, the risk of an earthquake destroying the structure. "Their worries and warnings are well justified," the essay continued, and then proceeded to the transition: "But we should not give up eating for fear of choking."

I found it hard to teach this essay for various reasons. First, nobody was allowed to argue about the Three Gorges Dam. Fuling was one of the places that would be affected, and in low-lying parts of the city the government had painted red lines that marked the water level of the future reservoir. Another red line, figuratively speaking, was the topic of the dam itself. At that time, it wasn't possible for a Chinese scientist to publish an open opposition to the project.

An infinitely smaller problem, but one that occupied infinitely more of my energy, was that transition sentence. Chinese education traditionally emphasizes imitation of models and rote literary phrases, and my Fuling students diligently incorporated the transition into their argumentative papers. It infected other writing, too: personal narratives, dialogues, literary essays. I might be reading a paper about "Hamlet," when suddenly a voice would boom out, worse than Polonius's: "But we should not give up eating for fear of choking." The words are a direct translation of *yinyefeishi*, a Chinese literary phrase. Over and over, I tried to explain that this sounds terrible in English.

More than two decades later, at Sichuan University, I occasionally received a freshman argumentative essay that choked up the same phrase. And there were plenty of subjects that remained off limits for argumentation. For a returning teacher, this was a mystery: how had China experienced so much social, economic, and educational change while the politics remained stagnant, or even regressive? Nobody in freshman English was going to argue that it was a bad idea to remove Presidential term limits, or that the internment camps in Xinjiang should be abolished. Even if a student took a pro-government stance on a sensitive topic, he couldn't fully engage with a counter-argument. And there was some risk for a teacher who played devil's advocate while editing.

One of my freshmen—I'll call him John—submitted a draft of an essay arguing that it was necessary for the government to limit free speech. He wrote that, "in a civilized country with the rule of law," citizens aren't allowed to make statements that question national sovereignty. I responded in the comments section:

> *It's not accurate to say that in a civilized country with rule of law, people are not allowed to make statements that challenge national sovereignty and social stability. In the United States, Canada, Europe, etc., anybody can make a statement claiming that some part of the country deserves independence.*

In the Weibo posts, the comment had been turned into something else:

> *In class, a student gave a speech saying that the country's sovereignty cannot be violated.*
>
> *Ho Wei asked why it's allowed to be violated in Quebec, Texas, California, and Scotland. People violate their national sovereignty every day.*

The posts continued in this vein: using details from my comments and fabricating other things, the author created a scene in which I argued aggressively in the classroom, browbeating students about China's government. The Weibo account was anonymous, and it was quickly removed from the site, possibly by censors. Reading the fictional argument, I remembered that that freshman classroom was the only place I taught that did not have a surveillance camera. There wasn't any digital proof that the argument hadn't occurred.

In class, John was quiet, and his academic performance was somewhere in the middle of the group. We had never had an unpleasant interaction, and I had a good impression of his cohort. Could he have done this on his own? Or was somebody else from the class involved? Or Little Pinks elsewhere in the university? A security agent? I couldn't decide if the Weibo posts were clumsy or devious—they were clearly inaccurate, but they seemed calculated to draw maximum attention.

One of my comments had been particularly critical of the Party. In John's paper, he mentioned that free speech isn't necessary because the government always informs citizens about key events in an accurate and timely manner. On the day I marked the essay—December 7, 2019—I had no idea how soon this particular issue was going to affect us all. In my comments, I referred to the SARS outbreak of 2003, when the Chinese government was accused of hiding the true number of infections. That April, a doctor in Beijing told *Time* magazine that there were sixty cases in his hospital alone, whereas the official number of cases in the capital was only twelve. I mentioned the role of whistle-blowers and journalists, and wrote:

> *One of the functions of the media anywhere in the world is to report on things that the government might want to hide. We have seen over and over, in countless countries, that official information is not always timely or accurate.*

Some of my most powerful memories from the classroom in Fuling involve incidents in which I made a statement that touched, even obliquely, on a sensitive aspect of Chinese history or politics. At such moments, the room would fall silent, and students would stare at their desks. It was a visceral response, and it became the same for me—looking out over the bowed heads, my heart raced and my face grew hot. Initially, I considered these to be the instances when I felt most like a foreigner. But I came to realize it was the opposite: my body was experiencing something that must be common to young Chinese. The Party had created a climate so intense that the political became physical.

