

China and the Campus

Introduction to the Symposium: China and the Campus

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The US-China relationship has worsened dramatically in recent years. After decades of pro-engagement policies toward China, a bipartisan consensus began to emerge around 2016 that engagement had neither accomplished US policy goals (such as encouraging China to liberalize politically) nor served US citizens well.¹ At the same time, political changes within China have pointed to a declining appetite for engagement with the United States and sidelined the domestic constituencies who remained interested in cooperation and exchange. Further restrictions have shrunk the already limited space for media, civil society groups, and academic exchange in China. Pandemic-related border closures eliminated in-person exchanges almost completely for nearly three years. And some are concerned that China's 2021 Personal Information Protection Law could be used to prosecute foreign researchers who conduct research in China (Lewis 2023).

This symposium seeks to focus attention on colleges and universities as important sites where the contours of a new US-China relationship are being drawn—with significant implications for the experiences of research and teaching on those campuses and for their institutional norms and practices. These dynamics are not limited to the US-China relationship; the United Kingdom, Australia, and other Western democracies are also reckoning with similar challenges in their own bilateral relationships with China. For several reasons, university campuses have become key loci of confrontation and cooperation.

First, international collaboration—between US and foreign universities and between scientists of different nationalities on US campuses—has long been an essential component of US science. However, several recent policy changes have inhibited scientific collaboration between US and Chinese scientists. Presidential Proclamation 10043 (issued in 2020) restricts student visas for Chinese graduate students with ties to Chinese universities that “support the PRC’s ‘military-civil fusion strategy.’” The now-defunct FBI China Initiative, created in 2018, overwhelmingly targeted ethnically Chinese scientists. In addition, the 2018 increase in the number of

NIH investigations of scientists for failure to disclose foreign research funds disproportionately affected scientists with ties to China. These policy changes have caused US scientific innovation to decline and significant numbers of Chinese-heritage scientists to leave or consider leaving the United States (Jia et al. 2023; Xie et al. 2023).

Second, public universities play a *paradiplomatic* role. They can be sites of subnational cooperation between Chinese actors and US state and local governments, as in the case of the California-China Climate Institute housed at the UC-Berkeley School of Law and the now mostly shuttered Confucius Institutes. Public universities are also—with increasing frequency in recent years—being targeted by governors and state legislatures who see them as sites of malign Chinese influence and seek to regulate both academic cooperation between the United States and China and the presence of Chinese nationals on US campuses (Jaros and Newland 2023). For example, a new Florida law limits the ability of public colleges and universities to form a partnership or solicit or accept a gift from an educational institution in a “foreign country of concern” (including China). Ohio’s SB83, which was passed by its state senate and is in committee in its lower house, bans academic and financial ties between Ohio’s public universities and Chinese educational institutions. And a Texas state legislator proposed a bill to ban undocumented immigrants and Chinese and North Korean citizens from public colleges and universities. Although some of these efforts, like the Texas bill, are unlikely to pass, they are an indication of the growing attention that universities are likely to receive as subnational governments increasingly pursue hawkish policies toward China.

Third, US-China ties have immediate effects on university finances, classroom dynamics, and campus life. Before the pandemic and the 2020 Chinese student visa restrictions, Chinese students represented a major source of tuition revenue for US colleges and universities: there were 363,000 Chinese students enrolled in the United States in the 2017–18 academic year, and they and their families contributed \$15 billion to the US economy in tuition and living expenses in 2018. By 2022, enrollment numbers had dropped to 290,000 (Chen 2023). Although Chinese students remain the largest group of international students in the United States, this dramatic decline may have a severe impact on the financial health of tuition-dependent schools, a possibility that UK universities are confronting as well (*The Guardian* [UK] 2023).

US universities with satellite campuses in China, often created in partnership with Chinese universities, are also coming under pressure as US-China relations worsen and China’s limitations on academic freedom grow. Such partnerships have nearly always required US universities to accept limits on academic freedom as a condition for operating in China. However, the costs of such concessions and their potential risks to students and faculty have grown as the

Chinese government has become more repressive. Debates over how to balance internationalization and academic freedom are often fiercely contested, as recent disputes at Cornell University demonstrate. The university closed two exchange programs with China's Renmin University in 2018 after student participants were harassed and surveilled but initiated several new exchanges, over faculty objections, in 2021 (Friedman 2018; Knox 2023; Lu and Fabbro 2023).

