

# Teaching Chinese Politics in the “New Cold War”: A Survey of Faculty

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The past decade has been a difficult time to be a scholar of Chinese politics. After Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, opportunities for international collaboration began disappearing, and local interlocutors became increasingly nervous about speaking with foreign researchers. Since 2016, these problems have been compounded by the increasingly tense US–China relationship. Changing attitudes and policies in both countries have hindered those who conduct research on China, work with Chinese collaborators, and recruit Chinese students. The Fulbright Program in China and Hong Kong was closed; National Institutes of Health investigations into foreign influence in US science have caused US-based scientists’ research productivity to decline; and visa restrictions have hindered efforts to recruit Chinese graduate students (Jia et al. 2023). Legal changes in China, including the 2021 Personal Information Protection Law and the 2023 revised Counter-Espionage Law, could be used to target foreign scholars who conduct research in China (Lewis 2023; McCarthy and Gan 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these challenges in several ways: it caused a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States and created severe pedagogical challenges for those teaching Chinese politics and other courses containing “sensitive” material that could put students—some now physically located in China—at risk (Gueorguiev et al. 2020).

Although individual faculty members often share anecdotes, no systematic data have been collected about the frequency and severity of the problems that these changes have caused for scholars and teachers of Chinese politics. This article uses the results of an original online survey to fill this gap. In Spring 2022, research assistants and I identified 510 faculty members teaching Chinese or East Asian politics courses at four-year colleges and universities in the United States. We searched a list of 1,050 known websites and course catalogs and cross-checked them with all colleges and universities in the *US News & World Report*. We fielded the survey online between June and August 2022 and received 169 responses (i.e., a 33% response rate). Respondents varied widely (figure 1). The survey asked the respondents 27 open- and closed-ended questions about themselves, their classroom experiences, and their campus climate as it relates to Chinese politics. To focus attention on the period of greatest US–China tensions, the questions asked about their experiences in the past five years.<sup>1</sup>

The survey shows that student interest in Chinese politics remains high. Most faculty respondents reported that their

enrollments have increased or remained about the same (figure 2), a striking contrast to the Chinese *language* enrollment declines of 21% between 2016 and 2020 (Modern Language Association 2022). However, they reported a range of new challenges arising from increasingly nationalistic sentiments among both Chinese and US students, negative effects of both US and Chinese government policies, and an increase in anti-Asian bias. This article documents these challenges using both quantitative evidence from the survey responses and direct quotations from answers to open-ended questions. These quotations reflect shared views expressed by multiple respondents.

