



American Universities – The New Sino-US Battleground

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Abstract

A new red scare has descended over Washington and American universities, with the establishment of the Committee on the Present Danger: China. Issuing warnings that China poses an existential threat to the U.S. and with the Committee's views embraced by the Trump administration, university campuses have become the new battlefield for U.S.-China rivalry. As the FBI crack down on research collaboration not only in STEM fields but in regular academic exchanges and travels to China, the unintended consequence is an increasing climate of fear that is chilling educational interactions, and may have a negative long-term impact on the traditional open environment of academic inquiry and exchanges at universities.

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Analysis

Back in July, a New York Times article reported that a new red scare had descended upon Washington, DC, with the establishment of the Committee on the Present Danger: China (CPDC).¹ As this new curtain of fear is enveloping and reshaping the US capital, it is now also stretching into American university campuses.

The Committee on the Present Danger had campaigned against the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, and has recently been revived by former Trump adviser Stephen Bannon to warn against the dangers of China. The New York Times described the CPDC as “an unlikely group of military hawks, populist crusaders, Chinese Muslim freedom fighters and followers of the Falun Gong” warning anyone who will listen that “China poses an existential threat to the United States that will not end until the Communist Party is overthrown.”²

Working in tandem with CPDC in the US would be the Dignitatis Humanae Institute in Italy, to be housed in the 800-year-old Trisulti Monastery outside of Rome, where according to a Reuters report “Bannon was helping to craft the curriculum for a leadership course aimed at right-wing Catholic activists.”³ However, as of June the Italian government had revoked the lease for what some called a “gladiator school,” and in October the academy was evicted from the monastery.⁴

Nonetheless, in Washington, CPDC views are embraced by President Donald Trump’s administration, where China’s rise is viewed as an economic and national security threat, and American intelligence agencies have ratcheted up efforts to combat Chinese espionage. And the new battleground is at universities and research institutions.

New front on campuses

Officials from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Council have been dispatched to Ivy League universities to warn administrators to be vigilant against Chinese students in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields, and University of California campuses are also feeling the effect.⁵ Research projects are being stalled because of visas issues, and while protecting intellectual property from Chinese theft is a legitimate concern, it is unclear how the chilling of research collaboration will impact the traditional open environment of academic inquiry and exchanges at universities.

FBI investigations are not limited to STEM fields. Already Americans who have studied in China are being investigated.⁶ Over the past two years the Bureau has questioned at least five US citizens who have studied in

¹ Ana Swanson, “A New Red Scare is Reshaping Washington”, *New York Times*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/20/us/politics/china-red-scare-washington.html>; Committee on the Present Danger: China, <https://presentdangerchina.org/guiding-principles/>

² Ana Swanson, *Ibid.*

³ Silvia Aloisi, “Italy revokes lease for site of Bannon’s right-wing academy”, *Reuters*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-monastery-bannon/italy-revokes-lease-for-site-of-bannons-right-wing-academy-idUSKCN1T235I>

⁴ Chico Harlan, “Italy disrupts Steve Bannon’s plan for right-wing academy in a monastery”, *Washington Post*, May 31, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/italy-disrupts-steve-bannons-plan-for-a-right-wing-academy-in-an-italian-monastery/2019/05/31/0f804838-83d1-11e9-b585-e36b16a531aa_story.html; “Italy evicts Bannon-backed rightwing “boot camp” from monastery”, *The Local (Italy)*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.thelocal.it/20191011/italy-evicts-bannon-backed-far-right-boot-camp-from-monastery>

⁵ Theresa Watanabe, Don Lee, “Trump is cracking down on China. Now UC campuses are paying the price”, *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-07-21/uc-china-trump-trade-visa>

⁶ “Why is the FBI investigating Americans Who Study in China?”, *ChinaFile*, September 13, 2019, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/why-fbi-investigating-americans-who-study-china>



the prestigious Yenching Academy, known as the “Chinese Rhodes Scholarship.”⁷ These incidents fit into a broader pattern of increasing FBI scrutiny over educational exchanges with China, and as some observe in a ChinaFile report, may dissuade young scholars from seeking opportunities to study abroad and opt for the “safer” option of learning about China from a textbook.⁸

The Trump administration portrays the crackdown as necessary to protect the US, with FBI Director Christopher Wray warning that China poses a “whole-of-society-threat.”⁹ But there are growing concerns that this is stoking a new red scare, and Scott Kennedy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies is worried “that some people are going to say, because of this fear, any policy is justifiable,” with Asian-Americans increasingly caught in the middle as anti-war/engagement supporters have been dismissed as apologists or even traitors.¹⁰

Which countermeasure?

Now an increasing number of people in Washington – including many members of the CPDC – view decoupling the two economies as inevitable. But as Jonathan Hillman observed in *The Washington Post* in reference to Bannon’s recent documentary *Claws of the Red Dragon*, casting foreign competition as a struggle between good (ours) and evil (everybody else’s) would actually hurt US competitiveness.¹¹

Hillman added, “The paranoid style dangerously neglects the offense. Rather than considering how the United States should become more competitive, it fixates on defensive measures to undercut foreign competitors.” Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) president L Rafael Reif likewise warned, “If all we do in response to China’s ambition is to try to double-lock all our doors, I believe we will lock ourselves into mediocrity.”¹²

Unfortunately, it seems the double-locking is extending to educational exchanges, with a climate of fear that is ending conversation rather than helping to generate the conversation. At a time when bilateral official channels are breaking down and are imbued with skepticism and hostility, independent scholars with insights on China could be a valuable tool for future negotiations and progress, not a justification for suspicion.

