

Statement on Censorship and Prosecution by Chinese Authorities

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The American Historical Association is alarmed by news reports that Chinese authorities have escalated the censorship and prosecution of Chinese citizens who deviate from the Communist Party line of hero worship. These authorities are using a newly amended law to criminalize speech that slanders, denigrates, or ridicules anyone whom the party considers a national hero. What once was punishable by a fine now generates time in prison. Several individuals have faced arrest, conviction, and incarceration for speaking or writing about these notables in a way that does not comport with the party's view of history. Such efforts strike at the very heart of historical scholarship, which depends on open-ended inquiry and a free exchange of ideas, wherever that inquiry leads, and whether or not those ideas cast aspersions on historical actors.

Just as troubling as these instances of censorship and prosecution is the effort of the Chinese Communist Party to substitute national myth for evidence-based scholarship in the service of the party. It is a marked characteristic of authoritarian regimes to seek to control a national narrative that promotes their own political interests. China is not the only country to try to impose a reverence for its founders and military heroes in its nation's history; such efforts put at risk not only historians but anyone who engages with the past and fails to adhere to party strictures. The AHA stands firmly against national laws and policies that in effect criminalize the historical enterprise.