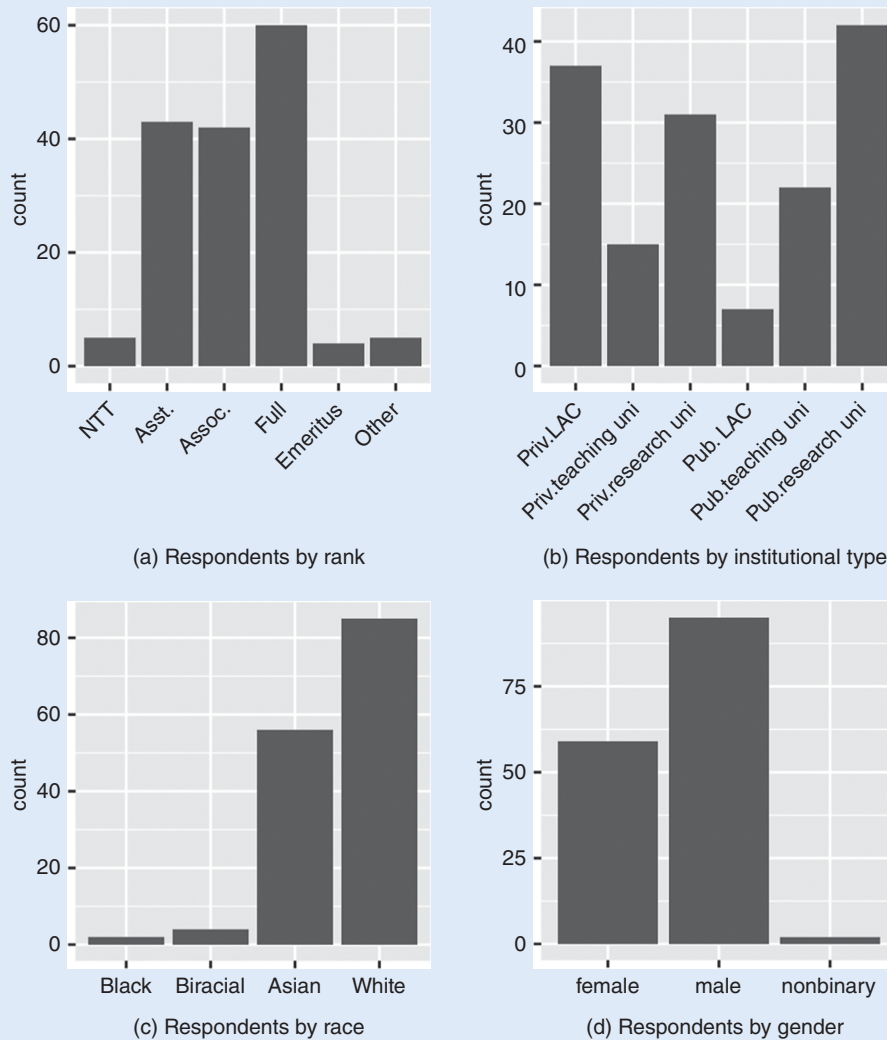
## FACULTY FEAR PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES FOR TEACHING CHINESE POLITICS

The survey asked faculty respondents about their concern for potential consequences that they might face from teaching Chinese politics and about any real consequences they had suffered. Three key findings emerged. First, faculty are anxious about personal, career, and family repercussions for teaching Chinese politics; a majority of respondents reported at least one concern (figure 3). Second, both the level and type of concerns that faculty reported vary by race. A higher percentage of Asian-heritage than white respondents agreed with most of the response choices, and significantly fewer Asian-heritage respondents reported having no concerns (i.e., 44% of white faculty reported no concerns versus 27% of Asian faculty).<sup>2</sup> Third, faculty *are anxious* about negative consequences at much higher rates than they actually *experience* them from teaching Chinese politics; however, there are several possible explanations for this disconnect.

Concerns about possible consequences were prevalent and unequally distributed. Respondents’ most common fear was visa denial if they teach about topics that the Chinese government considers sensitive. Faculty also are concerned that students might monitor them and report on their course content to People’s Republic of China (PRC) consular officials. Although their concerns were widespread, open-ended responses also indicated that many view students and teaching assistants as more vulnerable than faculty members. In particular, respondents were concerned that Chinese students on US college campuses may be surveilled by PRC officials, fellow students, and classmates’ parents (some of whom have government ties), with negative consequences for those who are critical of the Chinese government. Table 1 indicates that this concern is on the minds of students as well.