During my first three and a half months teaching in Chengdu, I hadn't yet had that sensation. I was probably better at speaking diplomatically, but there are so many Chinese sensitivities that any foreign teacher is bound to trespass. Recently, a nonfiction student told me that in October of 2019, when Leslie visited my class to talk about her experiences as a journalist, she casually used the phrase "China and Taiwan." She had stumbled into a forbidden zone: those two proper nouns can be linked by history, culture, geography, politics—but never by the conjunction "and." Even the act of connecting these places linguistically implies that they are separate.

Two years later, my student recalled that there had been some glances, and a classmate had whispered something about correcting the phrase. But the students had let it go. Neither Leslie nor I had noticed; after I was told about it, we couldn't remember the larger context. I was certain that I broke many other such taboos, and in the old days I would have felt it—somehow these students were more capable of controlling outward reactions. Still, they had been trained like hawks to be alert to such phrases.

At Sichuan University, a half-dozen political courses were mandatory for all undergrads. My Fuling students had had similar requirements, but since then another two decades of Communist history had piled up, and now the course names seemed to be getting longer: Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Research on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. If these titles were ungainly, things got worse when you opened the texts:

> *Only by taking the socialist core values as a major task with basic internality and targeted norms can we realize these core values while enhancing the people's self-confidence in the path forward, theoretical self-confidence, institutional self-confidence, and cultural self-confidence, in order to ensure that socialism with Chinese characteristics is always moving in the right direction and constantly showing stronger vitality.*

That sentence was quoted by one of my freshmen, who wrote his argumentative essay in favor of reforming the political classes. His topic was among the edgiest, which made it difficult to research. One afternoon, he came to my office.

"When I search on Baidu, I can only find the counterpoint of my argument," he said. "Or I find people who say things like 'I don't care if I'm brainwashed, as long as it gives some benefit to us.' " He believed that most useful sources had been removed by censors or blocked by the firewall.

At the institute, I was provided with a list of unblocked English-language search engines, which I dutifully passed on to my classes, although, with the exception of Bing, I had never heard of any of these sites. They sounded like obscure rock bands: Dogpile, Yandex, WolframAlpha, Swisscows, DuckDuckGo. Even this third-tier-festival lineup was subject to cancellation: in 2019, during the first week of fall semester, a student could still do a DuckDuckGo search, but by week four the firewall made it DuckDuckGone. A site could be accessed only if it allowed content to be censored, like Bing, or if it remained so lightly trafficked that it didn't draw attention.

Sometimes freshmen showed up to my office hours simply to ask me to Google something. I had subscribed to a virtual private network before leaving the United States, and a number of students asked for help signing up for the same service, but I didn't know how to do it without an overseas credit card. Domestic V.P.N. providers could be arranged over WeChat, but the quality varied, and first-year students were often intimidated, because such services are illegal in China.

Over time, I learned that the best advice was: Talk to an older student. Along with mandatory political courses, learning how to *fanqiang*, or climb the wall, was essentially part of the curriculum at Sichuan University, which is among the top forty or so institutions in China. Relatively few of my freshmen seemed to be climbing the wall, but many of the juniors and seniors clearly used Google and other blocked sites. It wasn't a secret that many professors had tech support that helped them arrange V.P.N. services. One of my juniors, a liberal-arts major, described it as almost like a game. She told me, "Whenever they ask us in class to Google something, some students say, 'We don't have a V.P.N., so how can we Google? Can you tell us how to use a V.P.N.?' And they say, 'Sorry, we have support, but we're not allowed to tell you.' "

In my nonfiction class, a senior named Yidi profiled her V.P.N. dealer. That was the term Yidi used—it was like sourcing drugs. "I've been paying him on WeChat for a while, so I want to find out who he is," she told me, when she proposed the project. The dealer agreed to an interview, at which point Yidi learned that he was neither a hardened criminal nor a tech guy. He had developed an online course in art history after attending graduate school in Europe, where he became accustomed to a free Internet. After returning to China, he shopped around for a V.P.N. service and realized how easy it would be to set up such a business. That was an old story: the user who becomes a dealer.

