

China on Campus: A Conversation with China Scholars of Asian Heritage

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Increasing tensions between the United States and China, a rise in anti-Asian sentiment, and the risk of government surveillance has dramatically altered the teaching and research contexts for scholars of Chinese politics. In this conversation, Dan Chen (University of Richmond), Rongbin Han (University of Georgia), and John Yasuda (Johns Hopkins University) discuss how questions of identity, politics, and security have affected classroom dynamics and their future research endeavors.

What is your institutional context? How are the politics of China taught at your university?

Dan: The University of Richmond is a private liberal arts institution with about 3,200 undergraduate students. We do not have a large cluster of faculty who teach classes on China or Asia more broadly. I'm the only person who teaches Chinese politics, which is typical for liberal arts colleges. Student interest in Chinese politics is driven by different motivations. For international students from China, they seek to "know the truth" about events that are censored at home. For American students, some take the course to fulfill their major requirements, whereas others have career aspirations in foreign service or immigration advocacy. Other students are driven by a general interest in China as a major power in global politics.

Rongbin: I joined the University of Georgia in 2013. University of Georgia is a public land-grant research university and Georgia's flagship institution, currently enrolling more than 40,000 graduate and undergraduate students. I am the only faculty member in my department who teaches Chinese politics at both graduate and undergraduate levels. Students take my courses for similar reasons as Dan's students. Although my university does not have an institutionalized platform centering on China studies (we have a Center for Asian Studies), I am lucky to be in the Atlanta area where a robust regional China Research Center allows me to connect with fellow scholars in the field.

John: At Johns Hopkins University, a private research university, there is broad interest in the study of China dispersed across a number of departments, including anthropology, East Asian studies, economics, history, political

science, and sociology. Close to a third of my students come from China and the rest hail from across the continental United States. Most of my enrollees have taken at least one other course on China or on East Asia. Students from China often cite an interest in the way that Western scholars view Chinese politics as a major reason for taking my course. Similar to Dan, my students from the United States have an expressed interest in pursuing careers in foreign service. There also has been a slight uptick in enrollments from students majoring in the sciences who simply want to gain additional insight on the China-related headlines of the day.

In what ways do you think people's perceptions of your ethnic or national identity affect the dynamics in your classes or your experience at academic conferences and public events? How would you like to see the problematic situations addressed?

Rongbin: Other than the rare instances in which I got yelled at on the street (twice since arriving in the United States in 2006), I have not encountered anything that is overly unpleasant. I feel fortunate that my experiences at academic conferences and public events have been "eventless" in this regard. My interaction with students has been smooth as well. In fact, my identity has likely affected the dynamics in a positive direction. Students perceive me as a reliable source on China. Probably due to my research on state censorship and the possible repercussions associated with doing research on "sensitive" topics, my students view me as a critical observer of the state. Many students are also aware of anti-Asian racism and have expressed their support.

That being said, this certainly should not be taken as evidence that "everything is fine" across higher education because selection bias might be at work. Students and colleagues simply might avoid my courses or the events that I attend if they have issues with where I am from. Moreover, because racial discrimination is not socially desirable, people may engage in impression management, making it more difficult to observe.

Indeed, I have heard troubling stories about our colleagues experiencing anti-Asian racism in both classroom and

professional settings. Some of the cases are quite dreadful. For myself, these stories function as “control parables” (Stern and Hassid 2012)—although they are not my direct experiences, they remind me that I should behave cautiously for the purposes of self-preservation.

John: As a Japanese American who grew up in Hong Kong and is now teaching Chinese politics at an American university, questions about my identity and its influence on my scholarship do filter into my classroom. Whereas Rongbin is viewed as a reliable interlocutor on China, I often feel compelled to dispel concerns that my Japanese heritage, colonial upbringing, and Western gaze unfairly bias my presentations of China. On the flipside, an added complication is that given my research focus on China’s regulatory establishment, I have been more embedded in the Chinese state during fieldwork, which can raise questions about my impartiality—especially for American audiences.

Unfortunately, I am now personally familiar with what Rongbin referred to as the “dreadful” cases of anti-Asian sentiment. It happened during my sabbatical abroad. As I was leaving a public lecture during the Q&A segment, which I was attending as an audience member, I was singled out by the visiting American speaker and discourteously told to stay in my seat because the speaker had “something to say to me.” A tense standoff in front of 60 people ensued with me insisting that I had to leave and the speaker telling me in Mandarin and English to take a seat. Upon my exit, the speaker then publicly accused me of being a representative of the Chinese embassy sent to monitor his lecture. The whole sorry experience was personally humiliating and deeply unnerving to the many Asian students and faculty in the audience. This casual labeling of an individual as a state agent is so very dangerous—it is an invitation for physical and reputational harm by others. It was a toxic mix of racial profiling, paranoia, and bullying that should not be tolerated anywhere, let alone at an academic venue where frank and open discussion is *sine qua non*.

