

**Resisting Sinophobia and a New Cold War:
Protecting the Free Flow of Ideas and Economic Health of Higher Education**

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The pandemic and upcoming national election have increased the virulence of Sinophobia and the pressures for a new cold war. This brief essay tries to focus attention on these tendencies and challenge the Procrustean bed of xenophobia, militarism, McCarthyism, and educational crisis.

President Trump and his supporters have been using concerns about Covid-19 to nourish anti-Chinese feelings. In mid-March, the President provocatively referred to the coronavirus as “the Chinese virus” on Twitter and during a press briefing. After this allusion there was a spike in anti-Asian racist incidents in the United States (A3PCON June 18). Fanning the flames, the President has demanded that China pay reparations for its slow announcement of the dangers of the virus. These attacks appear to have emboldened pre-existing ethnic prejudices. From March 19 to June 3, 2020 a group tracking racist incidents involving Asian Americans (the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council or A3PCON) reported 2,066 racist incidents against Asian Americans.² About a quarter of these included specific references to China. One third of these attacks blamed China or Chinese people for the pandemic. About a fifth of the reports expressed anti-immigrant sentiment, including perceptions of China as the enemy (Borjia 2020). Illustrative comments included:

My elderly parents were walking with my two-year old and some 20-30-year-olds drove by and screamed “f—k China!”

Some individuals yelled “Chinese go back to your country!” then threw their soda at me from a moving vehicle.

Roommate told me that the Chinese are filthy people who all deserve to die of Covid-19.

¹ I would like to thank David Kotz and other members of the Asian Political Economy Program of the Political Economy Research Institute [PERI] of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for helpful suggestions. Any residual errors are mine alone.

² Borja, Melissa and Russell Jeung, Aggie Yellow Horse, Jacob Gibson, Sarah Gowing, Nelson Lin, Amelia Navins, and Emahlia Power. “Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Tied to Racism against Asian Americans, Stop AAPI Hate Report.” http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Anti-China_Rhetoric_Report_6_17_20.pdf Accessed 7/1/20.

Based on interviews across the country, the *New York Times* similarly reported that many Asian Americans “were afraid—to go grocery shopping, to travel alone on subways or buses, to let their children go outside...”³

The decision to demonize China seems to be a central part of the Republicans’ 2020 election strategy.⁴ An April 7th memo from the National Republican Senatorial Committee, for example, recommended Republican candidates: (1) blame China for causing the virus by covering it up, (2) paint Biden and the Democrats as soft on China, and 3) push for US sanctions on China.⁵ From April 1-May 15 the Republicans spent more than \$8 million on TV ads referencing China and \$64,000 on all other ads (Amanda Terkel, 5/19/2020). In true cold war fashion, when asked whether President Trump had ignored warnings about the dangers of coronavirus, Senator Martha McSally of Colorado “promptly pivoted. ‘I learned the day I entered the military, never trust a communist,’ Ms. McSally answered. ‘China is to blame for this pandemic and the death of thousands of Americans.’”⁶

It is possible that Trump and his allies will try to create and ride a second wave of McCarthyism, this time directed against Chinese Americans. The FBI has been secretly investigating Chinese residents in the US for several decades, based on a form of racial profiling (Hvistendahl 2/2/20).⁷ According to the “thousand grains of sand” theory of Chinese espionage, armies of ordinary Chinese people, not specifically trained as spies, are said to be collecting information for China in response to ethnic pride and a concern for relatives still in China. While this theory has since been disavowed by its originator (Zweig and Kang 2020),⁸ there are

³ Tavernise, Sabrina and Richard A. Oppel Jr. “Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese Americans Fear for Their Safety.” *New York Times* 3/23/2020, updated 6/2/20.

⁴ Terkel, Amanda. “Demonizing China Dominates GOP Political Ads During Coronavirus Pandemic.” 5/19/2020. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/china-issue-2020-election_n_5ebee495c5b64fe2e88489c7 Accessed 7/4/20.

⁵ Isenstadt, Alex. 4/24/20. “GOP memo urges anti-China assault over coronavirus,” Politico <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/24/gop-memo-anti-china-coronavirus-207244> Accessed 7/1/20. See also Solender, Andrew. “Republicans See Attacking China As A Winning Strategy.” *Forbes*, April 25, 2020.

⁶ Edmondson, Catie. June 13, 2020 (updated June 17, 2020). “Faced with Crisis and Re-election, Senate Republicans Blame China.” *New York Times*.

⁷ Hvistendahl, Mara. 2/2/20. “The FBI’s China Obsession: The U.S. Government Secretly Spied on Chinese American Scientists, Upending Lives and Paving the Way for Decades of Discrimination.” *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/02/fbi-chinese-scientists-surveillance/> Accessed 7/7/20.