When Yidi asked how much the business cost to run, the dealer responded, "If I tell you, you will probably ask for a refund." But he went ahead: for three hundred yuan a year, a little less than fifty dollars, he could rent a Vultr virtual private server overseas, which could handle up to fifty Chinese customers, each of whom paid the dealer an annual subscription fee of three hundred yuan. And then he scaled it up: fifty times three hundred, minus the minimal overhead, as many times as he pleased.

Yidi was one of the best writers in the class, with a breezy, funny voice. Her story had no sense of surprise or outrage—students seemed accustomed to contradictions and mixed messages. They weren't shocked that the university required classes in Xi Jinping Thought while tacitly encouraging students to contract with illegal-V.P.N. dealers, just as they weren't shocked when one of those dealers turned out to be somebody with a sideline in art history. Yidi wrote:

> *The business is operated on WeChat, one of the most meticulously monitored social-media platforms in the world, and I was concerned that such an approach is tantamount to distributing anti-sexual harassment leaflets on public transportation during International Women's Day. But my dealer dispelled the myth. "Hundreds of millions of Chinese are getting around the wall, you think the state will punish them all?"*

The dealer was exaggerating the numbers, but his point was that the Party wants some porousness in the firewall. People in the export business need to access Google Trends and other useful tools, and scholars and researchers depend on full access to the Internet. Yidi thought that more than half the students she knew at Sichuan University used a V.P.N., which was similar to other estimates I heard. In society at large, the figure is much lower, especially among older people. In 2017, when I surveyed a group of my former Fuling students, I asked whether they used V.P.N.s, and only one out of thirty responded in the affirmative. For most Chinese, the hassle and the expense act as deterrents. But it's much more common among the young and the élite. Yidi's dealer told her, "It's a good business, the gray market of China."

By the time I met with Minking Chyu, the SCUPI dean, Party officials had already interviewed a number of my students. Chyu told me that the students all said they hadn't witnessed any classroom exchange like what had been recounted on Weibo.

In the hybrid arrangement at Sichuan University, Chyu represented the University of Pittsburgh. Originally from Taiwan, he was now a citizen of the United States, where he had begun his career as a professor of engineering and later became an administrator. He wasn't directly involved in any Party investigation, but officials communicated their findings to him. In our meeting, Chyu told me that the officials were satisfied that the incident had not occurred as it was described on Weibo. (Chyu subsequently claimed that he was not aware of any investigation.)

I had brought John's essay with my comments, but Chyu said this wasn't the issue, at least not yet. All that mattered was that nobody had formally started the *jubao* process, filing a complaint with the administration. A number of Chinese and foreign journalists had contacted me about the incident, and I asked Chyu if it would be accurate for me to say that I had not been reported. Chyu said yes, and after I issued the statement the social-media conversation died down.

That month, my department held a meeting about the incident with a Party official from the university. I explained what had happened, and an American professor asked if any topics were explicitly forbidden in our classrooms. In response, the Party official read from a statement, in English: “These include sex in a graphic or degrading manner, political opinion that may not be generally agreed upon, religious material promoting or degrading the tenets within, and topics deemed politically sensitive.”

This was a typical Party approach—by not being specific, authority remained broader and more flexible. The American professor spoke again. “Sometimes we have discussions and students raise topics themselves,” he said. “And they might raise a topic that seems borderline. To what extent do we interrupt?”

“It’s better not to talk about it,” the official responded, this time in Chinese. “Because this is still a Chinese student. You don’t know if that student will *fanguolai*”—turn it upside down.

Throughout the various meetings, nobody ever said that I had done anything wrong. But neither was I told that it was a violation for a teacher’s private editing comments to be twisted and then posted on social media. If officials had spoken with John, and if they knew more about what had happened, they kept their findings to themselves. The general approach was to proceed as if nothing had occurred, which meant that, five days after the Weibo attack, I was scheduled to teach John and his cohort again. We still had three weeks together in the classroom.

When I discussed *jubao* culture with the law-school teacher who had been disciplined after using the Ai Weiwei documentary, he explained that the fear ran in two directions. Administrators were afraid of what students might do, and they also feared higher officials. With the parameters deliberately left undefined, outcomes were also uncertain. After the incident with the documentary, the head of the department quickly reassured superiors that he would discipline the teacher. The punishment, though, was relatively light. The teacher was suspended from that class, but he was allowed to continue with his other courses. He told me that a large scandal would have reflected poorly on everybody. “They were protecting me, but they were also protecting themselves,” he said.