Classroom and campus dynamics have also become increasingly fraught in the context of the pandemic, the worsening

the downward turn in US-China relations after 2016. However, scholars and universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere are now navigating similarly difficult waters, as Alexander Dukalskis describes in his contribution to this symposium (Al Jazeera 2021; BBC News 2021; Schumann and Moore 2023). We thus see this symposium as an opportunity both to take stock of current challenges facing faculty and administrators across a wide range of contexts and to offer concrete recommendations for navigating these challenges at the level of the classroom, the campus, and the field.

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US-China relationship, and the nationalistic turn in Chinese politics under Xi Jinping. The transition to remote instruction in March 2020 was particularly complex 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). Anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States rose as conservative media and political elites blamed China for the pandemic. Chinese students and scholars faced the prospect of being stuck in an increasingly hostile country when China's “zero COVID” policies made returning home difficult or impossible (Liu and Peng 2023), and faculty and students of Asian descent were forced to contend with rising incidents of anti-Asian violence and hate speech. A number of high-profile incidents in the United States and elsewhere in which nationalistic Chinese students, sometimes in coordination with consular officials, disrupted lectures and other campus events on “sensitive” topics also increased fears about the Chinese government's ability to limit free speech even outside China's borders.²

Finally, China scholars have long served as an important bridge between China and the United States, but their ability to effectively play that role is now under threat from both sides. China has become an increasingly inhospitable place in which to conduct social science research, and since the reopening of China's borders, several scholars have been turned back at the border or encountered other problems when attempting to enter or leave China. The US State Department's level 3 travel warning for China, issued in June 2023, mentions detention and interrogation of academics as one among several concerns. On the US side, the closure of the Fulbright program to China and Hong Kong has eliminated essential funding for research in China. And, as Rory Truex discusses in his contribution to this symposium, deep China knowledge is increasingly being treated in policy circles as a cause for suspicion rather than an asset.

These challenges are especially visible in the context of the US-China relationship because of its global importance, the outsized influence of US academic institutions within the global academic landscape, and the severity and rapidity of

The six contributions to this symposium approach the theme of “China and the Campus” in different ways. The first three reflect on the classroom and campus environment and the experiences of China scholars as teachers. I present the results from a survey of faculty who teach Chinese politics courses on US college and university campuses. They show that, even though student interest in Chinese politics remains high, faculty report a range of new challenges arising from increasingly nationalistic sentiments among both Chinese and American students, the negative effects of both US and Chinese government policies, and an increase in anti-Asian bias. Ji Yeon Hong reflects on how the shared historical experience of prodemocracy protests can serve as a useful point of cross-cultural connection in the classroom but can also complicate classroom and campus dynamics when students' views on contemporary protest movements differ, as they did during the 2019 Hong Kong protests. Dan Chen, Rongbin Han, and John Yasuda discuss their experiences as faculty members of Asian heritage. They describe the ways in which rising US-China tensions have affected students' and colleagues' perceptions of them and the challenges of international research collaboration today.

The final three contributions consider institutional challenges and the research environment. Alexander Dukalskis compares US and EU approaches to regulating the Confucius Institutes, which policy makers in both contexts came to see as problematic but for different reasons. Roselyn Hsueh reflects on the interplay between research on and US policy responses to China's political economy and discusses the evolving challenges of conducting research on political economy in the context of changing Chinese and US policies. Last, Rory Truex describes the challenges of conducting research on Chinese politics in the current geopolitical moment and offers recommendations to the field for supporting junior scholars, maintaining research collaboration, and informing public discourse.

Our hope is that these contributions provide both a balanced assessment of the challenges facing the field and a set of useful recommendations for faculty and administrators as they face these challenges moving forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Devin Caughey, Eleonora Mattiacci, Alexander Dukalskis, and Roselyn Hsueh for their feedback; to participants in the 2023 Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges (AALAC) seminar on teaching and research about China for thoughtful discussion of the themes discussed in this symposium; and to the symposium contributors for their participation. All errors remain my own.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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


NOTES


1. See Campbell and Ratner (2018) for a prominent articulation of this position.
2. Examples include a speech by a Uighur activist at McMaster University in Canada, protests in support of the 2019 Hong Kong protest movement at the University of California, Davis, and an art exhibit by a Chinese dissident artist at George Washington University (Goldberg 2019; Rogin 2022; Shih and Rauhala 2019).


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