Figure 1

### Survey Respondents by Rank, Institutional Type, Race, and Gender



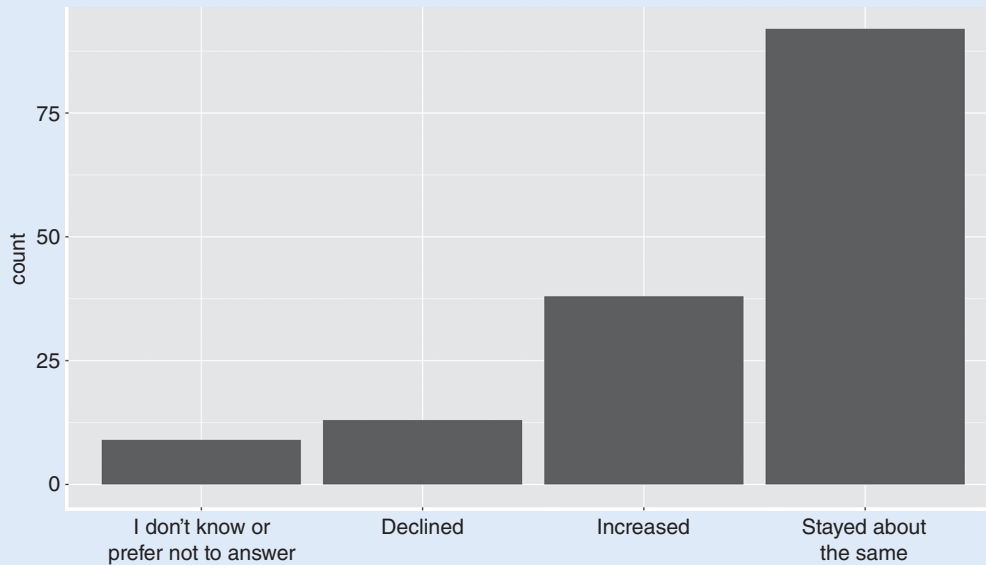
Although faculty members' anxieties are high, direct negative experiences were relatively uncommon: of the 144 responses, 90 reported no experience of any personal problems related to their Chinese politics courses in the past five years. Although 50 respondents reported concern that the content of their Chinese politics course might result in a Chinese visa denial, only two reported that they actually had difficulty obtaining one.<sup>3</sup> Of the faculty respondents, 47 expressed concern that students might monitor them and report on the content of their course to PRC consular staff or other Chinese government officials; however, only four reported that they believed students had done so. This is consistent with the Greitens and Truex (2020) study revealing that most China scholars believe their research is "sensitive"—despite the fact that only a minority received a signal from the Chinese government indicating the sensitivity of their research or directly experienced repression.

As Greitens and Truex (2020) noted in their own research, these results should not be considered evidence that scholars are irrationally concerned. There are several possible explanations for the disjuncture between respondents' fears and their lived experiences. First, ambiguity is a hallmark of Chinese government repression. Uncertainty encourages subjects to police their own behavior in order to steer well clear of the "red lines," wherever they may lie (Stern and Hassid 2012). The fact that a small number of documented incidents inspired widespread anxiety may be evidence that this strategy is effective rather than that scholars are misjudging the risks they face.

Second, respondents (and their students) may be preemptively altering their behavior to avoid negative consequences. In open-ended questions throughout the survey, respondents were emphatic about the importance of academic freedom and of resisting pressure to alter course content. In response to a closed-ended question about pandemic-related course modifications, only five reported that they had altered their course

Figure 2

“Over the Past Five Years, How Have Enrollments in Your Courses Related to Chinese Politics Changed?”



content out of concern for the safety of their Chinese students who were studying remotely while physically located in China.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, respondents expressed concern about the incentives for self-censorship by both faculty and students:

faculty mentoring. Chinese students at US colleges and universities have encountered a daunting set of challenges in recent years, including increasing anti-Asian racism, isolation from friends and family in China as a result of pandemic-related

*...faculty reported a range of new challenges arising from increasingly nationalistic sentiments among both Chinese and US students, negative effects of both US and Chinese government policies, and an increase in anti-Asian bias.*

- “The main concern is self-censorship about what I want to cover and how I cover the materials. Sometimes, I might opt for easier or less controversial materials.”
- “Although my answers thus far to the questions indicate little to no concrete problems in the classroom, the reality is that difficult issues certainly cast a shadow over discussion. Students from China are generally (but not always) reluctant to participate in discussion but it is hard to tell how much this reflects self-censorship as opposed to lack of familiarity with non-lecture-based classes.”