The teacher mentioned the practice of using students as *xinxiyuan*—literally, “information personnel.” This wasn’t new: in the Peace Corps, we had been told that some students were almost certainly tracking classroom content. In 1997, one volunteer got into an altercation with a taxi-driver and was taken to the police station, where a Peace Corps administrator was also called in. In the course of questioning, it became clear that the police had a record of sensitive political comments that the volunteer had made in class during the previous year and a half.

But we never knew the exact mechanisms. Even after more than a quarter century, with a number of Fuling students who are very close friends, I’ve never heard a word about the monitoring. My impression is that the Party is shrewd about recruitment for such jobs, and the vast majority of students remain outside this subsystem. And there's little incentive, and also significant risk, for them to ask questions. "It's a waste of time to find out," one of my more liberal Sichuan University students told me. It was like following a thread that connected to an enormous tapestry, which was how I felt about the surveillance cameras. When I counted the devices in my local subway station, at Dongmen Daqiao, I saw fifteen cameras at track level, forty-seven at the turnstiles, and thirty-eight for the escalators. The total came to a hundred cameras, not to mention the two devices that were positioned in each individual subway car. Who was monitoring all this stuff?

The law-school teacher had heard that he had been reported by a group of students, but he didn't know which ones. He said he wouldn't have been angry at any individual. "He doesn't know that his mind is being enslaved," the teacher said. "I'm angry with the system."

When I came to class after the Weibo attacks, John was sitting alone toward the back. He didn't make eye contact when I greeted the students.

We were scheduled to discuss "Animal Farm," but I had decided to delay Orwell for a week, until I could gauge the group's dynamics. That day, we talked about some sample papers, and then we did an editing exercise. Everything seemed normal, although John didn't participate in the discussions. I couldn't tell if he was deliberately avoiding my gaze—he had always been shy.

I felt relieved to hear the final bell. A few students seemed disappointed that we hadn't talked about "Animal Farm," and they lingered after class. One boy remarked that he had found the novel to be even more depressing than "1984." "Because Winston has his happiness," he said. "At least he has a moment. Here the animals don't even have that."

Another student brought up "Brave New World," commenting that Huxley's fictional society is quite different from Orwell's. "But the end is similar," he said. "It's also very negative."

"Big Brother," the first boy said. "Some students want to be Big Brother."

John was still in the classroom, collecting his things, and now I was careful not to look in his direction.

"What about you?" the boy said to me. "Do you want to be Big Brother?" He said it lightly and laughed; I couldn't tell what he meant by the comment.

Of the many things that are banned, blocked, or censored in China, the novels of George Orwell do not make the list. Last year, when I entered Xinhua Winshare, one of the largest of the bookstores that are overseen by the Party in downtown Chengdu, the first table displayed twenty titles that documented the career and theories of Xi Jinping in mind-numbing detail: "Xi Jinping's Seven Years as an Educated Youth," "The Story of Xi Jinping's Poverty Alleviation," "Xi Jinping in Xiamen," "Xi Jinping in Zhengding," "Xi Jinping in Ningde." Less than thirty feet away, another table featured stacks of books marketed as the Dystopian Trilogy: "1984," "Brave New World," and "We," a novel that was banned in the Soviet Union after it was written, around 1920, by Yevgeny Zamyatin. Nearby, a security camera hung from the ceiling, and the cover of the Orwell volume declared, "War Is Peace. Freedom Is Slavery. And Big Brother Is Watching You." There were also copies of "Animal Farm," and another Chinese translation of "1984." In 2021, more than two hundred thousand copies of "1984" were sold in Chinese editions, along with a hundred thousand copies of "Animal Farm."

Many of my students had read Orwell in high school, and his books were taught in various courses at Sichuan University. Less than two weeks after the Weibo attack, students from another department invited me to attend their dramatic performance of "1984." When I entered the lecture hall, the professor greeted me warmly; he asked only that I not mention the name of the class. I sat at the back of the hall, near a security camera. There was another camera in the front.

