

Research Report
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Academic Freedom in Taiwan: Faculty Perception of its Role in a Democracy

Jennifer Ruth, Portland State University
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Project

I conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with humanities and social science faculty as well as a few prominent intellectuals over the course of three months, interviewing thirty individuals in total. While the majority of faculty I interviewed hold positions at public universities, I also interviewed faculty members at private universities such as Hsi Hsin University and Ming Chuan. While the vast majority of faculty I interviewed work at universities in and around Taipei and Taoyuan, I also interviewed one full professor at a private university in Taichung. In addition to faculty at teaching universities, I interviewed three research fellows at Academia Sinica. The professors I interviewed range in stages of their careers as well as in age (from mid-30s to mid-60s). I began with an open set of questions: How do they understand academic freedom? How is it protected on their campuses? In what kinds of situations does it become contested? What is its importance to Taiwan as a democratic society? How do geopolitics affect higher education in Taiwan generally and academic freedom specifically?

Context

On June 30, 2020, the People's Republic of China implemented the National Security Law in Hong Kong, rendering expression relating to Hong Kong democracy or independence punishable by up to life imprisonment. This necessarily means that the academic freedom, long cherished by faculty in Hong Kong, no longer exists. And, as many commentators have noted, what happens in Hong Kong is watched closely by those in Taiwan: "Since the handover of its sovereignty in 1997, Hong Kong has officially become a reference model for Taiwan," writes Ming-sho Ho in *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and*

Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. A key difference between Hong Kong and Taiwan, though, is that Hong Kong never achieved full democratization. From the late 1970s through the 1990s, Taiwan undertook reforms that allowed it to transition from a one-party state to a democracy. This development reverberated powerfully through higher education in Taiwan and spurred the development of fairly robust practices of academic freedom, as Wing-Wah Law argued in 2015 in *International Higher Education*:

The rule of law for democracy in Taiwan in the 1990s was not only a necessary condition, but also a catalyst for the protection and enhancement of academic freedom. Despite a lack of a tradition of university autonomy, mechanisms were created to make manifest the rule of law for democracy so as to reduce the possibility of the domination of higher education by the state. In the newly democratic Taiwan, the state, academics and politicians, and the community are in the process of learning how to exercise and honor university autonomy. (6)

Democratization was key to developing university autonomy and, in turn, democratization itself has its roots in part in student movements for freedom on university campuses, primarily at National Taiwan University.

Before the 1990s, all aspects of education from kindergarten through tertiary schools were under the complete control of the one-party (KMT) state. After the Japanese left, the KMT entered and overhauled education in every respect, changing a Japan-centered curriculum to a China-centric one and substituting mandarin for Japanese as the enforced language of instruction. Tuition fees, appointments of presidents, curricula, student quotas—all were determined by the KMT-led cabinet-level Ministry of Education (MOE) (see Tsai). The

“educational guidelines during the nation’s reconstruction period,” set forth in 1950, made the “Three Principles of the People” the mandatory political ideology with an emphasis on “Recovering the Mainland” (see Hou). University administrators and faculty members could be dismissed without due process (see Law). With military soldiers on campus, martial law in force, and the memory of the 228 massacre kept fresh by the harsh White Terror period, the situation on campuses was one of virtually total conformity with the KMT’s Nationalist propaganda. This situation continued from the Chiang Kai-shek era into the Chiang Ching-kuo one (see Xie). However, after Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations in 1971, the situation slowly began to evolve as dissidents dared to question the legitimacy of a one-party state that did not allow for representation from 85% of its population and which continued to maintain the fiction of a provincial government and a regime destined to retake the mainland. Social movements also developed—around farmers’ rights, environmental issues, etc.—and a civil society emerged (see Hsiao). Students were especially active, particularly at National Taiwan University where in 1986 the student council voted unanimously to abolish the school’s practice of censoring the student newspaper before its publication. The NTU students called next for “complete reform of the university system, including freedom of assembly, academic freedom, university autonomy for professors and students and for complete government withdrawal from school affairs” (see Han). Their demands were refused but this moment—called the “love of freedom” student movement—was the beginning of a series of events that would lead to fundamental changes to the Republic of China’s political system and to higher education in Taiwan.

In 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party was established out of the *dangwai* movement. In 1987, martial law was lifted. Over the following two decades, Taiwan saw a

dramatic expansion in the number of its colleges and universities. In 1991, the percentage of youth who enrolled in university was 20% but, with the upgrading of technical-vocational schools and the creation of new schools, that number reached 95% by 2013 (see Hsueh). Institutions of higher education began to determine their own criteria for student admissions and began to exercise more control over their affairs. In the 1990s, one major law was amended and one put forth, both of which dramatically transformed the higher-education landscape. They were the University Law and the Teacher Law. The revision to the University Law granted institutions autonomy from political interference by the state while the Teacher Law made it significantly more difficult for faculty to be fired. These two acts of legislation gave institutions greater control over their curricula and over the appointments of their administrators. The MOE no longer had the power to select University Presidents, though the ministry retained some power in that final selections required MOE approval. The two acts of legislation discussed above laid the foundation for institutional academic autonomy and for professors' academic freedom and are routinely referred to in higher-education journals as providing a model for other East Asian countries (see Hung).

While this foundation has remained more or less intact, the laws have had some unexpected consequences that I will discuss below. There are also two recent developments that jeopardize institutions of higher education and the faculty within them: the drastic decline in numbers of students due to the falling birthrate and a rise in the exploitative use of adjunct or part-time instruction. In 2022, “51 universities — 22 public and 29 private — missed their target by 14,000 students, despite reporting a record acceptance rate of 98.94 percent” (see “Taiwan’s Higher Education in Crisis”). Having expanded its numbers of institutions (with government encouragement and subsidies) so rapidly over the preceding decades, Taiwan must

now find ways to shrink those numbers through closures, downsizing, and mergers. This throws the security of thousands of faculty members into question and, of course, brings with it a more self-censoring and chilling atmosphere. During times of extreme precarity people grow anxious about drawing any potentially negative attention to themselves and this inhibits their speech and research activity. This anxiety around job security is mirrored in the other development that has taken place over the last decade—the rise in the numbers of contract faculty who are not protected by the Teacher’s Act but instead work on short-term contracts with no guarantee of future employment. The number of faculty hired into these positions has been growing. One interviewee explains, “In the past, at private universities there were about 70% full-time to 30% part-time faculty. Now it is more like 50-50 or worse” (see Appendix A). Faculty in such positions, whether at universities imperiled by the demographics or not, are necessarily more precarious and so structurally unable to enjoy substantive academic freedom in their academic pursuits.

It is in this larger context that I offer a discussion of four key issues that came into view over the course of my interviews. These points are organized under the following headings: “The Authoritarian Hangover and Current Tensions,” “Neoliberalism and the Negative Impact of the Evaluation System,” “An Uphill Battle for Labor Unions in Higher Education,” and “The China Threat and the Paradox of Academic Autonomy.”

The Authoritarian Hangover and Current Tensions

A number of my interviewees pointed out that the two acts of legislation mentioned above that laid the foundations of academic freedom were put in place during a period when the KMT continued to hold power in the government either fully or in part and well before any

meaningful movement of transitional justice had occurred. This meant, in essence, that the independence offered universities through the amendment to the University law and to faculty through the Teacher Act enshrined the elite cohort that originally had been put in place by the KMT. The largely mandarin-speaking *waishengren* elite that had established control over education remained in place and tended to usher in like-minded personnel as they aged. This created what one interviewee called “a long authoritarian hangover” whereby the same mindset as before dominated higher education with only incremental and modest changes over time (see Appendix B). As the President of the Taiwan Association of University Professors, Shiu Wen-tang, explained to me:

From 1950 to 1970 140,000 people were arrested for political crimes. Everybody’s mouth was sealed. So under those conditions it was very difficult for a Taiwanese consciousness to coalesce as the political and educational elites were all mainlanders. Any Taiwanese who stuck out to challenge this China-only and China-centered consciousness was arrested. Because there was no transitional justice prior to the 1994 law on academic autonomy, what the academic autonomy law did was to in effect give legal backing to the conservative forces that had been in control of resources and in power all along. It gave them legal backing for their original stronghold.

