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China: Student Informant System to Expand, Limiting School Autonomy, Free Expression (U//FOUO)

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Chinese educators and Communist Party officials are expanding the student informant system (SIS) to a growing number of Chinese universities, colleges, vocational institutes, and lower-level schools. Students designated as student-informants, who report to an academic affairs department, engage in political spying on both professors and fellow students and denounce professors and students for politically subversive or unconventional views. (U//FOUO)

The principal objective of the SIS is to ensure campus stability and to control the debate and discussion of politically sensitive issues. Students have had their scholarships revoked and their academic records penalized because of information provided by student informants that is sometimes highly subjective, such as facial expressions. Since 2002, the SIS has added a separate, secret system of student informants who report to university security departments. (U//FOUO)

Despite some teacher and student resistance, the government appears determined to continue to use the SIS as a tool to ensure political stability on Chinese campuses, as evidenced by government studies touting its utility and effectiveness for improving education. The limited public debate on the SIS focuses on its impact on freedom of speech, the risk of spreading a culture of denunciation, and the harm the system does to cultivating talented students. (U//FOUO)

Motives for Creating and Expanding the Student Informant System (U)

The SIS had several announced objectives from its outset in 1989, such as improving the quality of college and university teaching, increasing student involvement in key aspects of education, and improving each school's ability to manage both the teaching and learning functions in schools. **In practice, however, the SIS's principal objective is to monitor and control teachers and students. (U//FOUO)**

Officials at a few elite universities first implemented the SIS after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, in which university students played the most prominent role. Government and Party officials were determined to suppress simmering resentment on campus, and identify and monitor potential future student leaders. Education officials expanded the system during the early 2000s to such provincial universities as Wuhan University, Shanghai Normal University, and Nanchang University as part of a set of educational reforms. In 2005, the Ministry of Education issued a revised version of the “Provisions on the Administration of Students in Colleges and Universities” that promulgated rules on the management of students and promotes greater student involvement in curriculum, teaching, and evaluation—called a “student-oriented education system.” The 2005 Provisions also strengthened the SIS, which thereafter expanded into lower-tier universities (such as the Huzhou Teachers Institute in Zhejiang province), technical schools (such as the Shangqiu Vocational Technical College in Henan province), and also into middle and high schools (such as the Baoping Middle School of Yunyang County, Chongqing municipality). (U//FOUO)

Many Names, Same Informant System (U)

Officials at China’s colleges and universities have tailored the SIS to fit their own unique needs, and over time the student informant system has been implemented under a variety of names, including:

- student teaching information system (学生教学信息员制度)
- system for teaching information staff (教学信息员制度)
- student information system (学生信息员制度)
- teaching quality control assistant system (教学质量信息员制度)
- student information coordinator system (学生信息员制度)
- system of teaching informants (教学信息员制度)
- student teaching messenger system (学生教学信息员制度)
- student teaching monitor system (学生教学督导信息员制度) (U//FOUO)

In Chinese, these various names of the Student Informant System are usually abbreviated as *xuesheng xinxi yuan zhidu* (学生信息员制度). Student informants are called *xuesheng xinxi yuan* (学生信息员). (U//FOUO)

Informant System Uses a “Denounce and Inform” Model (U)

The SIS employs traditional political spying and denunciation techniques, seeking to create a “white terror” (bai se kong bu 白色恐怖) environment on campus—in which students and teachers fear surveillance more than arrest—to achieve and maintain influence and control. Political spying was a key tool of government control in the PRC’s early history, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s. Domestic critics of the Chinese government focus more on official censorship

and control of China's new Internet-based media such as web sites, online social networking tools such as Twitter, and other online resources such as bulletin board systems than on the SIS and its traditional methods. (U//FOUO)

Most colleges and universities have set up a “student teaching information center” specializing in student informant-related work, and an official from the academic affairs office serves as director of the center. The academic affairs office in each college and university usually is the department that manages student informants and regulates their work requirements. Each class has one recommended student informant who reports directly to the information center through e-mail, telephone, written reports, or information feedback forms. Some universities have dedicated e-mail boxes and instant message groups on the popular QQ group messaging service for student informants. (U//FOUO)