The assignment had been to perform a new version of a classic story. At the beginning of the play, some boys and girls acted out the Two Minutes Hate, yelling Chinese curses that reminded me of a Cultural Revolution struggle session: *Fangpi!* (Fart!) *Yangliande zhu!* (Sheep-faced pig!) *Yangliande luozi!* (Sheep-faced mule!) After that, the play focussed on Julia, who becomes Winston Smith's lover. In the novel, Julia is a highly sexualized, unintellectual figure who simply hates the control of the state, but the Sichuan University students turned her into a secret Party agent. She is assigned to entrap Winston—but then, in carrying out her mission, she can't stop herself from falling in love with him. Her feelings are shattered when she sees how quickly Winston gives her up under torture. After that, she renews her dedication to the state, and the play ends with the Party identifying a new target, with a Chinese name. "Comrade Julia, congratulations on accomplishing this task," a superior says. "Your next mission is Ye Lianke."

I hadn't thought it was possible to make "1984" any darker, but the students had succeeded. Afterward, one of the writers told me that she'd expanded Julia's role because the original character seemed underdeveloped—the writer had recognized a strain of misogyny in the novel. On the whole, my students were good readers of Orwell. As part of our "Animal Farm" unit, they wrote about the character they most identified with. A common choice was Benjamin, the donkey who is skeptical of the new farm but keeps his thoughts to himself:

> *As a Chinese saying goes,* huocongkouchu*, which means that all one's troubles were caused by his tongue. We have two eyes, two ears, two hands, but only one mouth, which just tells us we should observe more, listen more, do more, and speak less.*

Some students identified with Boxer, the faithful and slow-witted horse who gets worked to death:

> *I am a person without independent thinking, too. I often believe what others say to me, and I always complete the work given by other people without any personal thinking. If I am one of the animals in the farm, I will believe the word said by the leader such as Snowball and Napoleon. . . . Maybe I will be brainwashed by Napoleon and finally become the animal who does whatever Napoleon orders me to do. In the end, I will be put away by Napoleon.*

The students could be brutally honest about themselves. They wrote well—when I contacted them for permission to quote their papers for this story, some made minor edits, but these excerpts are essentially as I first received them. I saw few signs of Little Emperor syndrome, which seems to be based primarily on a Western imagining of what an only-child society might be like. For one thing, most of my students had spent surprisingly little time alone. Chinese schools often require additional on-campus study periods, and quite a few of my students had lived in dormitories during high school, a practice that's common in China.

My students were spoiled mostly in the sense of having been provided every possible opportunity to do more work. This is typical in Chinese families: extra resources are dedicated to education. In one nonfiction class, I asked students how much time they had spent in tutoring sessions during middle school, and the average figure was six and a half hours a week. Personal essays about childhood often described devilishly designed competitions. One boy wrote about how, as a third grader, he had been enrolled in a supplementary math program that had six hundred applicants. An exam quickly winnowed the group down to sixty children, who were divided into an A team and a B team. From there, the program embarked on an endless series of examinations, with kids constantly demoted and promoted, like Premier League franchises.

Everything came down to numbers, because that's the principle of the *gaokao*, the national college-entrance examination. When a student applies to university, scores are all that matter—no teacher recommendations, no list of extracurriculars. One attraction of SCUPI was that its cutoff *gaokao* score was lower than that of other departments. In order to enter SCUPI in the fall of 2019, a student in Sichuan Province needed 632 points out of 750. The next-lowest cutoff was 649, which allowed a student to enter a number of less prestigious departments, including Water Resources, Sanitation Testing and Quarantine, and Marxism. English was 660, econ 663, math 667. The university's Web site listed the numbers, and status was measured accordingly. The ultimate campus élite, the Brahmins of

Sichuan University, occupied the School of Stomatology. At first, this mystified me—why such a fuss about oral medicine? But the School of Stomatology at Sichuan University's West China Medical School is recognized as the best in the nation, and it took a remarkable 696 points to enter its program in clinical medicine. Other undergrads resented the stomatologists; my students said they held themselves apart. If asked about his major, a stomatologist might coyly avoid answering, like a Harvard grad who says he went to school "in Boston."