An example in practice of the continuity between the end of authoritarianism and after is that, soon after the 1990 Laws were implemented and autonomy established, university presidents nonetheless voted in 1995 to reinstate compulsory subjects in Chinese language, foreign language, history and political ideology as before and to continue the dominant language of instruction. Although only 15% of the population spoke mandarin, mandarin remained the

primary language of instruction. As Dee points out, “The University Act of 1994 did not specify which roles and responsibilities accrue to faculty members and which are within the domain of administrators.” Given this ambiguity, power accrued to the top levels of university administration, and faculty as a whole were not structurally empowered to advocate for major changes at the university-Ministry level.

Given that nothing comparable to lustration in Poland after the fall of the Soviet Union occurred with the end of authoritarianism in Taiwan, and given the KMT’s continued hold on politics, transitional justice efforts were minimal, limited to reparations and acknowledgements of past injustice devoid of accountability (see Caldwell). The KMT’s defeat in the presidential election of 2000 did not change these circumstances significantly. It was not until 2016 and Tsai Ing-wen’s election that the government began to deliberate more systematically on transitional justice (see Chang-liu and Chen). However, at this point, given the University Law amendment of 1994, institutions have autonomy from direct state interference so any transitional justice efforts must be voluntarily undertaken and largely at the discretion of university presidents and upper-level administration and this has not happened without conflict (consider the protracted struggle to establish the Chen Wen-chen memorial on the NTU campus). Furthermore, without meaningful transitional justice demonstrating an irrefutable change in societal values and expectations, the “authoritarian hangover” is necessarily one not just of residual personnel but of ongoing reflexes of conformity insofar as the kind of fear discouraging speech that was internalized under martial law does not simply evaporate when the law ceases to exist.

Given this dynamic, as well as other variables such as how well civil servants were financially taken care of by the state relative to other workers over these decades, the

educational establishment has remained largely conservative, according to many of my interviewees. This necessarily means that an atmosphere genuinely encouraging of freedom of thought and rewarding critical thinking has been slow to develop. This conclusion is borne out by the universal agreement among interviewees regarding the weakness of shared governance at their institutions. At those institutions where a culture of strong academic freedom exists in the United States, faculty are actively involved in the major decisions of their universities through councils, senates, and other university-wide bodies or committees. Having been affected by the same forces as have Taiwanese faculty (namely, neoliberalism and a kind of careerist individualism enforced by tightening job markets), situations of robust power-sharing between faculty and administrators at universities in the United States are now less common but they do continue to exist in some places. While comparable university-wide committees exist on some Taiwan campuses, there was general agreement among my interviewees that shared governance is very weak and faculty are largely inactive in demanding to share power with administrators. The heavy reliance on Western indexes such as the SSCI in evaluating faculty in Taiwan, which I will discuss below, directly contributes to this situation, as it necessarily encourages a narrow individualism in faculty. In this context, it is instructive to consider that there did appear to exist a period of lively faculty innovation and organization from the mid-90s to the early 2000s, before the evaluation system was implemented and became fully entrenched. During this period, some notable accomplishments over the years suggested more faculty empowerment, as evidenced by the establishment of two graduate institutes of Taiwan history, the Center for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University, and the Center for Social Transformation at Hsi Hsin University. Another noteworthy development was the founding of the Wenshan Community University (see Tsai).

An interesting counterpoint was also articulated to me by a few of my interviewees. These faculty members pointed out another side, one seeming opposite in nature to the “authoritarian hangover” viewpoint. They argued one of two related points: 1) the sense that the DPP has such overwhelming support that a meaningful two- or multi-party system is not in existence and that this ends up having an unhealthy effect on academic freedom insofar as the thinking tends to be homogeneous; and 2) given the relentlessly constant and increasingly looming threat of China, the necessity of, and ability to, create a robust climate of academic freedom that entertains a range of conflicting viewpoints is almost necessarily restricted and inhibited. For the most part, though not entirely, these interviewees did not blame the ruling party of the DPP itself for this problem – it was more that it was an unfortunate consequence of Taiwan’s unique vulnerabilities. I should conclude this section by noting that a few—a very small minority—of the interviewees felt that the DPP’s power was a problem in restricting and censoring pro-KMT or pro-unification viewpoints.

Neoliberalism and the Negative Impact of the Evaluation System

While the cultural and political conditions for cultivating robust academic freedom were perhaps not ideal even after the 1990s law, there were no explicit inhibitions and proscriptions, thus allowing for the centers and experiments mentioned at the end of the last section to develop. Unfortunately, though, not long after the laws passed, the evaluation system was established and this worsened the cultural conditions for robust academic freedom. As one retired professor put it to me:

Just when martial law strait-jacketing was weakening in the late 1990s, the American systems of ‘academic excellence’ and university ranking began to be operationalized in Taiwan. But, of course, this was pushed through by the Ministry of Education, even the so-called training for critical thinking, though mostly in the name of technological excellence and maintaining national competitiveness.

The implementation of a quantitative evaluation system essentially put the ball right back in the state’s court. The 2021 article “Centralising, decentralising, and recentralising: a case study of the university-government relationship in Taiwan” quotes an official of the Ministry of Education:

In practice, the Ministry of Education still owns the budgetary power. Well, if universities want to have the funding, they have to take it. They have to show us the evaluation outcomes. Indeed, because of this relationship, our institutional autonomy is quite different from that of the West.

This last point is not entirely accurate insofar as state governments in the United States exercise indirect control over public universities through purse strings. The current threats among red-state legislators to rescind funding for universities that teach the 1619 project or other material that they consider “divisive” are a case in point (see Appendix C).

The state’s intentions in implementing the evaluation system were salutary. Chou explains in “Taiwan’s Universities and Colleges”:

In an attempt to provide universities with more incentives for pursuing excellence and to offset the declining quality of universities due to rapid expansion and public budget cuts, the MOE first promoted the World-Class Research University Project in 2003. Then in 2005, the MOE launched the Higher Education for Excellence plan, which provided NT\$5 billion (approximately US\$1.6 billion) to twelve Taiwanese HEIs over a span of five years. The plan was renewed in 2011, with the goal of creating a higher education system of excellence, adapting to the changing trends of the future, and producing great leaders. Through such a system, the MOE seeks to establish top universities and improve fundamental development, integrate human resources from different departments, disciplines, and universities, and establish research centers for pioneering specialized interests.

The outcomes, however, according to a number of my interviewees, are pernicious to the development of a strong intellectual culture among Taiwanese academics. As the President of The Higher Education Union, Chou Ping, explained to me:

After 1987, after the lifting of martial law, we are supposed to see a new atmosphere in Taiwan – freedom of speech, freedom of press, etc. The university part of this—academic freedom—is part of this. However, new forces that are not so democratic or free have emerged and that is what we call the new managerialism by which administrators exert control over faculty. In the nineties, people promoted the idea that professors should be in charge. They tried to institutionalize a spirit of ‘academic autonomy’ but the new managerialism has damaged this spirit as administration became more and more powerful as they chase dollars from the government. Universities rely heavily on financial support from government and the National

Science Council. Even private universities depend on the government for 20% of their budget so all university administrators, public or private, have to cater to government demands and expectations. There are regular evaluations at every level (university, department, individual professor) and these evaluations create very strong pressure for university administrators to control professors in all areas of our jobs – academic research, teaching, and service. (see Appendix A)

According to a number of studies, the introduction of this kind of market-modelled competition has had the effect of exacerbating the already uneven distribution of resources among public/private and elite/non-elite institutions (see Chou & Wang, 2012; Chen & Chen, 2009).