Student and Teacher Resistance Hampers Implementation (U)

A February 2010 study about the SIS published in *Education and Teaching Research*, a leading academic journal on higher education published at Chengdu University, and other academic studies point out several problems with the SIS:

- The information reported by student informants is neither accurate nor objective.
- The information feedback loop of the SIS is broken. Academic affairs offices do not respond promptly to information reported by student informants. Even with respect to the more straightforward teaching, learning, and administrative issues upon which informants provide reports, student informants are not told about measures that the academic affairs offices may have taken.
- Teachers have strong misgivings about the system. (U//FOUO)

The SIS has soured relations between teachers and students. Teachers call student informants “education spies” (*jiayou jian die* 教育间谍). Teachers reject being monitored by student informants, and worry that these students understand little about teaching methods and theories. Student informants worry that if they report teachers, the teachers will take their revenge and ruin the students' academic careers. (U//FOUO)

Some Chinese scholars also emphasize the danger of promoting a culture of denunciation that may become an obstacle to learning. Broad public discussion of the SIS ensued after the suspension of lecturer Lu Xuesong from the Jilin Art Institute in June 2005 for positive views on a film about a Cultural Revolution-era dissident after an SIS informant reported her opinions. Drawing upon lessons from the Lu Xuesong case, Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) University professor Ai Xiaoming called for independent thinking and rational management of the university. *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a Guangzhou newspaper, also published a commentary on Lu's case from well-known commentator Chang Ping, who noted that authorities at the Jilin Art Institute authorities refused to discuss the issue or respond to questions after the case became public. Chang wrote: “It seems [the case was] handled ‘secretly.’ No matter what the result is, a normal society does not allow this shady way.” (U//FOUO)

Recent Examples of SIS Monitoring of Teachers and Students (U)

“Facecrime” Incident at Beijing University, October 2010: After the Nobel Committee announced the award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to political dissident Liu Xiaobo, a Netizen posted a comment entitled “Beijing University Students Commit Crime Because Of Facial Expression” on a number of blogs and online bulletin board system forums. The post disclosed that students who celebrated Liu’s award on 8 October 2010 will have their scholarship eligibility canceled as well as points deducted from their comprehensive quality assessment. University authorities also investigated students who “showed unusual happiness” on the day of Liu’s award. Some students wondered how their students’ facial expression could be known by school authorities, and asked how many student informants had been hired. Students used the term “Facecrime,” a term from George Orwell’s novel 1984, to describe the incident. (U//FOUO)

Students Denounce Professor Yang Shiqun in Shanghai, November 2008: Yang Shiqun, a professor at the East China University of Politics and Law in Shanghai, was investigated in November 2008, after two students denounced him as a “counterrevolutionary” to police and school authorities because Yang criticized the government in his Chinese classics class. Yang publicized the incident on his blog, and it was discussed among students and scholars in both online and traditional media. (U//FOUO)

Some Chinese students are resisting government efforts at political spying and rejecting the culture of denunciation. Netizens are publishing rosters of student informants online, resulting in the student informants being denounced by peers. A commenter named Mohui, writing in response to a post that discusses the SIS on the popular web portal douban.com (豆瓣网), wrote: “The student informants system is laughable and ridiculous. This is like a joke about the informant, but for most people in this generation, do you think they will choose to monitor each other like fools? The student informant system is only the ‘legacy’ from a certain age. It is despicable that a few people play this role now.” (U//FOUO)

Chinese students now use new communications tools, such as QQ message groups and microblogs, outside of group or classroom settings to discuss various issues, including their anger and frustration at bleak employment prospects after graduation, the poor quality of university education, and corruption and other social ills. These new technologies limit the effectiveness of the SIS system in monitoring and controlling public discourse among students on sensitive issues. (U//FOUO)

Government Likely to Expand SIS Program to Other Universities (U)