Most of my students seemed traumatized in some way by the *gaokao* experience. A few described having had suicidal thoughts, and one boy wrote a personal essay about being hospitalized for stress-related heart trouble. In 2020, I asked students in a freshman class how they had reacted to learning their *gaokao* scores, and seventeen out of eighteen said they had been disappointed. Leslie and I sometimes joked that in America every child is a winner; in China, every child is a loser.

Yet students generally supported the Chinese system. Each semester, my freshman classes debated whether the *gaokao* should be significantly changed, and the majority answered in the negative. Many came to the same conclusion in argumentative essays. (Spring of 2020: "We cannot give up eating for fear of choking, we should treat *gaokao* dialectically. On the whole, its advantages far outweigh its disadvantages.") One major reason was that numbers are incorruptible—the richest man in Sichuan might buy that Porsche, but he can't buy his kid's way into stomatology. And, despite their youth, many students were realists. A nonfiction student named Sarinstein—he created this name because he admired Sartre and Einstein—profiled a ten-year-old schoolboy. He observed how, in the classroom, the boy's cohort had been seated, from front to back, according to their exam scores. Sarinstein wrote:

> *China's system cannot afford individualized education, caring for one's all-around and healthy growth. . . . Our system is merely a machine helping the enormous and somewhat cumbersome Chinese society to function—to continuously supply sufficient human resources for the whole society. It is cruel. But it is also probably the fairest choice under China's current circumstances. An unsatisfying compromise. I haven't seen or come up with a better way.*

They often used the term *neijuan*, or involution, a point at which intense competition produces diminishing returns. For them, this was unavoidable in a vast country. For one writing assignment, a freshman engineering student named Milo returned to a Chongqing auto-parts factory that he had first visited eight years earlier, for an elementary-school project. This time, when Milo interviewed the boss, he was struck by how old the man looked. The boss explained that booming business required frequent travel and many alcohol-fuelled banquets with clients. "I had no time to take care of my family," he told Milo. "My kids do not understand me and even dislike me, since I seldom show up. What's more, after drinking so much alcohol, I sometimes have a terrible stomachache."

On the factory floor, a foreman whom Milo remembered said that the workforce had been reduced by a third, because of automation. Milo titled his essay "Farewell, Old Factory," and he concluded:

> *Everyone in the society must try their best to follow the world's trends. This is a colorful and fascinating world, but this is also a cruel world. If you are not good enough, you will be eliminated without a trace of pity.*

In my first book, "River Town," I described the "childlike shyness" of my Fuling students, who seemed young because they were entering a new world. To some degree, this had been true for every generation of modern Chinese. Time and again, young people had entered the maelstrom of overwhelming change, whether it involved war or revolution, politics or economics.

But my students at Sichuan University were old souls. They knew how things worked; they understood the system's flaws and also its benefits. The environment they were entering was essentially the same one in which their parents had worked: for the first time, China has been both stable and prosperous for a period that's longer than a university student's memory. When they wrote about their parents' generation, and about the society that they would someday inherit, they could be completely cold-eyed:

> *My parents were born in the 1970s, and I think they now fit into the lower middle class in China. They are characterized by firm patriotism and nonchalant cynicism. They strongly support the People's Republic of China, not by praising the Chinese government, but by criticizing foreign governments. They refuse to use Apple products, decline to travel to Japan, and dismiss Trump as crazy and malicious. Yet they seldom admire China with passion. They have witnessed corruption in Chinese bureaucracy as well as injustice in society, which they are not able to redress, so they always say, "Things are just like that." . . .*
>
> *I think my generation, born in the age of the Internet, is puzzled and somehow depressed by the conflict between Chinese beliefs and Western ones. Propaganda about liberty and reason prevails on the Internet while propaganda about patriotism and Communism prevails in the textbooks. Youngsters are mostly attracted by the former, but when passing exams and pursuing jobs, they should bear in mind the latter, and in practice in China, more often than not, the latter functions better.*

Reading words like that felt heartbreaking but also inspiring: even the act of describing a situation with no easy solution is a kind of agency. Despite the stifling political climate and the soul-crushing *gaokao* routines, the Chinese educational system produced no small number of people who could observe and analyze, think and write.