This has, in turn, accelerated social stratification in Taiwan, as the union president explained to me:

The union has an ideal of distributional justice. We see the way economic class in Taiwan has become more and more unequal in part as a result of the higher education system. We want to reform the system to minimize class polarization. Take the cycle by which the national elite schools gain a disproportionate share of resources due to the ranking system. Students from poorer backgrounds, with less competitive preparation in high school, are unable to gain admission to these public universities. So they enroll in private universities. Because the private schools have less financial support, their tuition is higher and this means that the poorer students end up taking on student loans to get their degree. This debt becomes a burden which they carry through the lives. The SSCI is one of the mechanisms creating this non-egalitarian distribution of resources. (see Appendix A)

The current Democratic Progressive Party government has taken some steps to ameliorate this shifting the emphasis from “promoting excellence” to “ensuring equity” but it’s not clear that this has made in any impact on the longstanding trend, now exacerbated by the demographic crunch.

A number of interviewees stressed to me a point about the evaluation system that does not get enough treatment in the higher education literature available in English on Taiwan. In 2011, Hou did worry that the system might create an academic “cultural imperialism” insofar as American Anglo-Saxon accreditation standards are internalized in Taiwan but the real extent of the problem only became apparent to me when I heard the myriad frustrations voiced by my interlocutors. The problem is two-fold: the distorting effects on one’s intellectual arc of a quantitative rather than qualitative system of evaluation and the warping of the Taiwan academic context by its triangulation through an index dominated by English-language journals.

Tenure *per se* does not exist in Taiwan, though the Teacher Act has provided a great deal of job security to the professoriate hired into full-time positions. Faculty are evaluated regularly throughout their careers and are expected to publish a certain number of articles every handful of years after their first promotion. Though it is hard to fire a faculty member hired into a full-time position, faculty remain aware that they are under evaluation throughout the lifetime of their careers due to the regular evaluations. Because books only count as two-three articles, there is a disincentive to writing them and faculty are instead led to produce “one-offs” instead of doing the kind of deep, sustained thinking that is involved in a book project. This could rightly be considered an indirect impediment to robust academic freedom insofar as one-offs are geared to pre-existing topics and conventions that will find ready publication in journals and are less likely

to generate the kind of intervention in a field that a more thorough-going analysis provided by a book might offer. If the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan would have it, the medium of the article is less suited to deeply-engaged critical thinking than is the medium of the book.

The uneven academic playing field created by English-language dominated indexes also creates obvious problems for Taiwanese faculty. It forces them to refract their thinking through those topics and issues that are prevalent in Anglophone societies, inhibiting exploration of more local topics and issues that might be of more demonstrable benefit to the development of a strong Taiwanese intellectual culture. It is also, of course, a patently unfair situation which puts native Taiwanese who have not studied extensively in Western countries at a distinct disadvantage, something that a number of Taiwanese academics stressed in talking with me.

Another important negative outcome of the evaluation system was explained to me by a prominent theorist of civil society in Taiwan. Given that the academics in Taiwan are forced to squeeze their thinking through the prism of the anglophone context, their work ends up being of less benefit to, or influence on, Taiwan's civil society. This disconnect between a country's professors and the concern of its citizenry is a profound and arguably devastating consequence of the evaluation system, inhibiting the growth of an intellectual cohort that might more effectively weigh in on critical issues facing Taiwan. Given the fairly unique variables of Taiwan's history (a young democracy with a threatening authoritarian neighbor), the indirect but nonetheless powerful effect of an evaluation system that primarily prizes work that appears in international, largely English-language circles is deeply problematic.

A related issue is the impact on faculty power and activism within universities themselves of the evaluation system. Because they become habituated to the recurring evaluation

system and the quantitative approach to their careers, faculty are less disposed to engage in the larger issues of the university, the qualitative issues around policy and curriculum and academic freedom that go beyond the life of faculty members' individual departments. They are encouraged by the quantitative system to see their careers in individualistic terms and, in this way, implicitly discouraged from engaging actively in shared governance and shared decision-making with administrators. Without a strong culture of shared governance, faculty members' understanding of "academic freedom" shrinks to little more than "free speech"—the right to say what you want. However, "free speech" is only one aspect of academic freedom and arguably the least powerful. More powerful is the academic freedom exercised in shared governance activities related to the collective decisions a university must make. Without regular practice in shared governance, faculty find themselves shorn of a meaningful voice in key decisions at critical junctures, such as the ones facing universities today in light of the demographic crisis.

Finally, it's worth noting that a number of faculty pointed out that given that university budgets are dependent on the MOE, universities themselves should not be considered to be autonomous, despite the University Reform act. Those who control the purse strings control the priorities of the universities. It is hard to imagine how this situation could be ameliorated, however, given that relying on less money from the government would mean more reliance on corporate interests and/or higher tuition fees. Both of these solutions, then, would likely generate worse problems than the ones they would be intended to resolve.

An Uphill Battle for Labor Unions in Higher Education

A growing body of literature in the United States emphasizes the importance of unionization to the health of various sectors of society, including higher education (see Appendix D for an article I wrote on the importance of unionization in pushing back against

the exploitation of part-time faculty). Union organizing is an uphill battle in academia everywhere, as intellectual laborers often have a knee-jerk aversion to being associated with manual labor, the traditional province of unions. In Taiwan, this uphill battle is particularly steep for some additional reasons: (1) The “Taiwan miracle” during the last decades of the twentieth century suggested to people that hard work plus merit is a reliable formula for class mobility and, as the downsides of unchecked corporate and capital power have increasingly come into view, the ‘bootstraps’ model remains hard to dislodge; (2) over the decades, the KMT tended to treat civil servants well with regard to benefits so an immediate need for unions within higher education was not acutely felt; (3) “Labor” is, to some extent, associated with the communist party and the CCP tends to evoke negative feelings in Taiwan and this, too, in an indirect way, has created an impediment to unionization; and (4) the quantitative evaluation system discussed above creates a faculty mindset that is focused on the individual and not on the kind of accomplishments that are possible through the collective action of faculty, whether through shared governance or collective bargaining.

Nonetheless, the foundation for a strong higher-education union was laid in 2012, when unionization became legally possible and THE (Taiwan Higher Education) union was established. This organization has done remarkable work in a relatively short amount of time. Fourteen branches have been created and more are expected in the coming years. The expectation that branches will increase stems from the fact that universities are now in crisis, largely due to the falling birthrate. Faculty fear for their jobs and there is immense pressure on faculty to take pay cuts, to take adjunct positions, to move online, etc. Further, the need to have a strong voice in the bigger decisions facing universities has become obvious insofar as faculty realize that they have not created an infrastructure of strong shared governance that would

ensure that empowered faculty representatives take part in existential questions around merging, downsizing, closures, and dispersion of assets after closure.

Faculty at the more elite national universities are largely immune and still appear not to recognize the long-term dangers to themselves if they ignore the contemporary crisis impacting their colleagues at private universities as well as their colleagues on part-time contracts. While faculty at private universities and part-time faculty at both public and private universities scramble with the union's help to have a voice and raise awareness, faculty at the better-resourced public universities would be wise to follow developments carefully and to internalize the importance of having strong shared decision-making and a strong collective faculty voice *before* crises strike for them.

