TEACHER SYMPOSIUM

Researching China in Hard Times

Rory Truex, *Princeton University, USA*

In the spring of 2018, Sheena Greitens and I conducted the China Scholar Research Experience Survey, a survey of 562 China scholars in the social sciences.[1] The goal of the survey was to understand the incidence rate of different repressive experiences in the conduct of research. We found that at the time, such incidents were a "rare but real" phenomenon. Approximately 9% of respondents stated that they had been "invited to tea" by authorities within the past 10 years; 26% of scholars who conduct archival research reported having had issues with access; and 5% of researchers cited some difficulty obtaining a visa (Greitens and Truex 2020).

Unfortunately, the "shelf life" of that project was destined to be cut short. The COVID-19 outbreak ground research to a halt in 2020, and lingering quarantine rules and the draconian implementation of zero-COVID policies made travel to China effectively impossible for most researchers through 2022. Scholars are beginning to test the waters now that the country has reopened (Kuo 2023), but it is unclear whether the inferences we made in our 2018 survey hold in the current period.

Anecdotal reports suggest that research activities are possible but not easy—a Western affiliation can make would-be informants decline an interview, and even the interviews that can take place are more muted than they would have been a decade ago. New regulations around national security increase the likelihood that at some point, researchers could be targeted with substantial penalties for simply collecting or transmitting data (Junck et al. 2021). The Chinese government is increasingly restricting access to Chinese data, to the point where basic government statistics and Chinese academic journals are becoming harder to reach for foreign scholars (Yang 2023). The general mood in the field seems to be one of unease. Our standard forms of research have been on pause for so long and, in the meantime, the nature of the Chinese state and United States–China relations have fundamentally changed. We no longer know where the boundaries are, and we will have to test them out anew as a field.

On the US side, the government is now focused on treating China as a "strategic competitor," and some officials have even declared a "new Cold War" (Harris 2023). On paper, this shift in mentality could create opportunities for the China field, as China expertise has never been more valuable. In practice, it remains unclear whether the US government values our expertise or whether it is seeking voices that already confirm its assumptions about the Chinese state. Increasingly, ties to China—whether through ethnicity, language, or lived experience—are being viewed as a liability in US policy circles (Waldman 2019). Rather than being recognized as a reservoir of deep knowledge about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), our field risks being dismissed as too close to the regime and naïve about its true intentions. Some journalists have proffered a false narrative that the field as a whole is guilty of self-censorship, cowardly mincing words about the CCP to secure visas and maintain research access (Fish 2018). These accusations do tremendous damage to the field.

The net result is that China scholars are caught in the middle, viewed as potentially "hostile foreign forces" by governments in both their country of study and their country of residence. This situation is not new, of course—scholars of other authoritarian countries, most notably Russia, have seen the health of their field ebb and flow with the vagaries of the regimes they study (Goode 2010; Smyth 2023).[2] Any time an authoritarian regime becomes more closed and repressive, the scholarly project suffers, precisely at the moments when knowledge is most needed. What are we to do as a field and as a discipline? This article proposes four professional principles to guide our field in these hard times.

First, we must recognize that this environment will erode the quality of research on China—to a degree, at least—and we must continue to *protect and encourage junior scholars* to persist despite these challenges. We cannot hold people to standards that are no longer attainable. A dissertation that once would center around a hundred interviews with government officials may have to rely on only a couple dozen. Ethnographies that would have been in person may have to become digital. Fieldwork centered in Mainland China may have to be conducted with the diasporic communities in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Editors and reviewers at general-interest journals must better understand how difficult it has become to research China and how these barriers affect the quality of our work. Scholars should be encouraged to directly discuss practical and ethical research constraints in their papers (Goode 2010). The China field historically has had almost no representation on the editorial teams at top journals in the field, and this must change. We also may consider normalizing the practice of hardship statements for job applications and tenure files so that committees understand how the research environment in China has affected a scholar's productivity. As it stands, junior scholars will be professionally penalized for studying China because it will be more difficult for them to obtain data, conduct interviews, and construct the high-quality inferences needed to publish in top journals (Libman 2023).[3]

Second, we must *maintain a commitment to scientific impartiality* and resist ideological pressure in the conduct of our

doi:10.1017/S1049096523000641

research. We must begin our projects open to reaching any possible conclusion from the data collection, even if those conclusions upset the preconceived notions of American or Chinese government officials. Our collective goal should be to provide accurate, nuanced views of China as it is. When we initiate projects to prove a certain ideological point of view, we cease to be scholars and have crossed the line into activism. If China scholars are concerned about upsetting the Chinese or American government with the results of their scholarship, they are probably in the wrong field.

The general mood in the field seems to be one of unease. Our standard forms of research have been on pause for so long and, in the meantime, the nature of the Chinese state and United States–China relations has fundamentally changed. We no longer know where the boundaries are, and we will have to test them out anew as a field.