⁸Zweig, David and Siqin Kang, 2020. “America Challenges China’s National Talent Programs.” Center for Strategic and International Studies No. 4 May 2020.

enough fragments of data consistent with the theory to create a basis for a tabloid-like Trumpean story. Based on this flawed narrative, the pain and tragedy of unjustly ruined reputations that accompanied McCarthy's anti-communist crusade is now being repeated (Hvistendahl).⁹

The Trump Administration's portrayal of China's "Thousand Talents Plan" (TTP) as a blueprint for espionage reflects this anti-Chinese discourse. The TTP was initiated in 2008 in an effort to reduce China's long time "brain drain."¹⁰ The TTP offered incentives for high level Chinese scientists and engineers to return to China. The program did not initially attract many returnees. In 2010 the TTP was modified to allow participants to retain their current positions outside of China, while affiliating with Chinese institutions on a part-time basis. This was more successful. Some participants subsequently hid their involvement in the TTP in order to avoid paying American taxes on their extra income earned in China. They also appear to have been worried that disclosure of their China work could lead departmental colleagues and non-Chinese granting agencies to feel they were not adequately committed to their non-TTP work. This secretive and sometimes illegal behavior has been highlighted by second cold war proponents who encourage a decoupling of US and Chinese scientific research projects.

Zweig and Kang challenge the wisdom of this divorce. They acknowledge the reality of illegal and/or unethical behavior by some TTP recipients, as well as China's efforts to acquire cutting edge technologies, legally and illegally, but find the Administration's anti-Chinese policies excessive. In a careful review of TTP issues, they conclude:

https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/20505_zweig_AmericaChallenges_v6_FINAL.pdf zweig and Kang 2020. See also Hvistendahl 2020,

⁹ To get a sense of the new cold war mindset I would recommend reading *China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance, Report of the Working Group on Chinese Influence Activities in the United States* (Hoover Institution Press 2019). The Working Group was led by Larry Diamond of the Hoover Institution and Orville Schell of the Asia Society. The two also edited the volume. The 33 member working group included some well-known China scholars, members of important think tanks, a former US ambassador to China, as well as 10 foreign members with similar backgrounds. After the report's publication, its conclusions were endorsed by the Editorial Board of the Washington Post (11/28/18, "China's ominous plan to 'penetrate and sway' the United States").

While the report's authors explicitly oppose a new cold war and the casting of Chinese Americans as potential subversives, the book's tone and underlying message seems at odds with their claims. See for example, Susan Shirk's dissenting statement (p. 193) and Peter Waldman, "As China anxiety rises in U.S., fears of new red scare emerge," 12/31/19, Bloomberg <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-31/as-china-anxiety-rises-in-u-s-fears-of-new-red-scare-emerge>. Accessed 7/12/20.

¹⁰ In 2008, 93% of Chinese students earning American PhDs in science and engineering in 2003 were still living in the U.S. (Zweig and Kang 2020, 3).

[K]ey members of the administration . . . mobilized the FBI, which . . . searched for as many cases as possible. . . . [W]hile there is definitely room for concern, their assertiveness in this search for internal enemies has bordered on zealotry (Zweig and Kang 2020, 11).

In the face of Trump's anti-Chinese provocations, Biden will be under increasing pressure to respond. Progressives need to ensure that Biden does not try to out-bash China.¹¹ While the rapid rise of China is bound to generate some frictions with the U.S., which has long dominated the global economy, there is a need to channel these frictions away from the mutually destructive cold war dynamics and into a peaceful and managed relationship. If, instead, we opt for a cold war framing of our relationship with China, it will poison our political discourse, militarize our foreign policy, distort our national priorities in the direction of wasteful arms races, and constrain the free flow of ideas.

On a global level, the growth of knowledge should be regarded as a shared human triumph. The challenge is to create the cultures and institutions that permit healthy interactions among nations and local/national diversity. This is also a challenge within capitalism, where it is important to ensure that economic rivalry does not lead to a "race to the bottom" with respect to environmental quality or workplace health and safety standards.

A vibrant Chinese university and research program can contribute to American and global well-being, as illustrated by the Chinese development of an artemisinin-based treatment for malaria. Emerging from traditional Chinese medicine, artemisinin-based drugs have become the standard treatment of malaria worldwide. Hopefully, Chinese science can also contribute to finding a vaccine for Covid-19. Using statistics such as data about first authorship on scientific papers, Zweig and Kang concluded, "closing down research collaboration between the United States and China will hurt U.S. scientific scholarship more than China" (17).¹²

Beyond these considerable losses, the reconstruction of America in cold war fatigues could seriously weaken the vibrance of American higher education. One of the earliest casualties of China bashing and Cold War II dynamics would be the openness of US universities to the free flow of ideas as well as to Chinese and other international students. The Trump administration's policies have already created a chilly atmosphere on campus for Chinese