See Appendix A for my interview with THE union, in which I discuss additional union-related issues with Chou Ping, the union president.

The China Threat and the Paradox of Academic Autonomy

In *The Paradox of Democracy: Free Speech, Open Media, and Perilous Persuasion*, Zac Gershberg and Sean Illing explain the vulnerabilities of democracies to authoritarian encroachments, either from without or within. They write:

To function, democracies require more than just voting. Citizens are afforded access to information and to an open system of debate. But throughout history, when new forms of communications arrive – from the disingenuous use of sophistic techniques in Athens to the social media – enabled spread of propaganda we see today – they often undermine the practice of a democratic politics. The more widely accessible the media of a society, the more

susceptible that society is to demagoguery, distraction, and spectacle. We see this time and again: media continually evolve faster than politics, resulting in recurring patterns of democratic instability. (4)

In order to maintain its reputation as an open society, the government of Taiwan cannot restrict speech in the public sphere nor can it intervene too overtly in education, both k – 12 and higher education. This creates some inevitable but nonetheless extremely challenging dynamics for a society faced with an aggressively expansionist neighbor who has numerous cards to play.

It might be sufficient to give a sense of the scale of the problem simply by invoking the title of one recent report: “China’s Changing Disinformation and Propaganda Targeting Taiwan” (see Chan & Thornton). The authors describe the ever-evolving ways in which China capitalizes on all available media channels to spread rumors and other forms of disinformation in order to undermine the Taiwan public’s trust in their government and/or persuade them to look favorably on the CCP. The CCP can spread rumors about corruption or plagiarism to discredit politicians they see as unsympathetic to China and these can warp and distort the public sphere in ways that are hard for Taiwan’s government to combat. Another recent example is the misleadingly edited video the CCP circulated on TikTok of Jimmy Carter speaking on China-Taiwan policy. The Associated Press reported on August 17, 2022, that the misleading video cut part of Carter’s statement so that it appears as if he said only, “There is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.” The Taiwan Association of University Professors has called for regulation of fake news so as to help mitigate the “use of democracy to fight democracy” but any attempts of this nature are tricky because they invite accusations of censorship or repression. How to handle this problem will be at the forefront of the Ministry of

Information's agenda and any decision – including not intervening – will impact the public's perception of free speech and academic freedom (see Shan).

In the area of higher education, the threat China directly poses to the robust exercise of academic freedom in Taiwan seems to be in abeyance or limbo due to both China's restrictions on students coming to Taiwan after Tsai Ing-wen's election and restrictions on travel arising from the COVID pandemic. However, the threat was once acute and has the potential to become acute again in the future. There are a number of ways that the CCP can use both its own higher education institutions to bring Taiwanese students to China, where they will be vulnerable to the kind of propaganda that prevails in authoritarian regimes, and use the lure of its tuition-paying students to restrict academic freedom in Taiwan. The most egregious example of the latter is the scandal exposed in 2017 wherein it was revealed that university presidents in Taiwan were signing agreements with China that their universities would not discuss topics considered sensitive by the CCP in their classrooms (see Redden). This is an extreme and direction violation of academic freedom by almost any standard. However, interestingly, the Presidents who signed such agreements claimed "academic autonomy" to defend themselves when criticized—that is, the autonomy to do what they want without interference from the state. To most, if not all, international experts on academic freedom, this claim would be viewed as a very perverse use of the concept of "academic autonomy." It is rather the bald compromise that tuition-seeking administrators appear willing to negotiate behind closed doors, even though it means selling out academic freedom. Given the financial hardship facing many Taiwanese universities, especially private ones, the potential for the CCP to find ways to manipulate and restrict academic freedom on Taiwan campuses in exchange for

dollars remains very real and one that changing geopolitical and pandemic circumstances might bring back to the fore in time.

There are other disturbing ways in which China impacts the academic freedom of Taiwanese academics that need to be more widely understood internationally. For example, there are disciplinary associations that do not allow for a separate Taiwan contingent because they do not want to antagonize their Chinese contingents by acknowledging Taiwan to be independent of China. There is also, of course, the way the Chinese academic market creates incentives for publishers and presses across the world to cater to a worldview that excludes Taiwan (and Tibet and the Uyghurs, etc.). Faculty also provided me with examples of how their own work had been altered without their consent before it appeared in the Chinese market.

The myriad ways that the geopolitical situation with China compromises the full enjoyment of academic freedom by faculty in Taiwan is an area I intend to explore further and expand upon in future publications.

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Appendices

A. Taiwan’s Higher Education Union and Its Battles

BY JENNIFER RUTH

Last week, I interviewed Professor Shiu Wen-tang (許文堂), President of the Taiwan Association of University Professors. Given the attention in America paid to US Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit and the aftermath (namely, Chinese military aggression), it seemed an apt time to introduce readers to the faculty organization in Taiwan dedicated to Taiwan’s identity

and autonomy. This week Chou Ping (周平), President of THE (Taiwan Higher Education) union, graciously agreed to sit down with me for an interview. The trade union is dedicated to protecting the rights of faculty and staff at Taiwan's universities and colleges. It was established in 2012 to advocate for "better labor conditions, democratic governance of universities, and academic freedom and fairness in distributing the nation's educational resources." The union is playing an increasingly critical role in defending faculty as Taiwan's universities and colleges find themselves financially squeezed by an unprecedented drop in student enrollment. The drop is in response to a number of factors – swift decline in enrollment of students from China for geopolitical reasons, for one, but perhaps the most important factor is the island's changing demographics leading to many fewer college-age students in Taiwan. Universities are consolidating, downsizing, and some are closing altogether, a trend all too familiar to some of us here in the US. The union is fighting to make sure that faculty across the country do not unfairly or disproportionately bear the brunt of this precipitous decline. Indeed, on the day I interviewed President Chou (August 23), we needed to move our appointment up a few hours to accommodate a newly announced action: a protest held in front of the Ministry of Education. Faculty at Kao Yuan University in southern Taiwan had not been paid for more than three months and the campus branch of the union organized a demonstration.

In addition to being the president of the labor union, Chou Ping is an Associate Professor at Nanhua University in Applied Sociology. He received his PhD in sociology from The New School in New York in 2002.



Chen Po-Chien (L), Chou Ping (R)

With us for the interview was also Chen Po-chien (陳柏謙), a researcher on the union staff.

Jennifer Ruth (JR): Can you tell us about the union's establishment in 2012?

Chou Ping (CP): Before 2012, there was no teachers' union. We had professional associations but a union was not legally allowed. Immediately after it became legal in May 2012, we established the Taiwan higher education union. After 1987, after the lifting of martial law, we are supposed to see a new atmosphere in Taiwan – freedom of speech, freedom of press, etc. The university part of this—academic freedom—is part of this. However, new forces that are not so democratic or free have emerged and that is what we call the new managerialism by which administrators exert control over faculty. In the nineties, people promoted the idea that professors should be in charge. They tried to institutionalize a spirit of “academic autonomy” but the new managerialism has damaged this spirit as administration became more and more powerful as they chase dollars from the government. Universities rely heavily on financial support from government and the National Science Council. Even private universities depend on the government for 20% of their budget so all university administrators, public or private,

have to cater to government demands and expectations. There are regular evaluations at every level (university, department, individual professor) and these evaluations create very strong pressure for university administrators to control professors in all areas of our jobs – academic research, teaching, and service. Before 2012, individual professors wrote articles and found other ways to express our discontent regarding this system of governmental and administrative control. After 2012, with the union, we can organize our efforts to reform the system.