**FACULTY ARE NAVIGATING INCREASINGLY COMPLEX CLASSROOM AND MENTORING DYNAMICS**

Although the respondents’ worst fears about possible personal consequences of teaching Chinese politics have mostly not come to pass, faculty reported significant changes to the classroom and campus environment that have required new investments of time and emotional labor. The challenges that Chinese students now face in the United States significantly impact

travel restrictions, and anxiety about China’s changing political environment. The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionately negative effect on the mental health of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in the United States (Wu, Qian, and Wilkes 2021). The survey responses reflected these challenges: almost 20% reported that in the past five years they have experienced “significant new demands on your time related to mentoring and supporting students as they deal with anxieties and problems related to the US–China relationship”:

- “Several of my PRC-based students appear to have experienced severe anxiety or depression in the recent past, likely due to the combination of increasing anti-China sentiment in the United States, inability to easily travel to/from China, and concerns about their own family and future. I have spent more time discussing such issues with students and I have also worried more about exacerbating such student mental health issues through my own teaching of China and China-related issues.”

Figure 3

“Which of the Following, If Any, Worry You About Teaching Chinese Politics Today?”

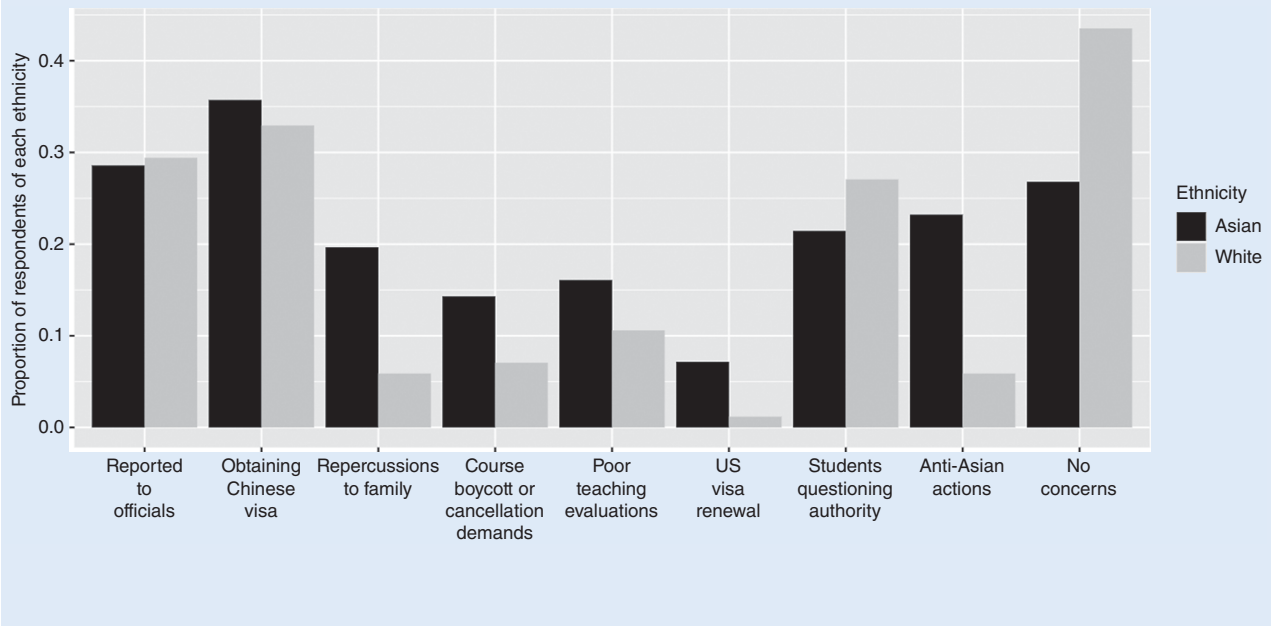


Table 1

Negative Classroom Experiences in the Past Five Years

PROBLEM	NEVER	ONCE	2+ TIMES
Conflicts between students from the United States and mainland China	124 (86.7%)	8 (5.6%)	11 (7.7%)
Conflicts between students from mainland China and Hong Kong or Taiwan	117 (81.8%)	18 (12.6%)	8 (5.6%)
Students expressing concern that other students might be monitoring them and reporting on their behavior to PRC officials	110 (76.9%)	18 (12.6%)	15 (10.5%)
Students reporting that they are afraid to participate in class because of fear of offending or being judged by other students	91 (64.1%)	31 (21.8%)	20 (14.1%)
Students reporting fear of enrolling in your class due to possible danger to themselves or their family members if they do so	123 (86.6%)	15 (10.6%)	4 (2.8%)
Anti-Asian or Sinophobic speech or action by students in the course	117 (82.3%)	15 (10.6%)	10 (7%)
Difficulty facilitating conversation between students from the United States and students from mainland China	107 (75.4%)	13 (9.2%)	22 (15.5%)