At the university, I never again had an experience like the one with John. A little more than a month after that incident, the pandemic shut down the campus, and I never saw him in person again. Recently, I contacted him, sending a long e-mail and a screenshot of the original Weibo posts. Almost immediately, John responded, and within hours we were talking via video connection.

John told me that he was mortified to learn that the attack had been connected to his essay. He claimed that in the fall of 2019 he had heard only that I had been reported. John didn't post on Weibo, and he hadn't seen the original attack. "I'm sorry," he said. He had no idea how the editing comments had become public.

Over the years, I had talked about the incident with a few politically savvy students and professors. One teacher who knew John had told me that the boy didn't seem like a Little Pink. The teacher and others imagined the same scenario: that some other student had seen the essay, or heard details from it, and then written the attack. When I spoke with John, he said that he had mentioned some of the editing comments to his roommates, and that he had also taken the paper to the institute's writing center, where other students and tutors may have seen it. From looking at John's face, and from his over-all reaction, I believed that he was telling the truth.

"Actually, after you gave the comments on the paper, I was a little upset," he said. "I totally agree with you about the comments, if we don't consider the politics. But I had to consider the politics, because I am under a certain circumstance in China. Your comments were against the traditional politics."

I asked if he would have the same reaction now.

"Yes," he said. "It's not that the comments are wrong. It's just the feelings."

For many students, the experience of the pandemic seemed to confirm a general idea that the benefits of the Chinese system greatly outweigh its flaws. In assignments, a number of them wrote angrily about the government's initial coverup and missteps. But they recognized that China was the only large country in the world that, after early mistakes, had been able to dramatically change course and keep fatalities to a minimum. They were realists, but I wouldn't describe them as cynical. In the course of several semesters, I asked more than a hundred students if they expected their generation to have a better life than their parents' generation had, and eighty-three per cent said that they did.

The Little Pink phenomenon, which seems to be amplified by social media, was not something I observed in the classroom. In my experience, the Chinese students of twenty-five years ago were much more nationalistic, and much less aware, than the students of today. Li Chunling, one of China's most prominent sociologists, has carried out many largescale surveys of young Chinese. In her book "China's Youth," she describes a pattern of less interest in joining the Party, in addition to a tendency for high income and higher education to correlate with reduced national identification. But Li emphasizes that this is not a sign of dissidence. "They see Western democratic institutions as better than China's current systems," she writes. "But they see little value in immediately instituting a Western-style democratic order, because China's current situation seems to demand the institutions that it has."

Li also writes that, with regard to highly educated young Chinese, "simple propaganda-style education will not be effective." Over the course of four semesters, I couldn't remember any student bringing up Xi Jinping in class. I recently reviewed more than five hundred student papers and found the President mentioned only twenty-two times, usually in passing. Undoubtedly, fear played a role. But there also seemed to be a genuine lack of connection to the leader. I often gave an assignment that I had previously given in Fuling, asking freshmen to write about a public figure, living or dead, Chinese or foreign, whom they admired. In the old days, Mao had been the most popular choice, but my Sichuan University students were much more likely to write about scientists or entrepreneurs. Out of sixty-five students, only one selected Xi Jinping, which left the President tied with Eminem, Jim Morrison, and George Washington. The student who chose Washington wrote, "The reason why I admire him most is that he gave up his political power voluntarily."

In early April, 2021, my teaching contract wasn't renewed. Dean Chyu had been in the United States since the start of the pandemic, and he e-mailed me with the news. First, he said that SCUPI had other candidates, but, when I checked with my department, I was told that there wasn't any recruitment taking place—because of the pandemic, it was extremely difficult to get foreign teachers into China. After I wrote to the dean again, he added a different reason, citing a Chinese rule that supposedly prevented the university from extending a short-term contract like mine. I offered to sign a long-term contract, but he declined, without explanation. Recently, I wrote to Chyu, and he responded in an e-mail that he was too busy to do an interview. (When contacted by a fact checker, Chyu claimed that I never expressed interest in signing a long-term contract, and he said that he had made plans to replace me before the pandemic began.)

During the pandemic, there had been periodic social-media attacks about my writing, by Little Pinks and others. Two professors at Sichuan University told me that mid-level administrators had had to file reports about these incidents, which supposedly was one of the reasons my job ended. (Chyu and a former university official claim that they were not aware of any such reports.) The professors also told me that nobody at the top had issued a direct command to not renew my contract, because the system created enough nervousness that people were likely to err on the side of caution. "*Tianwei bukece*," one professor explained, using a phrase that means the highest authority remains unclear. "You have to guess what the exact order is."

