

The irony of it all.

On Tuesday last week, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) unveiled a sculpture by British artist Mark Wallinger outside its Saw Swee Hock Student Centre. Commissioned by the Contemporary Art Society (CAS), the sculpture of a giant globe is the first permanent public work by the London-based artist for the British capital.

However, his sculpture was quickly enveloped in controversy after Chinese students at the school protested that the island of Taiwan was a different color than China and urged the school to change it. That led their Taiwanese counterparts to urge the school to retain Wallinger's original version, and eventually drew complaints from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and some Taiwanese LSE alumni.

The irony of getting upset over a few centimeters of pink paint on a sculpture titled *The World Turned Upside Down* appears lost on the Chinese students.

They appear not to have been as bothered by Taiwan being labeled "REP. CHINA (Taiwan)" on the globe, which would still make it different from the area labeled "CHINA (People's Republic)."

Then there is the irony of the LSE on Wednesday caving in to the Chinese students' demand and saying, according to a Taiwanese student, that all maps released by the UN show Taiwan as a part of the People's Republic of China — even though Wallinger's goal in inverting the Earth was to make people rethink how they view the world.

"This is the world as we know it from a different viewpoint. Familiar, strange and subject to change," he has been quoted as saying.

Wallinger wanted to force the sculpture's viewers to reconsider the traditional flat Mercator projection of the Earth by showing them the true size of the African continent and the vastness

of the oceans.

The LSE originally embraced that challenge.

As LSE director Minouche Shafik said last week in welcoming the sculpture: “This bold new work by Mark Wallinger encapsulates what LSE is all about. We are committed to tackling the biggest global challenges ... and this means seeing the world from different and unfamiliar points of view.”

However, it seems that LSE’s Chinese students are not interested in different and unfamiliar viewpoints. They only want to see the world, and have the world see China, from Beijing’s perspective.

Fabienne Nicholas, head of consultancy at the 109-year-old CAS, said that Wallinger’s “astute understanding of the social and political context of our times has produced a remarkable work that comments on the state of our world today.”

She was more right than she realized, as she was probably not thinking of the cross-strait chasm that divides Taiwanese and Chinese national identities, or Beijing’s unwillingness to recognize the reality of Taiwan today.

Again, it is ironic that on LSE’s Web site page touting Wallinger’s work, it notes that *The World Turned Upside Down* was also the title of a revolutionary English ballad from the 1640s and a 1981 song by Leon Rosselson about the English Protestant radical Gerrard Winstanley and his followers, who are often considered forerunners of anarchism.

The Web site quotes an excerpt from a pamphlet Winstanley published in 1649 outlining his belief in economic equality: “When once the earth becomes a common treasury again, as it must ... then this enmity in all lands will cease, and none shall dare to seek a dominion over others, neither shall any dare to kill another, nor desire more of the earth than another.”

Rethinking the world — and failing

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Wallerstein's *The World Turned Upside Down* is not the first work of art to fall afoul of Chinese censorship, and it will not be the last.

The LSE might have hailed the boldness of Wallerstein's work, but by caving in to the Chinese students' demands, it has been anything but bold itself.

As an educational institution, it could have used the controversy as a chance to teach its students that not everyone views the world the same way they do, and people can acknowledge those differences even if they do not agree with them.

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