- “I have had multiple students from China who are related to persons who have undergone persecution in recent years—this has resulted in a need for more personal and emotional unpacking with these students and help getting counseling support on-campus.”

The second-most widely reported challenge was “significant new demands on your time related to resolving student conflicts.” Open-ended responses suggest several sources of conflict. Rising nationalism and increasing US–China tension mean that both US and Chinese students may be quick to defend their country against perceived slights:

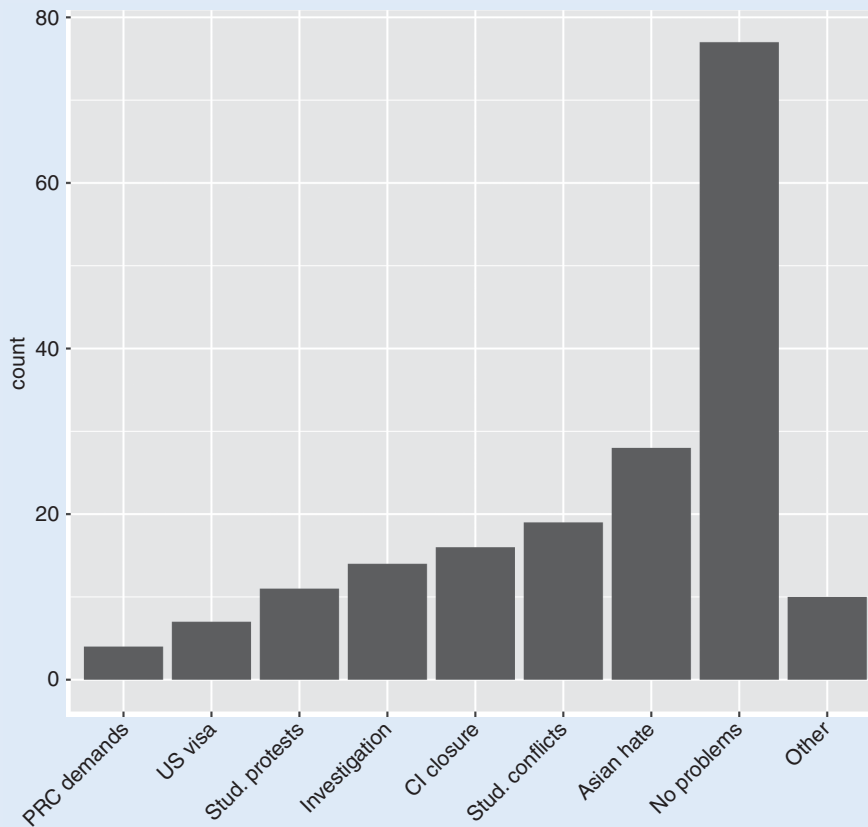
- “I’ve had more highly nationalist Chinese students (almost always men) who question my authority/expertise. It is not a major problem, but it is something new. It feels a bit like trying to teach about the January 6 insurrection to a QAnon adherent.”
- “My institution has a large majority of white, conservative students, and if I contradict whatever the current right-wing American ideology about China is, I will definitely hear about it in my evaluations and have to talk about it with my chair...”

These conflicts often occur over issues that the Chinese government (and many Chinese citizens) perceive as core questions of national sovereignty. These include Chinese government policies in Xinjiang and the 2019 Hong Kong protests—which also are topics that non-Chinese students often have strong opinions about before they arrive in the classroom. Responses across the survey suggest that the conflicts occur both within and outside of classrooms (see figure 4 and table 1 for frequency of conflicts on campuses and in respondents’ classrooms, respectively). Examples include the following statements:

- “[Time spent] mentoring a student who was working with a PRC classmate to understand each other’s views of Xinjiang.”

