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1. China denounced over 'grave threat to academic freedom'

# China denounced over 'grave threat to academic freedom'

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## Body

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Hundreds of scholars have co-ordinated an international "fightback" against China for imposing sanctions on a British academic who spoke out against human rights abuses.

More than 420 academics around the world united behind Joanne Smith Finley, of Newcastle University, after China took the "unprecedented step" of banning her from entering the country and working with its institutions.

She was the sole scholar among a group of nine Britons, including politicians and lawyers, hit with sanctions by Beijing for "maliciously spreading lies and disinformation". The move came days after Britain joined other countries in imposing sanctions on Chinese officials over their alleged involvement in the mass persecution of the Uighurs in the Xinjiang region of China.

Smith Finley is regarded by her peers as a leading voice on research about the treatment of Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims in China. She has studied the country for more than 30 years.

In a letter published in The Times today, hundreds of academics, including scholars from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Yale, said that targeting her represented a "serious escalation" of China's attempts to silence critics.

They said the sanctioning of Smith Finley represented "a grave threat to the principle of academic freedom that is the cornerstone of UK universities".

Iain Duncan Smith, the former Conservative Party leader who was one of the politicians hit with sanctions, has described it as a "badge of honour".

Smith Finley made a series of field trips to Xinjiang between 1995 and 2018 and last November published a paper in the Journal of Genocide Research in which she said the territory was home to the largest forced incarceration of an ethno-religious minority since the Second World War.

Her research suggested that more than one million Uighurs had been forced into internment camps or highsecurity prisons to undergo "thought transformation" and forced labour.

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John Heathershaw, an international relations expert at the University of Exeter, who helped draft the letter, said that in sanctioning her China had succeeded in "creating greater publicity for this important work".

Nick Megoran, Smith Finley's colleague at Newcastle University, said the letter represented a "determined fightback" against Chinese coercion and attempts to use its "economic and geopolitical clout to cajole and bribe dozens of countries into remaining silent about gross human rights abuses in Xinjiang".

On March 21, the EU announced travel bans and asset freezes against four Chinese officials and one organisation. The UK and Canada soon sided with the EU and also announced sanctions on Xinjiang officials.

President Biden's US administration also imposed sanctions on two Chinese officials, stating that the regime "continues to commit genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang".

China denies claims of genocide. The Chinese foreign ministry said that sanctioning Beijing over Xinjiang "severely undermines China-UK relations" and warned that Britain should "not go further down the wrong path". Freedom threat, letters, page 16

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