¹¹ There have been some movements in this direction. See, for example, Michael Martina, "Exclusive: Biden to hammer Trump's 'tough talk, weak action' on China, top adviser says." Reuters May 12, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-biden-china-exclusive/exclusive-biden-to-hammer-trumps-tough-talk-weak-action-on-china-top-adviser-says-idUSKBN22P02B> Accessed 7/5/20

¹² Considering the benefits to America of the internationalization of science more broadly, foreign born Americans have won 38% of the 95 Nobel prizes won by Americans in medicine, physics, and chemistry between 2000-2019. Stuart Anderson, "Immigrant Nobel Prize Winners Keep Leading the Way," Forbes 10/14/19, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/10/14/immigrant-nobel-prize-winners-keep-leading-the-way-for-america/#724368d94d4b>

students, who have been portrayed as potential spies and tools of the Chinese government. Uncertainties about visas are also reducing Chinese enrollments at US colleges and universities.¹³ This was recently compounded by the release of new student visa regulations by ICE that would bar millions of international students from U.S. colleges and universities where in-person classes are temporarily replaced by remote instruction due to the Coronavirus. Of course, the most significant cause of falling foreign student enrollments is the pandemic and its effect on student travel, along with the perceived health risks of living in the US. These problems will hopefully end with the development of a vaccine. However, the political and cultural barriers to maintaining a foreign student presence at our educational institutions may be more enduring.

A significant decline in the number of Chinese and other international students on American campuses would be a great loss. At Knox College, where I teach, we have had many excellent matriculating students from China. They have strengthened the College's academic environment and enriched domestic students' understanding of cultural diversity. Without a change in government policy, we will probably lose many of these students. As perhaps a harbinger of things to come, one of my advisees from the PRC recently informed me that his parents had changed their mind about the merits of studying and working in the US and now recommended that he look for opportunities in China.

Critics of open admissions policies sometimes worry that foreign students are taking slots away from Americans. For the most part, it appears that the opposite is true. Chinese students often pay full out-of-state tuition. On average, they pay about twice what domestic students pay.¹⁴ Their higher payments often help to subsidize domestic students and allow larger university and college enrollments. This is true, for example, at Knox College. Similarly, foreign tuition and fee payments are so important to the finances of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign campus that the administration took out a \$60 million insurance policy against a fall in Chinese enrollments.¹⁵

From a macroeconomic point of view, higher education is one America's most successful export surplus sectors. The million international students studying in the US in 2016 (about a

¹³America's share of Chinese students studying abroad fell from 43.3% in 2017 to 40.5% in 2019 (Zweig and Kang, 2020, 16)

¹⁴ Educationdata.org, "International Student Enrollment Statistics."
<https://educationdata.org/international-student-enrollment-statistics/> Accessed 7/2/20

¹⁵ West, Charlotte. Sept. 26, 2019. "UIUC hedges its bets against decline in Chinese students with \$60m policy." PIE (Professionals in International Education) News
<https://thepienews.com/news/uiuc-hedges-its-bets-against-decline-in-chinese-students-with-60m-insurance-policy/> Accessed 7/4/20. If enrollments of Chinese international students in the UIUC colleges of business and education fall by 18.5% the policy triggers. If UIUC lost all revenues from Chinese international students, they would receive a compensating payment of \$60 million. See also: Rampell, Catherine. 2018. "One of America's most successful exports is in trouble." *Washington Post* 12/13/18.

third of whom are from China) spent \$40 billion on tuition and other educational expenses (Mitchell and Korn 2018). If outlays for housing, food, and other living expenses are included, foreign student spending totaled about \$50 billion. This approximates the value of US semiconductor exports (\$48 billion), passenger car exports (\$52 billion) and civilian aircraft (\$56 billion) (Mitchell and Korn 2018).¹⁶

Besides contributing to the US economy, America's colleges and universities engagement with international students, scholars, and faculty have long contributed to a favorable view of the US in other countries. Many international students develop an affection for their alma mater and the country that hosted their college years. They also develop inter-personnel networks and language skills that facilitate later economic and professional relationships. On a cultural level, American colleges and universities attractively represent American ideals, such as inclusion and freedom of thought.

To sum up, Sinophobia and a new Cold War rhetoric are likely to heat up in the near future and need to be challenged if we are to prevent a return to the disastrous politics of the first Cold War. Academic freedom and the openness of US higher education to international students need to be defended. Compromises with a new McCarthyism, caused by the Democratic party's fear of being seen as "soft" on China or inattentive to threats to national security, also need to be challenged. What's at stake is not only a better and more honest relationship with a rising world power but, perhaps even more importantly, our ability to retain control over our own democratic discourse.

¹⁶ We have a large trade surplus in education, as spending by Americans studying abroad tallied only \$8 billion in 2016 (Mitchell, Josh and Melissa Korn, "Targeting China, Trump Threatens Student Visas. That would Hit a Big U.S. Export." *Wall Street Journal* 3/16/18).