

"SHENZHEN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF DESIGN" POSITION PAPER / PETITION TO THE UNIVERSITY BOARD

INTRODUCTION

A partnership between ZHdK and the Chinese *Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT)* in Shenzhen has existed since 2012. The aim of this cooperation is to establish a design school in Shenzhen. Exchange programmes are also planned, in which ZHdK students and lecturers would study or work in Shenzhen.

In recent months, ZHdK has appeared in the media several times in connection with this cooperation. As a result, the university assembly invited to a university-wide panel discussion on 14 December 2020. Due to the various requests from students and the fact that all students are and will be directly concerned, VERSO has decided to formulate a position with this position paper.

DEMAND

From a student perspective, there are various aspects of the cooperation with the HIT that are extremely problematic. Since we cannot imagine that these problems can be solved within the framework of the cooperation and since no satisfactory solutions have been provided so far, we demand the immediate withdrawal from the cooperation.

In our view, it is not compatible with the values of ZHdK to cooperate with a state university of a regime that has been proven to violate human rights. This is precisely because ZHdK, as a state university, is committed to political neutrality.

This position paper will be submitted with all collected signatures as a petition to the university board. VERSO and all signatories demand the immediate withdrawal from the cooperation with the *Harbin Institute of Technology* and the associated involvement in the planned *Shenzhen International School of Design*.

JUSTIFICATION

This summary justification is based on the document submitted by the University Assembly as an enclosure to the University Assembly discussion event.

The document can be found in full [here](#) (DE). Wherever further sources have been added to the position paper, they are linked directly. In addition, voices from the panel event have been included. They have been anonymised and partly shortened, but are reproduced in spirit (in italics).

Freedom of teaching and research

I wonder how ZHdK is going to be able to protect their students in Shenzhen in regards of the freedom of speech and intellectual rights. Freedom of speech is not protected by the Chinese law, or at least the government is known to have violated such freedom in the past 50 years. In Hong Kong, workers in both teaching and journalism are fearful because of the new national safety law. What is more is that there are already too many cases of the violation of international brands' intellectual rights by Chinese companies. And so far, all lawsuits against Chinese companies in China have failed.

In China, freedom of teaching and research cannot be guaranteed. Various publications ¹prove this and point out that teachers and students are subject to censorship and are not allowed to criticise China's political course. Under these circumstances, ZHdK will not be able to ensure that freedom of teaching and research is guaranteed in Shenzhen. In Zurich, too, ZHdK faces the risk of influence from China.²³ Here, the murals removed by ZHdK in connection with the protests in Hong Kong have already given cause for concern. Another prominent example is the attempted interference by the Chinese embassy in relation to the showing of a film about Hong Kong at the Toni cinema. There is a danger that ZHdK will increasingly undermine its own values through the cooperation and the accompanying political pressure from China - or will have to undermine them for the safety of university members. The fact that ZHdK only sought a broad discussion on the basis of various articles in the media and the commitment of the university assembly also shows that ZHdK is not fully aware of the danger of self-censorship.

¹ including a [publication by LeidenAsiaCentre](#) and a [report by Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project](#)

² Publication "Scholars at Risk": https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Scholars-at-Risk-Obstacles-to-Excellence_EN.pdf

³ Article by Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/21/china-government-threats-academic-freedom-abroad>

Political stance or political neutrality

"Supporting human rights movements should not be seen as 'political'."

China is a country that demonstrably commits human rights violations.^{4 5} Rector Thomas D. Meier emphasises in various interviews how important political neutrality is for an art university. From our point of view, one cannot speak of political neutrality when ZHdK enters into a cooperation, without comment, with a country that monitors its population on a large scale and systematically discriminates against minorities and interns them in camps. (In this case, the Uyghur minority is a confirmed example, although it can be assumed that it is not the only one). ZHdK lacks a clear stance; this lack of stance should not be confused with political neutrality. On the contrary, it is precisely an art university's duty not to simply accept the "cultural genocide"⁶, but to address it openly, to discuss it internally, to formulate a clear stance and to derive the necessary consequences - such as withdrawing from the cooperation.

Safety of university staff

"The internet is widely censored in China. VPN can easily be switched off by the government, and it is known to have happened before. How can ZHdK guarantee that students and colleagues will be able to access information related to their education and/or work? How can students and colleagues be protected while using the internet for both professional and personal purposes?"

The question for us is how ZHdK will ensure the security of university members. This includes the data security of the entire university, the security of university members in Shenzhen and the security of the exchange students from Hong Kong and China in Zurich. In addition, the Social Credit System would in all likelihood also be applied to foreign students and employees in China.

One point to consider is the communist party's office at the university location in Shenzhen. The fact that the party has access to internal documents, sensitive data and, in a roundabout way, also to data of university members who study in Switzerland and do not even consciously expose themselves to this risk, seems quite realistic.

⁴ Article by Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/global>

⁵ Article by Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china/report-china/>

⁶ Social scientist Adrian Zenz says in an [interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung](#): "This is the largest internment of an ethnic-religious minority since the Nazi era. The Chinese government has had more than one million people - mainly Uyghurs - locked up in camps, they have to do forced labour, and eyewitnesses also report torture. In addition, children are regularly taken away from their families. The aim is to eradicate the culture and tradition of the Uyghurs. This is cultural genocide."

It can also be assumed that the security law that came into force in China in connection with the protests in Hong Kong could also be applied to foreign university members - which means that these people can also be arrested for making critical statements about the Chinese government. Ralph Weber (Associate Professor for European Global Studies at the University of Basel) also emphasises in an interview that people who are in China can also get into an international situation by pure chance, in which they can be detained by China, for example, and misused for diplomatic purposes.⁷

Understanding of design and architecture

"I have the feeling that many points of criticism are passed over and no position is taken on them. For example, the question about the claim that design and architecture have nothing to do with surveillance. "

In an interview with the NZZ⁸, Thomas D. Meier expresses himself with the words "I don't see what design and architecture should have to do with surveillance technology". Such an understanding of architecture and design seems to assume that these disciplines are apolitical. This confronts us with the question of what content should be taught and can be taught without endangering university members. It also raises the question of what educational claim ZHdK has.

The attitude that the arts are different from architecture and design in terms of their political carrying capacity seems to us very dangerous in its naivety, especially in the context of surveillance technologies.

CONCLUSION

"Why don't we put ethical questions in the foreground when negotiating a cooperation and make them the ultimate condition of cooperation? We don't have to 'grow', we don't have to be oriented towards markets and therefore we can behave differently. "

Against all these backgrounds, VERSO and all the undersigned find it unacceptable that the currently planned cooperation should continue. As a state university, ZHdK has the possibility and the duty to maintain its political integrity and to freely educate people in research and teaching. The planned cooperation contradicts these fundamental values and makes ZHdK a collaborator of a state that violates human rights. VERSO and all the undersigned want to study and work at an art university where the freedom of teaching and research is of central

⁷ [SRF 1 Interview with Ralph Weber](#), Associate Professor for European Global Studies at the University of Basel

⁸ [NZZ Interview](#)

importance and can be lived in a safe environment. Therefore the immediate withdrawal from this cooperation is demanded.