The institutional support rendered to me and the personal outreach from colleagues has been overwhelming. At the time of the incident, in addition to anger, it was the sense of isolation that was most debilitating. Solidarity from faculty helped me to move forward. Given the precariousness of this moment, it is so very important that we engender spaces of mutual understanding. I also think it was crucial that the hosts of the event immediately made it clear in a public statement that what transpired was completely unacceptable.

Dan: I am sorry to hear this, John. In my classroom, I have been upfront about my background as a Chinese-born scholar and an immigrant. Most of my students have respected and appreciated my scholarship and personal experience. However, I also have encountered situations in which my ethnic and national identity shaped classroom dynamics. Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Spring 2020, a student in my senior seminar argued that we should be able to use the phrase “Chinese virus.” Before I could react, other students in the class passionately explained the biases behind the statement and the harm it could cause. The discussion

became a teachable moment about pandemic othering in general (Dionne and Turkmen 2020) and the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments in particular in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Reny and Barreto 2022). Another example is from an earlier stage of my teaching career. Because of my Han Chinese identity, a student from Tibet needed to make sure that I understood the Tibetan struggle for autonomy before he would even talk to me. In this case, I understood this student’s perspective and, although my national identity played a role, I am glad that it did not hinder my relationship with him.

On a few other occasions, I have been misrecognized on campus as someone who teaches Mandarin. On its face, this is a frustrating case of individuals not being able to tell Chinese people apart, which is problematic in and of itself. However, underlying this problem is an assumption that my presence at the university must be in the capacity of a language instructor. Othering occurs in academia on this institutional level. The ethnicization of scholars’ professional qualifications works to diminish their standing in the academic community. Such “small” instances of misrecognition reflect and reinforce the significance of race making and ethnic differentiation, which have played an important role in the history of Asian exclusion in the United States (Lee 2010).

In thinking about potential ways to address these problems, I would like to see more on-campus cultural events that represent current Chinese society from a more human, grassroots perspective. In a time when the public discourse centers on political-leader rhetoric and government action, we need to be reminded to still see one another as fundamentally human. I invited an American standup comedian, Jesse Appell, who performed comedy in Mandarin in China for almost a decade, to visit our campus last year. Jesse shared his experience of living and working in China, and he made a compelling case for cross-cultural communication between China and the United States—all with a strong dose of humor. Cultural events like this help to reduce stereotypes and facilitate a more authentic understanding of Chinese society and people.

Based on your experience as a researcher, are you concerned about being monitored by the US and/or Chinese governments? How has your willingness and ability to engage in international research collaboration changed over the last few years?

John: I have had privileged access to regulators and state-affiliated think tanks for my research, so monitoring has always been a concern. Because my interviews are largely technical—on a rule change or point of law—I do think I have managed to avoid unwanted attention from both the American and Chinese governments. Despite the specter of government surveillance, I think it is imperative in this complex moment that researchers are careful to guard their independence. In classrooms, seminars, and academic talks, I generally provide unvarnished accounts of my research with the full knowledge that representatives of the state might be present. A part of the job is to unmask and address

problematic priors about China regardless of whether government officials want to face them. Relatedly, I often hesitate to engage the media unless I know the individual personally due to a tendency for some journalists to use academics to legitimize sensationalistic treatments that reinforce rather than correct these biases. The risk of having your words misconstrued is high and the blowback from the state can be severe.

Like many of our colleagues, I have not been back to China since the beginning of the pandemic due to complications arising from the country's stringent zero-COVID policy, restricted access to fieldwork sites, and the potential inconvenience that my presence as a foreign researcher might have for a host institution. I still have relationships with scholars in China, but I have yet to start any new projects with them, given the current political uncertainties. I was tentatively invited to serve as a visiting scholar at one university, which I think bodes well for the future, but I intend to adopt a wait-and-see posture. Additionally, I expect my Japanese heritage likely will cause some discomfort when I return to China, especially if Sino-Japanese relations remain on a downward trend. Although I have never been denied access to field sites due to my Japanese ancestry, I have had to answer uncomfortable questions about territorial disputes and historical tensions.