Despite its problems, government efforts to legitimize the SIS through academic studies, together with promotion and expansion of the system, suggest that the officials believe that the SIS is meeting their expectations and objectives. Government-sponsored academic studies have tried to prove that the SIS is effective, but most of these studies focus on its educational process functions—improving teaching quality and techniques, increasing student involvement in key aspects of their education, and administering the teaching and learning functions rather than its political control function. (U//FOUO)

The government appears determined to continue to use the SIS as a tool to ensure political stability on Chinese campuses. The gradual expansion of the program now underway will bring the

SIS to provincial and local-level universities, colleges, and other types of schools in other regions of China. (U//FOUO)

The public debate on the SIS centers around how the system deters freedom of speech, as well as the risk of the culture of denunciation spreading on university and school campuses, and the harm the system does to cultivating talented students.

- Xie Yong, former deputy chief editor *Huang He* (Yellow River), a top-rated literature magazine, and now a professor at Xiamen University, argues if informant behavior in a society becomes widely popular and accepted, it will inevitably lead to a general feeling of insecurity among citizens. “The long-term effect of (the informant system) is the greatest harm to our culture.”
- Dong Changpao, a lecturer at College of Literature at the Guangxi University for Nationalities, discusses the student informant system from a teacher's perspective. He wrote: “A teacher should not only instruct a [student in a] subject but also enlighten students by providing a teacher’s perception on any social issues, then students will learn to use their own ability to identify some ‘real’ problems.” In most of the cases in which intellectuals have shared their own thoughts openly to enlighten students, they have suffered hardships, Dong asserts.
- Yang Yuliang, the Chancellor of Fudan University in Shanghai, commented on the possible reasons that no Chinese universities ranked in the top ten in the 2010 Asian university rankings, saying that Chinese schools lacked autonomy and real academic spirit. (U//FOUO)

Chancellor Yang’s remarks and the views of the other intellectuals cited above suggest that Chinese higher education suffers from a crisis in confidence as well as institutional problems. In this context, the growing SIS must be counted among the factors undermining student and teacher morale and impeding Chinese higher education. (U//FOUO)

SIS Now Includes a Security Element Operated by Campus Security Departments (U)

University security departments operate a separate security-related SIS program created in 2002. In this SIS subsystem, security officials openly recruit students as security informants, who are managed in the same way as special security agents. For example, the “Directive on Recruiting and Managing Student Security Informants” from Dezhou University in Shandong province stipulates that the Student Security Informants Corps is a “secret power” and that its existence should not be disclosed. Nonetheless, some information about student security informants is available in Chinese-language open sources. A news item entitled “In Recognition of Student Security Informants” from Jilin University was posted on 24 April 2006 on China Shuo-Bo Net, a comprehensive commercial education web site. The story disclosed that Jilin University security department officials established the Student Security Informant System in 2003. “Currently, [the] student informant [group] has a total of 202 members distributed in every school and campus [of the university].” Moreover, the news item noted that “the student security informants assisted the security department with publicizing safety information about campus fire and theft, effectively safeguarding the security and stability of the campus.” (U//FOUO)

In contrast, “The Work Regulations of Student Informants” document from the Jilin University web site shows that regular SIS student informants have a different focus than student security informants. The Regulations declare that the purpose of engaging student informants is to monitor teaching

quality and understand problems related to teaching and learning. Student informants are only responsible for collecting and reporting this information, but are not required to verify or investigate the details. Thus, university officials have established two groups of student informants under two different departments to report on different issues. (U//FOUO)

Public discussion about the SIS often confuses the two types of student informants, in part because the names of the two types are the same when abbreviated in Chinese—both types are called *xuesheng xinxi yuan* (学生信息员). Another reason is that many students know little about either SIS system—the regular, more open student informants system and the student security informant system, which operates covertly. A 2008 survey conducted by a student study group at the China University of Mining and Technology on the “student teaching informants system” showed that fewer than 10 percent of students acknowledged knowing about the system. (U//FOUO)