Figure 4

Problems on Respondents' Campuses in the Past Five Years



Dealing with angry PRC students when Tibetan monks displayed images of the Dalai Lama and information criticizing PRC policy during a visit to campus.”

- “In a course with both mainland and Hong Kong international students, there were heated exchanges in class over tightening mainland Chinese control of Hong Kong. Chinese students have claimed I was biased against China in course evaluations.”
- “I used to have debates about Taiwan in my US–China relations class but, on one occasion, the attitude toward Taiwan students who supported independence became so confrontational and uncomfortable, I no longer have debates about Taiwan policy.”

Some faculty reported that they rarely teach international students and therefore do not face these challenges. However, increasing US–China tensions are altering the Chinese politics classroom across a broad range of campuses. Students now arrive on campus more set in their views of China and the US–China relationship than previously. As a result, convincing students to engage with course material and consider alternate viewpoints has become increasingly challenging:

“...students in general are more anti-China, suspicious of the Chinese government, and more hardened in these views than in previous years. They do not necessarily know more than prior students; it seems to me their opinions are formed outside of the classroom (in media, popular discourse, political language of US officials) and it is a bit hardwired.”

**PROBLEMS ON CAMPUS**

The survey asked faculty respondents about problems that they had encountered directly in their Chinese politics courses (see table 1) and those that had occurred on their campus (see figure 4) in the past five years. A minority of respondents reported no problems in their own Chinese politics courses (i.e., 60 respondents, 35.5% of the total) or elsewhere on their campus (i.e., 77 respondents, 45.6% of the total). However, most respondents reported at least one problem and many reported multiple problems. Two important takeaways emerge from these responses.

First, Sinophobia and Asian hate are common—although not universal—problems: 25 respondents reported anti-Asian or Sinophobic speech or action by students in their course; 28 reported being aware of such incidents on their campus; and four also reported that they themselves had been the targets of

Sinophobia or anti-Asian hate speech on campus. Anti-Asian sentiment negatively affects campus experiences for students and faculty members, and addressing these problems more effectively should be an urgent priority for university administrators.

Second, although Chinese government “infiltration” of university campuses makes for good clickbait, respondents reported greater pressure from US government officials than Chinese officials (Epstein 2018). Few respondents reported demands from the Chinese consulate to cancel campus events. Many others, however, reported that their university had experienced difficulty securing US visas for Chinese students or that ethnically Chinese researchers had been investigated—either internally or by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—for ties to Chinese collaborators or government-funded research programs (see figure 4). Many respondents commented on the closure of their campus Confucius Institute (CI)—an unsurprising development given the changes in US federal funding to universities that strongly incentivized the closure of these Chinese government-funded centers. However, the closures do not support a straightforward narrative of cleansing US campuses of malign foreign influence. Instead, one respondent reported that the CI closed “primarily because of concerns that it would create needless US government suspicion”; another stated the reason was that the CI “was under too much political pressure from the US Congress.” Although concern about CIs is warranted, the closure of these institutes comes at a cost to universities and their students because US government funding has not replaced the resources once provided by the now-defunct CIs. One respondent reported that the administration closed the CI but “has not replaced the funding for language study or our exchange program with our CI partner.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, the survey asked respondents to provide recommendations for administrators and fellow faculty members. Their recommendations to administrators fell into several distinct categories. Of the 54 substantive responses to this question, 12 (22%) focused on better supporting the Asian- and Asian-heritage student population by providing more concrete mental health and other types of support and by improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on campus. For instance, respondents noted the importance of ensuring that DEI office staff are fully informed about anti-Asian hate on campus and that incidents of Sinophobia are taken as seriously as other types of racism.