JR: Can you say a little about your history with the union, how you got involved and became President?

CP: After graduating from The New School, I immediately came back to Taiwan and began teaching at Nanhua University. At that time [2002], I did not even know what “SSCI” [Social Sciences Citation Index] meant but my colleagues kept reminding me that I have to publish more articles in the journals ranked in that index. I was curious about this and after a few years I realized that the citational index has become an exaggerated force in Taiwan, one that has created a false meritocracy. I found this situation to be wrong so I wrote some editorials in the press about this. These articles caught the attention of Dai Bo-feng who became the first president of the union and she invited me to join in forming the union. I was there at the beginning and one of the original twelve board members. After our last president Professor Liu Mei-chun finished two terms and stepped down, I agreed to do it because it is important work.

[Note: Taiwan passed a law that stipulates that union presidents must not lead for more than two terms. See past-president Liu Mei-Chun discuss the difficult employment situation for Taiwan graduates here.]

JR: For American academics who may not be as familiar with the SSCI index or, if they are, have not considered how the index might impact research conditions in Taiwan, can you explain what it is and how it negatively influences Taiwan's academic culture?

CP: The index is not a bad thing in itself. It is a good academic network for some purposes. However, in Taiwan, it has become the primary mechanism used to judge professors' achievements and determine their promotions and bonuses. This reliance on the index pushes faculty away from writing books or developing projects and academic communities in Taiwan and pushes them towards always trying to place more and more articles in the predominantly English-language journals cited by the index. This situation is not only in Taiwan but also in Japan, Korea, and China. The government and the university administrators care so much about the SSCI because they use it to rank universities and to rank individual professors. The rankings determine how they distribute resources. The effect is to drive the majority of resources towards the elite institutions and towards those professors whose research agendas maximize citations in English-language international journals.

The union has an ideal of distributional justice. We see the way economic class in Taiwan has become more and more unequal in part as a result of the higher education system. We want to reform the system to minimize class polarization. Take the cycle by which the national elite schools gain a disproportionate share of resources due to the ranking system. Students from poorer backgrounds, with less competitive preparation in high school, are unable to gain admission to these public universities. So they enroll in private universities. [In Taiwan, the public schools have the most resources and prestige while private schools have significantly less.] Because the private schools have less financial support, their tuition is higher and this means that the poorer students end up taking on student loans to get their degree. This debt

becomes a burden which they carry through the lives. The SSCI is one of the mechanisms creating this non-egalitarian distribution of resources.

Another problem with the SSCI is that it leads teachers to focus on research rather than teaching at the expense of the students. And even the research itself suffers. Faculty are not free to choose the best research methods or research topics for their work because they need to apply the models and pursue the topics rewarded by the SSCI journals, the vast majority of which are based in the West. The methods and topics popular in these journals are not always the best ones for the situation in Taiwan but it doesn't matter. In this way, we do not develop our own indigenous theories or methods. This is not helpful for our domestic research or creativity. The articles themselves do not end up having a big impact. We have many articles in these journals written by faculty in Taiwan but quantity is prized not quality. [See [here an article in the Taipei Times](#) covering the union's criticisms of the evaluation system.]

JR: What is another issue important to the union?

CP: For private universities, especially this year, there is a shortage of students. For a while now, the private universities have been trying to lay off professors, replacing them with contract or adjunct faculty. In the past, at private universities there were about 70% full-time to 30% part-time faculty. Now it is more like 50-50 or worse. Many contract faculty are treated unfairly and they come to us for help. We help them to win in negotiations or to win legal cases. [See [this](#) for more information on the abuse of contract hires.]

Regarding private universities, because of the demographic crisis, many are facing an existential crisis. The Boards of these institutions are handling this crisis as if the universities were private companies and they are trying to empty campuses of faculty and students so that the board members can keep the assets and repurpose them as they see fit. But we argue that

private universities are not for-profit companies. They were established as non-profits and were subsidized heavily by the government as they came into being. We are against the board members who try to privatize the school's property, thereby sacrificing professors, staff, students, and the public who have no say in what happens to the assets. We argue that if a university must close down, it should be donated to the public.

The Ministry of Education designed a University Closure Act to regulate the process of closing the universities. It is supposed to provide guardrails for what happens to assets when a university closes but it is a very inadequate act and we have to fight with them to make it stronger.

JR: You were not consulted when they designed it?

CP: They view us as their biggest enemy. They didn't consult us but we protested and warned that we would hold a press conference if they did not invite us to the hearing they held so they did in the end.

JR: Please tell us about the petition and protest today for Kao Yuan faculty?



Demonstration outside the Ministry of Education, Taipei, August 23, 2022

Chen Po-chien (staff): A few months ago some faculty from Kao Yuan University came to us and asked for help. We helped them initiate a branch. Their Board is trying to shut down the university and has not paid faculty for over three months. We are helping faculty petition the Ministry of Education to disband the board.

JR: Any final point you'd like to make?

CP: We are also working to expose the reason why the Ministry of Education often does not act in the best interests of faculty and students. There are links between the governments officials in the ministry and the boards. When officials retire from the ministry, they often take positions at universities. This revolving door creates conflicts of interests. Current officials have an expectation that they will in the future be invited to be the president or senior professor at a private university and this influences them to make decisions that favor the interests of the Boards. [See [this article](#) for more information on this subject and the union's efforts to draw attention to it.]

Jennifer Ruth is a contributing editor and the author, with Michael Bérubé, of [It's Not Free Speech: Race, Democracy, and the Future of Academic Freedom](#)(2022). She is currently researching academic freedom issues on a MOFA fellowship in Taiwan, where she wrote [this editorial](#) for The Taipei Times.

B. “A Common Purpose”: An Interview with Shiu Wen-Tang, President of the Taiwan Association of University Professors

Jennifer Ruth / August 14, 2022

China's retaliation for Nancy Pelosi's trip continued last week, as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched a second wave of drills around Taiwan. "China has threatened Taiwan militarily for years, and it continues to upgrade its efforts," Taiwan's foreign minister Joseph Wu said at a press conference on August 9th. Wu stated that the drills appeared to be preparation for a future invasion. If China were to invade Taiwan, it would be attempting to annex a territory in which only 2% of the people identify as solely Chinese. As China's military encircled the island with its exercises, I sat down with Shiu Wen-Tang and Chen Li-Fu, President and Vice President of the Taiwan Association of University Professors (TAUP), at their offices in Taipei. They explained the organization's background and its role in the ongoing battle for academic freedom in Taiwan. Accompanying me to assist with translation was Linda Gail Arrigo, an activist and researcher who was involved in Taiwan's democratic movement.

When TAUP was established in 1990, it was, in Chen Li-Fu's words, "a revolutionary organization" in that the Taiwanese were only just emerging from thirty-seven years of martial law and were still subject to penal codes criminalizing speech critical of the government as "seditious." Its core mission is "to promote political democracy, academic freedom, social justice, economic fairness, cultural improvement, environmental protection, and world peace." It holds regular conferences and seminars to raise awareness on issues such as Taiwan independence, transitional justice and China's disinformation campaigns. It publishes an annual journal, protests violations of academic freedom, organizes public events on important

historical dates, lobbies the government to promote Taiwanese language and culture, and takes positions on political matters important to the citizenry of the self-governed island.

TAUP President Shiu Wen-Tang graciously agreed to be interviewed for the *Academe* blog. Shiu recently retired from Academia Sinica where he was a research fellow with the Institute of Modern History for 32 years. Academia Sinica is Taiwan's prestigious research-only institution, akin to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.

JR: What is the purpose of TAUP and when did you get involved in the organization?