Near the end of June, less than a week before my wife and daughters were flying out of China, a deputy director of the university's foreign-affairs office requested a meeting. The official told me that the university would have been happy if I had stayed, and that I was welcome to apply for a position with a different college. He said that the refusal to renew my job had been made by Dean Chyu alone. "He did not know the whole situation here," the official told me. (Later, when contacted by a fact checker, the official denied saying this.) It impressed me as another way in which the system functioned effectively: in the hybrid arrangement, the decision to get rid of the American teacher could be blamed on the American institution.

When my final class of freshmen read "Animal Farm," I asked them to reimagine the story at Sichuan University. In one boy's version, a mob of students take over the campus and penetrate the administration's central computer room, hoping to change grades, only to realize that the security cameras are still operating. Another boy, named Carl, described a revolt in which students successfully expel professors and staff. Afterward, all students are equal, but some become more equal than others:

> *Without teachers, the undisciplined people give up studying completely, while the self-disciplined people work harder every day, especially the people from the West China College of Stomatology. Although they said there was no discrimination, the students at Pittsburgh Institute were about 15 points worse than those of other colleges of Sichuan University in the college entrance examination.*

Carl's story ends with the stomatologists embarking on successful careers while other students fail to get jobs, thus destroying the university's reputation.

When teaching Orwell, I often thought about why such books aren't considered a threat to the Party. In the novels of the Dystopian Trilogy, futuristic societies distract and control individuals by various methods: the continuous war and rewritten history of "1984," the sex and soma drugs of "Brave New World," the surgical removal of human imagination in "We." But none of these books anticipates how useful competition can be in sustaining a long-term authoritarian state. In China, nationalistic propaganda might be effective for children and other people at a lower level, but there's a tacit understanding that it won't work as well for the highly educated. As long as these individuals have opportunities to advance and improve their lives, they are less likely to oppose authority. And the system doesn't need to be hermetically sealed in the manner of "1984." The vast majority of Chinese students who go abroad choose to return—for them, it's as simple as *yinyefeishi*. If they were truly afraid of choking, they would remain in the United States.

And there's a point at which competition becomes a highly effective distraction. For most of my students, the greatest worry didn't seem to be classroom security cameras or other instruments of state control—it was the thought of all those talented young people around them. In October of 2019, when China celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, I asked students what the holiday meant to them. One freshman wrote:

> *Holiday means others went out to play and I am studying, which is the time that I have the highest relative efficiency. I could learn more than others and I will get a higher GPA. Holiday is the best time that I can go surpass my classmates in study.*

At Sichuan University, there is one independent and liberal student-run publication. *Changshi*, or *Common Sense*, was founded in 2010, and the name is partly in homage to Thomas Paine's pamphlet. Somehow, *Common Sense* has survived the current political climate, although it no longer publishes on paper, uses no bylines, and has no list of staff writers. During my final semester, the most prominent stories were an investigation into the sudden death of a student on campus and a feature about an undergraduate who was trying to sue the university because of low-quality cafeteria food. A number of journalists from the magazine had taken my nonfiction class.

The week before I left the university, I met off campus with the publication's staff. There were about twenty students, almost all of them female. That was another aspect of university life that wasn't quite Orwellian. From "1984": "It was always the women, and above all the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallowers of slogans, the amateur spies and nosers-out of unorthodoxy." In my experience, female students seemed less nationalistic than the men, and I suspected they were less likely to *jubao* a professor.

During our meeting, the *Common Sense* staff asked what I thought about young people today. I mentioned the intense competition, and I said that I had been impressed with my students' understanding and analysis of the system around them. "But I don't know what this means for the future," I said. "Maybe it means that they figure out how to change the system. But maybe they just figure out how to adapt to the system. What do you think?"

"We will adapt," somebody said, and several others nodded.

"It's easy to get angry, but easy to forget," another woman remarked.

A third woman, one of the smallest in the group, said, "We will change it." ♦

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Peter Hessler joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2000. His most recent book is “The Buried: An Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution.”

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