Twelve respondents also emphasized the importance of better educating university administrators about the effects of a more confrontational US–China relationship on US campuses. Although respondents emphasized varying challenges—from racialized investigations of Chinese scientists by an FBI field office to concerns about Chinese Students and Scholars Associations to misunderstandings regarding international research collaboration—there was widespread concern that university administrators are insufficiently attuned to these challenges:

- “Overall, we need to have administrators who know something about the world. But they are, literally all of them—from my chair up on the ladder—specialized in the United States.”
- “The university leadership is for the most part oblivious. The provost for international affairs is the only exception.”

These concerns were not universal. Some faculty respondents reported effective administrative responses, including legal support for a faculty member targeted by a government investigation; regular briefing of top administrators by China specialists; and meetings convened by the provost for international affairs with administrators, faculty, and students to discuss China-related challenges on campus. Nonetheless, the concerns were widely shared and echoed similar concerns about the lack of institutional support for China scholars discussed by Greitens and Truex (2020). Greater knowledge sharing—among faculty, students, and administration at a specific institution as well as across different institutions—could yield more effective responses to shared challenges.

To fellow faculty members, respondents recommended setting student expectations at the beginning of the semester in three broad domains: bias, risk, and academic discourse. Throughout the survey, they noted the increasingly anti-China attitude that many students now bring to the classroom, and they reported incidents of anti-Asian hate on their campus and in their classroom. In this context, it may be useful to engage in pedagogical exercises that seek to disrupt implicit bias and to offer clear guidance in the syllabus about stereotypes and harmful language.

Faculty respondents also are concerned about potential risks to Chinese students who enroll in a Chinese politics course, particularly due to Hong Kong’s 2020 National Security Law, which could be used to punish dissent anywhere in the world (Gueorguiev et al. 2020).<sup>5</sup> Several respondents recommended the inclusion of an explicit statement on the syllabus about potential risks to Chinese students by engaging with the course material, as well as clear policies intended to keep the classroom a safe space for discussion (e.g., adopting Chatham House rules for course discussion and prohibiting students from recording class discussions). Risk and confidentiality statements must be handled carefully: at a moment in which some students already may view their Chinese classmates with suspicion, it is essential to avoid priming them to see their fellow students as potential spies.<sup>6</sup> Amplifying the voices of Chinese student groups that express the desire for a free exchange of ideas about China on their campuses, unconstrained by pressure from Chinese government officials, may help other students to understand that Chinese students are not politically homogeneous and that such policies are important for ensuring that all students feel safe when participating in class.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, faculty respondents recommended articulating clear standards regarding academic freedom and classroom discourse. Constraints on the free exchange of ideas about Chinese politics originate from multiple directions. In several widely reported incidents, nationalistic students from the PRC have disrupted campus events that criticize Chinese

government policies, and these types of disruptions—some on their own campus—loom large for some respondents.<sup>8</sup> However, other faculty respondents noted that American students and colleagues also may constrain the range of acceptable conversation about Chinese politics inside and outside of the classroom: “[I have] concerns about being harassed by students who are ideologically opposed to the course content. Both extremes, pro-China and anti-China, exist within a single course.”

To preempt these problems, some respondents recommended including a clear statement of free-speech principles (and the consequences for violating them); encouraging students to treat classmates with respect; and requiring them to base their arguments on evidence. Intervening quickly when students fail to meet these standards can prevent larger conflicts from escalating.

A second set of recommendations involves ongoing teaching practices. First, faculty respondents recommended presenting a diversity of perspectives so that students confront material that may challenge their own: “My strategy is to be as fact based and evenhanded as possible. I will speak up for unpopular (often Chinese government) views in order for students to see why Chinese officials or Chinese people might see things differently than they do. Keeping with balance, I try to give translated Chinese leader speeches AND reports from human rights groups.”

Second, simulations with assigned roles can build student empathy (Stover 2005). Students who otherwise might be reticent can participate without needing to reveal their personal views. Simulations also can allow students to discuss hot-button issues with a degree of remove and objectivity.