SWT: What I want to explain is that in early 1990s Taiwan, although martial law had been rescinded [in 1987], Article 100 which made thought crimes punishable still existed. There was also a blacklist of people who were not allowed to return from overseas because they had expressed criticisms of Chiang Kai Shek and the Kuomintang (KMT). So a group of professors advocated independence and created the organization. At that time I had just returned from Paris, France and did not join immediately. I watched its development closely, however, as my friend Chen Yi-shen was involved. [Chen Yi-shen, one of Taiwan's most important historians on the White Terror period, is the current president of Academia Historica and a former chairperson of TAUP.] I joined the organization after the election of Ma Ying-jeou in 2008 because Ma Ying-jeou's election brought a new crisis to Taiwan in that Ma was too pro-China. [Ma's pro-China policies triggered mass social protests throughout his two terms.]

JR: Can you talk about the history of higher education in Taiwan, the 1994 Education Reform Act, and how and why the latter did not transform the system as much as people might have

hoped or how it backfired in a sense? [The 1994 Act amended the University Act in order “to give Taiwanese universities the authority to decide on internal affairs with less external interference (gradually),” according to Jason Cheng-Cheng Yang in “University Autonomy of Higher Education in Taiwan: Developments and Consequences.”]



History of Academic Freedom, Book by TAUP member Lin Yu-Ti

SWT: The KMT controlled educational institutions and curriculum entirely before Taiwan transitioned to democracy. [And, despite the end of one-party dictatorship, the KMT remained in power until the election of Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party in 2000.] From 1950 to 1970 140,000 people were arrested for political crimes. Everybody’s mouth was sealed. So under those conditions it was very difficult for a Taiwanese consciousness to coalesce as the political and educational elites were all mainlanders [people who had come with the KMT in 1949]. Any Taiwanese who stuck out to challenge this China-only and China-centered consciousness was arrested. Because there was no transitional justice prior to the 1994 law on academic autonomy, what the academic autonomy law did was to in effect give legal

backing to the conservative forces that had been in control of resources and in power all along. It gave them legal backing for their original stronghold.

On the surface it looks like you can research anything you want, but, really, when you put in your application to the National Science and Technology Council, if you want to research something like the 228 incident, transitional justice, or the White Terror period, you will not get your research funded. Funding is very important when faculty go up for promotion. It is also an important and common way to supplement a professor's income because our salaries are low. However, the people who are going to be reviewing the applications are mostly the elite who received KMT-dominated education up to the 1980s. All the professional societies and disciplinary associations that were established in the name of China and to study China early on still exist today. Before 1990, there was no place for Taiwan in the educational curriculum. There was no knowledge of Taiwan history, geography, culture, etc. Nothing in the field of higher education recognized Taiwan's place in history and Taiwanese people's civil rights. The older educational elites will find offensive those research applications that focus on the White Terror or Taiwan identity or that criticize Chiang Kai Shek or Chiang Ching Kuo [Chiang Kai Shek's son who lifted martial law during his presidency but had been the director of the secret police during the deadliest years of the White Terror period]. Without real transitional justice, the mindset stays the same because they were educated under martial law and conditioned by it. They are not bad people but they end up presiding over an unequal distribution of resources because of their mindset. In principle we all agree that it is not academically correct to consider whether someone is a mainlander or Taiwanese, but in actual practice it is clear that mainlanders historically controlled more resources and that there continues to be an unequal distribution of resources.

I remember the demonstrations in 1994 held by the students and young professors who were fighting for academic autonomy. The students from National Taiwan University insisted that they represented the *People's Taiwan University* not *National Taiwan University*. [This emphasized that they did not support Nationalist (KMT) policy.] They didn't dream that academic autonomy would end up being a conservative thing.

JR: Can you talk about your organization's involvement in transitional justice efforts?

SWT: We have held several conferences for the demands of the victims of the KMT, including reparations for the families of political prisoners. We requested the declassification of the documents of the white terror and military courts. We helped prepare the legislation that created the Transitional Justice Commission. [The Commission is an independent governmental agency tasked with promoting transitional justice through increasing the accessibility of archives, removing authoritarian symbols, and proposing other forms of redress for acts of judicial injustice under the KMT. Its term of activity ended on May 30, 2022.] Of course we're not satisfied with the work it accomplished as, to take one example, some 3000 Chiang Kai Shek statues remain erected in Taiwan. And, of course, the map of China remains imposed on Taipei and most of the roads and important sites are based on those in China so there is so much work still to be done. Supposedly the Executive Yuan is going to set up a governmental organ to replace the Commission but we don't know anything specific about this yet.

JR: In the United States, some of the states are passing laws restricting how we can talk about our nation's history, especially certain subjects, particularly on race, that the right-wing legislators consider "divisive". Do you see any parallels in Taiwan?

SWT: Before the 1990s there were many things such as the 228 incident and the White Terror period mentioned above that Taiwanese could not talk about. After the 1990s, they are not legally forbidden to be talked about but the mindset has not changed.

JR: What do you want American academics to know about China's interference in Taiwanese intellectual and academic freedom?

SWT: There are many things that China does: it tries to sway Taiwanese attitudes by financially supporting youth trips to China and other activities. Here are two examples. On the one hand, if a student can't get into a top school in Taiwan, he/she might be encouraged by China to attend a prestigious school in China. All the personnel from China to recruit students go through a training program. The training will include who the personnel should favor and whom they can have contact with.

On the other hand, in order to be allowed to recruit and enroll students from China, a number of Taiwanese universities signed agreements with China to not discuss topics China considers taboo such as Taiwan independence [See [this article](#) for more details about this scandal and the subsequent outcry.]



(L-R) President of TAUP Wen-Tang Shiu, Linda Gail Arrigo, Jennifer Ruth, and Vice President of TAUP Li-Fu Chen. August 9, 2022. Taipei, Taiwan.

If you criticize China in your academic work, you won't get a visa. The interference even goes to the point that Taiwan's academic environment is affected by China pressuring other countries. Professional associations and international publishers cater to Chinese rules. Such rules include how to identify Taiwan. So our professors are often prohibited from identifying their institutional affiliations honestly. For example, SAGE publisher refuses to let faculty members identify "Academia Sinica" as "Academia Sinica, Taiwan", although co-authors of other nationalities are allowed to name the countries for their institutions. [See this recent *Academe* blog post "[Academic Freedom On Fire From Chinese Censorship](#)" for more on this topic.]

JR: Anything else you'd like to say to AAUP members?

SWT: AAUP and TAUP have a common purpose and that is to protect academic freedom but the big difference is that AAUP faces internal authoritarian threats [SWT refers here to the legislative restrictions] but TAUP faces a big external authoritarian threat in the form of China.

Note: At one point in the interview, which has been edited for length and clarity, Professor Shiu Wen-Tang made a very important point which I'd like to add here. He explained that when then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and then-Premier of China Zhou Enlai negotiated the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (also known as the Shanghai Communiqué) in 1972, the “one China” policy document that continues to shape international discussion regarding Taiwan, the Chinese mainlanders on the island were less than 15% of the population and the voice of the majority of the people was silenced by martial law.

Jennifer Ruth is a contributing editor and the author, with Michael Bérubé, of It's Not Free Speech: Race, Democracy, and the Future of Academic Freedom(2022). She is currently researching academic freedom issues on a MOFA fellowship in Taiwan, where she wrote this editorial for The Taipei Times.