Dan: I worry about potential government monitoring in both countries and I too have turned down many media interview requests for this reason. However, I continue to collaborate with scholars in China on research projects. We are careful about selecting the topic of our collaboration because we are conscientious about protecting one another from potential repercussions. Thus far, these projects have been productive and I have learned much from my Chinese colleagues. In this process, my Chinese identity has facilitated the building of trust in our relationship. Nevertheless, I think it is crucial for scholars in both countries to continue to dialogue with their counterparts even under difficult circumstances.

Yet, I do have concerns about the broader breakdown in collaboration with scholars or institutions in China in the current political climate. As a downstream effect of worsening United States–China relations, some Chinese scholars have become distrustful toward American academia. Moreover, administrators at some Chinese universities have started to emphasize publications in Chinese-language journals while downplaying English-language journals, many of

severely undermined. To preempt this trend, scholars in both countries should continue communicating. China's reopening could provide an opportunity for scholars to reengage and reconnect—not as representatives of each country but rather as scholars.

Rongbin: I do not identify myself as an activist. My research projects are all based on open data sources and all my published work is publicly accessible. As a China-born scholar, my Chinese origin, familiarity with cultural codes, and existing social ties used to be helpful when conducting fieldwork. However, I am anxious about resuming my in-country research agenda post-COVID, given the deteriorating bilateral relations and rising nationalism in China.

Moreover, because my research touches on sensitive topics, like John and Dan, I am concerned about being monitored by the US and Chinese governments. I have avoided applying for government grants from both sides. China's restrictions on academic research are well known, especially for projects that concern issues of national security and involve collaboration with foreign institutions. However, the United States also has escalated its efforts to combat China's influence, in part due to the perceived vulnerability of Americans to Chinese espionage efforts in research and industry. The China Initiative launched by the Department of Justice under Trump charged more than 150 people before it came to an end, creating a climate of fear and anxiety among scholars of Chinese origin (Guo, Aloe, and Hao 2021). Accepting grant monies from one side seems to automatically invite suspicion from the other. I also have declined to review grant requests from China. It has dampened my willingness and reduced my ability to engage in international collaborations, and I do think that this lack of engagement more generally has had a negative impact on research about China (Jia et al. 2022).

My concerns about international collaboration are primarily twofold. First, it is important that my Chinese colleagues do not get into trouble because of a project. I have tended to rely on their judgment because they have a better sense of what is and is not doable. Second, I certainly do not want to get myself into trouble. As China scholars, our research can be significantly impacted if we are denied access to the field. On the US side, programs such as the China Initiative have discouraged international collaboration. The price is dear if one becomes a target: it took MIT Professor Gang Chen a whole year to be exonerated after being charged by the FBI because of his

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which are based in the United States. If this trend continues, the scholarship of China studies will become bifurcated: the theoretical frameworks and methodologies that China scholars in both countries use might become increasingly different and separate from one another. If this becomes a reality, our understanding of China will become skewed, and the basis for improving United States–China relations will be

connections with Chinese institutions, despite being widely perceived as innocent.

Beyond research, these obstacles to international collaboration also undermine our educational mission, thereby limiting the learning opportunities of our students. That study-abroad programs in China have been canceled is truly disappointing.

CONCLUSION

Teaching and research on China in the current moment of geopolitical tensions between the United States and China is challenging, conflict-ridden, and precarious. Complex layers of history, politics, and identity have proven difficult to navigate in the classroom and at conferences. Encounters with racism are emotionally searing and enervating for targeted individuals, and they deeply undermine the basis for free and open academic exchange. Moreover, the specter of government surveillance steers scholars away from sensitive topics, collaborative exchange, and public outreach. For China scholars of Asian heritage, these challenges are particularly acute and emotionally exhausting.

Nevertheless, our three scholars do see positive dynamics at work. Classrooms can provide a host of teachable moments to confront and assess the impact of biases regarding China. Conversations with students can foster mutual understanding despite prevailing hostile narratives. Moments of solidarity can arise to support scholars who suffer abuse from xenophobic elements. Most important, all of these scholars emphasize the necessity of continuing to reach out to and build connections with scholars in China. The stakes are high and the risks are real, but teaching and research on China remains well worth the cost.

Our research community increasingly represents diverse interests—some are focused on advancing theoretical work, others have a more policy-focused agenda, and still others

seek to foster mutual engagement between the United States and China, whereas some are set on erecting barriers. Tension among China scholars will be unavoidable as we rethink our collective goals for the field. Nevertheless, at such a critical time, the three authors remain steadfast in their conviction that scholars should continue to reach out across subfields, the public–academic divide, and international borders to rebuild mutual trust. ■

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