

The 'great Chinese market' myth

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Unless Springer Nature backtracks as Cambridge University Press did in August, it will have to redesign its corporate Web site to add an addendum on several pages: "... unless China does not like it."

The company on Wednesday admitted that it had removed from its Chinese Web site, at the government's request, hundreds of articles that touched on issues Beijing is sensitive about: Taiwan, Tibet, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) internal politics and human rights.

Springer Nature's Web site opens with the declaration: "We advance discovery by publishing robust and insightful research, supporting the development of new areas of knowledge and making ideas and knowledge accessible around the world."

"We are a global publisher dedicated to providing the best possible service to the whole research community," it states, adding: "Springer Nature believes ... the free flow of information and ideas is at the heart of advancing discovery."

The company defended its decision by saying that only 1 percent of its content is now inaccessible in China, with director of communications and engagement Susie Winter adding that the move had been taken "to prevent a much greater impact on our customers and authors."

Removing the content from its China site was "deeply regrettable," but it was "not editorial censorship," she said.

Springer Nature should know better.

The company is this year celebrating 175 years as an academic publisher, tracing its lineage to Julius Springer opening a bookstore-publishing house in Berlin in 1842. The firm should know all too well the cost that comes from a publisher having to self-censor under government pressure, as the then-Springer-Verlag did under the Nazis: having to drop many of its authors,

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editors, a managing partner and titles.

Some might wonder how a company known for publications like *Nature* and *Scientific American* could have material that runs afoul of the CCP’s efforts to sanitize and rewrite Chinese history, but Springer Nature has a large humanities portfolio, having acquired Palgrave Macmillan, Macmillan Education and J.B. Metzler, the 337-year-old house that published Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Beijing’s effort to get publishers to censor their Chinese sites appears on the surface to be aimed at restricting information from Chinese researchers who read academic journals in English or other languages, rather than the average Chinese.

However, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s (习近平) censorship is in reality aimed at controlling the outside world’s information about China: Foreign academics are likely to be less willing to research, teach or seek to publish on topics that the CCP does not like if it means that they risk not getting visas to visit for research or attend conferences, or find it difficult to have their work published.

Cash-strapped universities around the world have already discovered just what kind of devil’s bargain they signed by agreeing to have Beijing’s Confucius Institutes on their campuses, with the resulting pressure on other academics, or by admitting Chinese students who prove intolerant of the appearance of speakers or lecturers on Beijing’s enemies list, such as the Dalai Lama.

The repercussions of falling afoul of China’s censorship authorities should be something that Taiwanese academics unhappy with their pay or career tracks in this nation think about as Chinese universities step up their recruiting drives with offers of high salaries.

What if the next demand is not to just to remove “sensitive materials” from platforms in China, but any Chinese-language platform?

Xi’s willingness to ignore borders, geographical or otherwise, as part of his censorship

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campaign was made clear with the kidnapping in 2015 of five men who worked with a Hong Kong publishing house and bookstore, and by the detention of Taiwanese human rights advocate Lee Ming-che (李明哲) earlier this year.

Foreign companies big and small have for decades chased the “great China market,” only to discover it is a creature as mythical as a chimera. Publishers such as Cambridge and Springer Nature might fear losing out on the Chinese market, but the truth is that it is China that cannot afford to lose them.

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