C. US faces academic authoritarianism

By Jennifer Ruth, Sat, Aug 06, 2022

Timed to coincide with her arrival in Taipei, US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Washington Post op-ed, "Why I'm leading a congressional delegation to Taiwan," was an unequivocal and impassioned declaration of US support for Taiwan. Drawing an explicit parallel to Ukraine, a democratic state attacked by an authoritarian regime, Pelosi warned that Taiwan's "vibrant, robust democracy — named one of the freest in the world by Freedom House and proudly led by a woman, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) — is under threat" from China.

I am an American professor in Taipei to study "academic freedom" in Taiwan's universities and colleges. "Academic freedom" is a term typically understood to refer to the right of university professors to research and teach freely, without political interference. Were China to occupy Taiwan, Taiwanese faculty would lose this right, just as faculty in Hong Kong lost theirs after the National Security Law was passed in 2020. This disastrous outcome — essentially, the end of intellectual freedom in Taiwan — is obvious to all the Taiwanese professors I speak with. What is not clear to them, and what strikes them as incredible, is that those of us who research and teach in the US are struggling with our own authoritarian incursion — and losing.

Taiwanese have heard about "the big lie," former US president Donald Trump's baseless claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him. They know about the Jan. 6 attack on the US Capitol, and even the hearings recently conducted to investigate the attack, but they seem largely unaware of the authoritarian tactics to control knowledge at colleges and universities in the US. This is hardly surprising, given all that is going on in the world, but for me here in Taipei, watching Pelosi come to Taiwan as a kind of standard-bearer for democracy

has a certain irony when I know firsthand how deeply imperiled US democracy is from its own homegrown variants of authoritarianism.

Democratic societies build in protections for university faculty so that they are not at the whims of whichever political party holds power. The idea is that democracies, unlike dictatorships, recognize a distinction — however contestable in specific instances and at particularly volatile historical moments — between knowledge and propaganda. Knowledge remains knowledge regardless of what the king (or president) might prefer the citizens to believe.

Put another way: If I am a scholar who works on the history of slavery in the US, my research stays the same whether Republicans or Democrats have a majority in my state legislature. I can write about and disseminate my findings in the classroom even when those findings reveal aspects of US history that some Americans would prefer not to know.

Yet, shockingly, this is no longer true in 19 US states where legislative restrictions on the freedom to read, learn and teach are now the law. If I work at a public university in one of these 19 states, and my research and teaching is deemed to be “divisive” by a student or student’s parent, or some other so-called stakeholder, I am vulnerable to being fired or to seeing my program defunded.

Faculty in Republican-dominated states are self-censoring, changing their syllabi and altering their research agendas to protect themselves. This is the kind of thing that people raised in the US never imagined our professors and teachers would be forced to do. I and my peers came of age during or soon after the Cold War, and 1984 was the novel we all read in middle school to congratulate ourselves on our democratic superiority. Americans never thought they would see laws banning the teaching of particular subjects such as “critical race theory” (which is not

what red-state politicians would have you believe it is) or declaring that only one version of US history (sufficiently patriotic in its affirmation of American exceptionalism) can be taught.

The non-profit organization PEN America calls the laws that have been passed “education gag orders” and has done admirable work tracking their spread across the US. Faculty are mobilizing to fight these authoritarian tactics, but the long-term prognosis for academic freedom in the US is far from clear.

The US does not have an authoritarian bully looming over it the way Taiwan has the People’s Republic of China, but it has homegrown bullies increasingly willing to use authoritarian tactics to achieve undemocratic ends. The US sees this in the flouting of the rule of law by Trump and others to corrupt elections. It is also seen in the denial of human rights in the Supreme Court’s recent decision to overturn a landmark abortion rights law, and in the education gag orders restricting research and teaching in areas pertaining to race, gender and sexuality.

Perhaps Tsai might consider visiting the US to rally support within the US for its own vulnerable democracy?

Jennifer Ruth is a professor in the Portland State University School of Film, and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs fellow in Taipei through September.

D. “Adjunct and Tenured Faculty Must Unite to Resist Pandemic Opportunism on Campus”



Members of New York University's adjunct faculty union march near Union Square on April 14, 2022, in New York City. MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO / GETTY IMAGES

BY

Jennifer Ruth,
Truthout

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When COVID-19 descended upon the United States, college and university administrators used the disruption caused by the pandemic to slash the jobs of adjunct faculty. Now, two years into the pandemic, these same administrators are continuing to use the conditions of the pandemic to rapidly accelerate the same neoliberal transformations they had been pushing for pre-pandemic, such as replacing “expensive” tenure-line faculty with a cheaper and more exploitable adjunct workforce.

My employer, Portland State University (PSU), is just one of many schools that has used the excuse of the pandemic to place entire programs (and their tenure-line faculty) on the chopping block, favoring a move toward cheaper and more exploitable adjunct laborers.

As we face these threats, it has become clear that adjuncts and tenured faculty alike will only be able to defend our jobs and institutions from this continued onslaught from neoliberal university administrators if we organize ourselves in one union wherever possible and, where not possible, act as one union even if we are forced formally to speak in different voices.

The Adjunctification of Higher Education

At my college graduation ceremony back in 1991, a professor pulled me aside to share some good news: a report had predicted that there would be five jobs for every four candidates available by the time I finished graduate school. It wasn't until 1999, when I in fact was finishing a Ph.D., that I realized that the profoundly misguided prediction shared with me at my undergraduate graduation must have been based on a now-infamous study of academic job markets titled *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences* by former president of Princeton University William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa.

Projecting that a wave of retirements would result in an abundance of open tenure lines (they didn't), Bowen and Sosa's study kept alive a high degree of denial and mystification about the deprofessionalization of academic labor that had been underway since the 1970s. My generation was but another casualty of "casualization," the conversion of stable jobs into part-time, at-will work.

I, however, got a good job so I survived the last two decades as tenure-eligible positions continued to evaporate, and contingent positions increased to make up 75 percent of the faculty workforce. I always understood, though, that my good fortune was a matter of luck not merit, and I never forgot the lesson we were all being taught. Faculty can be divided and played by rank (those with job security and those without), and we are all pawns in the corporate university.

Sure enough, my own moment has arrived with what I'm calling "Pandemic Opportunism 2.0": my department is one of 18 at the university that the provost identified for "curricular revision, program reduction, or program elimination."

To borrow words from scholars Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt and Bertin M. Louis, Jr. — the curators of *Truthout's* special series on "Challenging the Corporate University" — the "project of transforming higher education into an industry run on contingent faculty (insecure faculty positions like postdocs, teaching assistants, adjuncts and lecturers with little job security) and student debt, rather than a public good funded by taxes" is in many places now in its final stages.

Pandemic Opportunism 1.0 and 2.0

The American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) special report entitled "COVID-19 and Academic Governance," issued in May 2021, details Pandemic Opportunism 1.0. The report explains how administrators capitalized on COVID-19 by following the "disaster capitalism" rulebook:

This phenomenon, generally known as 'disaster capitalism,' a term coined by Naomi Klein, was exemplified in early December 2020 by James White, interim dean of the College of Arts and

Sciences at the University of Colorado at Boulder, who, after announcing a long-term plan to replace tenured faculty members with non-tenure-track faculty members, said, ‘Never waste a good pandemic.’ Even though Dean White apologized the following week, calling his remark ‘flippant and insensitive,’ to many faculty members the gaffe seemed to exemplify what in political circles is called saying the quiet part out loud. In this respect, as in so many others, COVID-19 served as an accelerant, turning the gradual erosion of shared governance on some campuses into a landslide.

The AAUP investigation found that university presidents at eight colleges and universities invoked “force majeure” to discontinue programs and lay off faculty without due process and boards of trustees denying shared governance — and ignoring the votes of no confidence protesting that denial — to ram through drastic cuts without faculty input.