Third, creating multiple venues for participation can reduce risk and improve classroom discourse. Sustained groupwork that enables small groups of students from different backgrounds to get to know one another may be more productive than full-class discussion. Perusall—a collaborative reading annotation platform that enables asynchronous discussion of course readings with an option for confidential participation—enables students to safely participate in discussions of “sensitive” topics. Several respondents emphasized the value of building trust and connections with students, in the classroom and privately. Some students may feel uncomfortable actively participating in a large class but be interested in sharing their views more privately. Individual connections can help faculty members support students who are facing new challenges as a result of the negative turn in the US–China relationship and also may prevent classroom conflicts by giving faculty members insight into sources of student frustration before major problems arise.

## CONCLUSION

In some ways, the challenges that Chinese politics faculty members face today are emblematic of broader debates about DEI, free speech, and the challenges of teaching in a moment of extreme political polarization. However, the context of what some scholars are calling a “new Cold War” between the United States and China creates additional complications.

Faculty members are concerned about career consequences and student backlash if they are either too critical of or too sympathetic to Chinese government policies. Moreover, as both US and Chinese policy makers have soured on US–China academic collaboration, the risks for faculty members who maintain research and institutional ties to Chinese universities and research partners have increased.

These challenges are especially severe for pre-tenure faculty who are concerned about the effects of poor teaching evaluations. Navigating this terrain also may be particularly complicated for Chinese and Chinese-heritage scholars, who are doubly vulnerable. In the United States, these scholars may be treated with suspicion (e.g., by FBI investigations that have disproportionately targeted Chinese scientists). In addition, Chinese government officials use “relational repression” to turn family members in China into tools for surveilling the diaspora and controlling their behavior, even outside of China’s borders (Deng and O’Brien 2013; Greitens and Truex 2020). In many cases, they must contend with these challenges alongside rising Sinophobia on campus and in their community.

Some universities have begun to seriously contend with the implications of continued engagement with China and to formulate concrete policies for addressing these challenges. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s detailed action plan is a useful model (MIT China Strategy Group 2022). By shedding light on the range of obstacles that Chinese politics faculty members currently face, this article contributes to a conversation within the discipline about shared solutions and best practices for confronting this ongoing challenge.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to participants in the 2023 Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges workshop at Swarthmore College on teaching and research on China for thoughtful discussion of this topic; to Scott LaCombe, Eleonora Mattiacci, Anna Mwaba, Erin Pineda, and two anonymous reviewers for detailed feedback; and to student researchers in the East Asian Politics Lab at Smith College for their assistance in fielding the survey. Any errors are my own.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The editors have granted an exception to the data policy for this article. In this case, replication data are not available on Dataverse and the editors have not verified reproducibility of the published results. This exception was granted because the approval granted by the author’s Institutional Review Board does not permit sharing of the underlying data.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300080X>.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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## NOTES

1. The survey instrument is available in the [online appendix](#).
2. All but six of the 147 respondents who reported their ethnic identity described themselves as white or Asian, and the extreme underrepresentation of Black and Latinx scholars within the China field warrants greater discussion. [Figure 3](#) presents responses from white and Asian faculty; the percentages of responses from other groups are misleading because the numbers are so small.
3. It is possible that this number would have been higher in the absence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of China's border closures, very few scholars applied for a Chinese visa between 2020 and late 2022.
4. Many more faculty altered course *policies*—for instance, by holding class only asynchronously.
5. Evidence now suggests that the National Security Law has been used primarily to punish dissenters in Hong Kong rather than to discipline speech abroad. However, the April 2023 arrest of a Hong Kong resident for social media posts that she wrote in Japan suggest that faculty members' fears were not completely unfounded. See [Yang \(2023\)](#).
6. I am grateful to participants in the 2023 Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges conference on teaching and research about China for this point.
7. See, for instance, the statement announcing the creation of the George Washington University Independent Chinese Student Union, April 25, 2023. [https://twitter.com/GWU\\_ICSU/status/1650947025360285719/photo/1](https://twitter.com/GWU_ICSU/status/1650947025360285719/photo/1).
8. For recent examples, see [Moody \(2022\)](#) and [Rogin \(2022\)](#).

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