As the ChinaFile report noted, intelligence agencies in democracies indeed have the right to question their citizens over potential dangers to which they may have exposed themselves and their country – especially in academia, where there has been some naiveté in the past regarding certain areas of cooperation.¹³ But dampening academic exchanges at a time of much-needed Sino-US mutual understanding may not be the best counterintelligence method. Rather, universities could partner with intelligence agencies and invest in proper training of students and faculty to raise awareness, and equip them with adequate tools to recognize unwanted intrusions and suspicious interactions to protect themselves.

⁷ Emily Feng, “American Graduates of China’s Yenching Academy Are Being Questioned By The FBI”, *National Public Radio*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/01/746355146/american-graduates-of-chinas-yenching-academy-are-being-questioned-by-the-fbi>; Emily Feng, “FBI Urges Universities to Monitor Some Chinese Students and Scholars In The U.S.”, *National Public Radio*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/28/728659124/fbi-urges-universities-to-monitor-some-chinese-students-and-scholars-in-the-u-s>

⁸ *ChinaFile*, *Ibid*.

⁹ Joel Gehrke, “FBI director: Chinese spies ‘a whole-of-society’ threat to the U.S.”, *Washington Examiner*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/fbi-director-chinese-spies-a-whole-of-society-threat-to-us>;

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/20/us/politics/china-red-scare-washington.html>

¹¹ Jonathan Hillman, “Pretending all Chinese companies are evil schemes will only hurt the U.S. economy”, *Washington Post*, August 11, 2019 https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/pretending-all-chinese-companies-are-evil-schemers-will-only-hurt-the-us-economy/2019/11/08/b0d98798-00dc-11ea-9518-1e76abc088b6_story.html

¹² L. Rafael Reif, “China’s Challenge is America’s Opportunity”, *New York Times*, August 8, 2018, <http://president.mit.edu/speeches-writing/chinas-challenge-americas-opportunity>

¹³ <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/why-fbi-investigating-americans-who-study-china>



As for initiatives such as the CPDC and the Italian monastery intending to raise Judeo-Christian activists to counter the “existential threat” of authoritarian countries, it seems Beijing may be ahead of Bannon and his team.

Not by might nor power

What is little reported in Western media is that China is currently experiencing the largest Christian movement in the world, especially the unregistered underground house churches in a movement called “Back to Jerusalem.” David Aikman, a former Time magazine Beijing bureau chief, first reported this phenomenon in his 2003 book *Jesus in Beijing*.¹⁴ Birthed in the 1900s, it was a vision of Chinese missionaries to spread the Gospel from the east coast of China through the landlocked Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim lands until it reached where Christianity was first born – back to Jerusalem.¹⁵

Though the Communist Party of China is the largest explicitly atheist organization in the world with 85 million official members, this is overshadowed by an estimated 130 million Christians in China. It has grown by an average of 10% a year since 1980, and Fenggang Yang of Purdue University in the US state of Indiana estimates there will be 250 million Christians by 2030, making China’s Christian population the largest in the world. Several million of them are in the CPC.

As such, Bannon’s initiatives to counter China militarily, economically, technologically and politically may be missing the main point of Judeo-Christian value – love. Washington may trust in its horses and chariots and implement full-spectrum warfare against Beijing, but it will not defeat the enemy if hearts and minds do not change – as we have witnessed after 18 years of war in Afghanistan.

In contrast, armed with sacrificial love and a heart for the lost, Chinese Christians have been riding the wave of China’s rise and Silk Roads to reach areas traditionally denied to the US such as Sudan, Iran, North Korea and Syria.¹⁶ Back to Jerusalem teams have already been in these countries for several years, risking their lives and providing humanitarian relief, health and medical services, building infrastructure, serving as interpreters and ministering to persecuted people.

Perhaps instead of demonizing and dehumanizing an entire country and its people, members of CPDC and the gladiator school could remind themselves of the message of Christianity and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

A radical concept in Judeo-Christian value in the midst of a seemingly brutish Hobbesian zero-sum world. Yet precisely the one that changed the heart of Mosab Hassan Yousef, son of Hamas leader Hassan Yousef, who became a Christian and ally of Israel after he was struck by the central tenet “love your enemies.”¹⁷

¹⁴ David Aikman reviewed by Lucian W. Pye, “Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/jesus-beijing-how-christianity-transforming-china-and-changing>

¹⁵ Back to Jerusalem, <https://vimeo.com/39454827>

¹⁶ Back to Jerusalem, “Jesus in Iran”, <https://backtojerusalem.com/product/jesus-in-iran/>

¹⁷ Catherine Elsworth, Carolynne Wheeler, “Mosab Hassan Yousef, son of Hamas leader, becomes a Christian”, *Telegraph*, August 24, 2008, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/2613399/Mosab-Hassan-Yousef-son-of-Hamas-leader-becomes-a-Christian.html>



In this case, the battle for hearts and mind was won “not by might, not by power, but by my spirit” (Zechariah 4:6) of love. And as Washington continues to wield fierce military and economic weapons to try to defeat its enemies, it may be that the Chinese Christians are the ones winning the battle – one heart at a time.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published in *Asia Times* on November 19, 2019.

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