The AAUP report shows that Pandemic Opportunism 1.0 laid waste to tenured faculty and adjunct faculty alike, but it is also clear that adjunct faculty have been the first and easiest victims across the country. After all, little work is involved in not rehiring someone you never promised to rehire, even if that person has served you and your students for decades.

Now the more calculated Pandemic Opportunism 2.0 is upon us, both at some of the institutions discussed in the report and at others. In this phase, administrations target “expensive” tenure-line faculty through something other than dictatorial fiat. This involves ratcheting up methods like retirement incentives to facilitate “the decades-long transition from a majority tenured to a majority nontenured faculty,” to borrow a phrase from the report. Retirements are then “non-replacements.” Community college dean Matt Reed explains:

Nonreplacements don't trigger the same kind of scrutiny, or pushback, as layoffs. For one thing, nobody loses their job. It's possible to argue that someone is harmed — presumably, the person who otherwise would have been hired — but most of the time, nobody knows who that is. No one person has the standing to sue. There's a cumulative, generational cost, but that doesn't trigger the same kind of conflagration as firing an incumbent.

Of course, “nonreplacement” is obfuscating because the retiring salaried faculty member *is* typically replaced — just by poorly paid adjunct instructors without access to health care or job security. And the many remaining duties — service, governance, advising — of the original position are heaped onto fewer and fewer full-time shoulders.

Retirement incentives were all the rage after the 2008 recession, and they are back in full force, but more aggressive means of cutting salaried positions are also on the table. Take the attempt by Point Park University to eliminate the positions of 17 faculty members but not their courses, which would continue as adjunct sections. The union took the administration all the way to arbitration where the arbitrator sided with the faculty union. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 2121, which represents the City College of San Francisco (CCSF) faculty, fought a similar attempt to replace full-time faculty workers with part-time work. In an open letter to their trustees in April 2021, they wrote that AFT 2121 is “particularly alarmed to learn that administration also plans to convert much of City College’s stable, full-time faculty into contingent, part-time workers.” If CCSF succeeds, they added:

Entire departments will be left with no full-time faculty. Our ability to write or update curriculum as required by accreditation standards, work with community agencies, bring in students, or do outreach needed to ensure San Francisco’s black and brown students know about

the opportunities City College provides will be severely diminished. Students will lose access to office hours and faculty support. The structure that keeps our college going as an intellectual and community resource will be undermined.

The form Pandemic Opportunism 2.0 has taken at Portland State University is a case in point. Though our union negotiated a memorandum of understanding with the administration at the start of the pandemic which stipulated that no new initiatives be undertaken during the crisis, the administration nonetheless did just that — forging ahead with a set of efforts that led to the identification of 18 programs for curricular reform, reduction or elimination. This is what is being called “ReImagine PSU.”

Once I digested the fact that my own department was on the chopping block, I was struck by how, with few exceptions, these were programs with reputations on campus for refusing to generate tuition dollars through exploitative labor practices. When I asked how departments had been identified, my alarm was apparently validated. I was told that the first set of calculations had been made simply by dividing the total number of student credit hours generated (which translates to student tuition dollars) by the average total term full-time equivalent cost of all faculty.

This is some breathtakingly crude math that guarantees that departments which deliver student credit hours as cheaply as possible look like paragons while those that maintain a commitment to jobs providing a decent living that allows instructors to dedicate themselves to the university and its students are the miscreants. By administration’s logic, in other words, the departments that had been identified as problematically expensive were just as likely to be problematic because their students were taught predominantly by full-time faculty with health care benefits as they

were because of low enrollment or poor management. This neoliberal exercise in “reimagining” the university ought to decisively prove that tenure-line faculty’s fate is inextricably bound up with that of adjuncts.

Adjunct faculty have long warned that corporatization was coming for their tenured counterparts, too. Pandemic Opportunism 2.0 must spell the long overdue death of tenured faculty’s inability to grasp this basic fact.

We Need Only One Union

We are all precariat now and it would behoove us to act like it by organizing ourselves in one union. Back in 2014, Jamie Owen Daniel wrote:

The administration is the only constituency that benefits when we faculty see each other in terms of these increasingly arbitrary divisions, instead of as faculty, pure and simple. Tenured and tenure-track faculty who still see their non-tenure-track colleagues as “supplements” to, rather than part of, their departments, or who view these colleagues as academic service labor, doing the faculty’s work but not included as faculty, do so at their own peril.

At Portland State, tenure-track and full-time non-tenure-track faculty are in one union, PSU-AAUP, but adjunct faculty are in a separate one, PSUFA. When the administration tries to implement program elimination, will the interests of these two unions be aligned? Full-time faculty may need them to be, but why should adjunct faculty care? Just to underscore the point, let me give you the numbers: In Fall 2021, PSU-AAUP represented 843 tenure-line and full-time non-tenure-line instructional and research faculty while PSUFA represented 785 adjunct faculty, as noted in an email that I received from my university.

This is not the case at the University of Oregon in Eugene, where interests have been aligned since 2013 when faculty of all ranks formed United Academics. Perhaps not coincidentally, the raw numbers there are strikingly different from those at Portland State. United Academics represents roughly 1,566 tenure-line and full-time non-tenure-line faculty and 233 “pro tem” faculty (equivalent to PSU’s “part-time” or adjunct faculty).

United Academics negotiated bargaining contracts that required adjunct faculty be promoted into career positions after three years or not be rehired. While the data is not easy to chart over time, the efforts made by the University of Oregon union to limit adjunct exploitation are surely one major reason why there are significantly more “good” than “bad” jobs there. The outcome sought by the pandemic opportunists among administrators — fewer decently paid secure positions and more badly paid, insecure ones — will be very hard to achieve in the unionized environment created by United Academics at the University of Oregon.

Another place to look for inspiration and a path forward is Rutgers AAUP-AFT. Rutgers AAUP-AFT leaders understood that the pandemic offered not just administrators but also unions an opportunity — to educate faculty of all ranks and categories that bargaining for the common good was how to transform the neoliberal university into something more democratic, just and sustainable. In spring 2021, AAUP-AFT union leaders Todd Wolfson and Donna Murch wrote in “Reclaiming Paul Robeson in the Time of COVID-19”:

The unprecedented pain and disruption caused by COVID-19 has helped create a united front of unions that would have been unimaginable before the pandemic. Workers across the sector are advocating for a compassionate and commonsense response to the pandemic that insists on holding the line on layoffs until the end of the fiscal year 2022; providing graduate student

workers — who are essential to the teaching and research mission of the university — funding to make up for the time lost toward their degrees; rehiring part-time lecturers who lost their jobs; and providing free COVID-19 testing at sites on all three Rutgers campuses.

The solidarity built over these last few years is manifesting itself in precisely the kind of increased unionization that needs to happen everywhere unions are possible. On May 18, 2022, the Rutgers Adjunct Faculty Union delivered the signatures necessary to demand that their union be allowed to merge with the full-time faculty unions.

At Rutgers, if these academic laborers are successful in bringing into being a single union, it will be much harder for administrators to pit faculty against each other. At Portland State, where whole programs (and their tenure-line faculty) are being set up for elimination, but adjunct sections are not, I can only hope that the adjunct union will work with the tenure-line and full-time non-tenure-line union to fight the neoliberal measures proposed by our Provost. But if the adjunct membership tells us full-timers to take a walk when we come hat in hand, who could blame them?

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Jennifer Ruth

Jennifer Ruth is a professor of film studies at Portland State University. She is the author of three books, the most recent, co-authored with Michael Bérubé, being *It's Not Free Speech: Race, Democracy, and the Future of Academic Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022). An essay adapted from the book was recently featured in *The New Republic*.