Third, we must continue to *advocate for exchange* with our colleagues in Mainland China, even as that word becomes increasingly unfashionable. Both the Chinese and American governments are building barriers to collaboration. In 2022, the Chinese government prevented five Chinese scholars based in the People's Republic of China from attending virtual events at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, citing security concerns (Feng 2022). On the US side, the Department of Justice's now-defunct China Initiative continues to have a chilling effect. New survey data of a thousand Chinese American researchers reveal that 35% of respondents feel unwelcome in the United States and 65% are concerned about collaborating with institutions in China (Xie et al. 2023). Everyday scholarly activities like attending an international conference and sharing data are becoming sensitive. However, even in this new era of strategic competition, it is possible to have productive academic relationships among scholars in the two countries—especially in the social sciences, for which the enterprise is less central to national security.

Fourth, and finally, I believe we have an obligation as a field to *use our expertise to inform the discourse* on China and United States–China relations. At present, we are observing a proliferation of "China experts" in the United States, many of whom have never been to China, have no meaningful relationships with Chinese colleagues, and have no Mandarin-language training (McCourt 2022). These individuals are increasingly active in policy circles and the media and their ignorance is viewed as a badge of honor—a sign that they are not morally tainted by their exposure to Chinese ideas. This is a dangerous dynamic for United States–China relations, which leads policy makers and the public to infer the worst intentions of the Chinese government and to overreact and misread domestic policy developments (Shirk 2022). We should not abandon scholarship for punditry, but we can and must do more to move our research beyond journals and classrooms and out into the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Sara Newland for the invitation to submit to this symposium and to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and support of the article.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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

NOTES

1. For sensitivity reasons, the sample was restricted to China scholars outside of Mainland China. The barriers to research for social scientists working in Mainland China are significantly more burdensome.
2. See Smyth (2023) for an excellent discussion of similar issues facing Russian studies.
3. Libman (2023) discusses how the "credibility revolution" in social science has affected the nature of scholarship in Russian studies.

REFERENCES

Feng, Emily. 2022. "China Tightens Restrictions and Bars Scholars from International Conferences." *National Public Radio*, March 30. www.npr.org/2022/03/30/1089631713/china-tightens-restrictions-and-bars-scholars-from-international-conferences.

Fish, I. Stanley. 2018. "The New Political Correctness." *The New Republic*. https://newrepublic.com/article/150476/american-elite-universities-selfcensorship-china.

Goode, J. Paul. 2010. "Redefining Russia: Hybrid Regimes, Fieldwork, and Russian Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (4): 1055–75.

Greitens, Sheena C., and Rory Truex. 2020. "Repressive Experiences Among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data." *The China Quarterly* 242: 349–75.

Harris, Bryant. 2023. "GOP Pick to Lead House China Committee Vows to Win 'New Cold War.'" *Defense News*, January 10. www.defensenews.com/congress/2023/01/10/gop-pick-to-lead-house-china-committee-vows-to-win-new-cold-war.

Junck, Ryan D., Bradley A. Klein, Akira Kumaki, Ken D. Kumayama, Steve Kwok, Stuart D. Levi, James S. Talbot, Eve-Christie Vermynck, and Siyu Zhang. 2021. "China's New Data Security and Personal Information Protection Laws: What They Mean for Multinational Companies." *Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP*. www.skadden.com/insights/publications/2021/11/chinas-new-data-security-and-personal-information-protection-laws.

Kuo, Kaiser. 2023. "A Firsthand View of China's Chaotic COVID Re-Opening, with Deborah Seligson." *The China Project*. https://thechinaproject.com/podcast/a-firsthand-view-of-chinas-chaotic-covid-re-opening-with-deborah-seligsohn.

Libman, Alexander. 2023. "Credibility Revolution and the Future of Russian Studies." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39 (1–2): 60–69.

McCourt, David M. 2022. "The Changing US–China Watching Community and the Demise of Engagement with the People's Republic of China." *Journal of American–East Asian Relations* 29 (1): 47–81.

Shirk, Susan L. 2022. "*Overreach: How China Derailed its Peaceful Rise*." Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000641 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Smyth, Regina. 2023. "*Plus ça change*: Getting Real About the Evolution of Russian Studies After 1991." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39 (1–2): 10–26.

Waldman, Peter. 2019. "Mistrust and the Hunt for Spies Among Chinese Americans." *Bloomberg News*, December 10. www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-12-10/the-u-s-government-s-mistrust-of-chinese-americans#xj4y7vzkg.

Xie, Yu, Xihong Lin, Ju Li, Qian He, and Junming Huang. 2023. "Caught in the Crossfire: Fears of Chinese American Scientists." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120 (27): e2216248120. DOI:10.1073/pnas.2216248120.

Yang, Lin. 2023. "China to Limit Access to Largest Academic Database." *Voice of America*, March 30. www.voanews.com/a/china-to-limit-access-to-largest-academic-database-/7029581.html.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000641 Published online by Cambridge University Press