

The Future of China Studies in the U.S.

A ChinaFile Conversation

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The ChinaFile Conversation is a weekly, real-time discussion of China news, from a group of the world's leading China experts.

As an extraordinarily fraught school year begins, the study of China on U.S. campuses (or their new virtual equivalents), as well as China's role in university life more broadly, has recently become a subject of scrutiny and debate. Last week, a group of China-focused political scientists [outlined](#) the “unique challenges” they feel educators now face when teaching about China in an atmosphere colored by Hong Kong's new National Security Law, potential surveillance of online teaching platforms, stepped-up repression of dissent in China, the mass internment and persecution of members of ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, and a growing hostility in U.S.-China relations. Their statement came on the heels of calls for Western universities to [close](#) satellite campuses in China, as well as an [unusual letter](#) from a U.S. Under Secretary of State to university governing boards urging a variety of measures to counteract what he described as the “the malign actions of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]” threatening academic freedom, human dignity, university endowments, and intellectual property. Meanwhile, in China, Peking University last week [issued rules](#) requiring professors to seek permission 15 days in advance to attend international academic webinars (including those held in Hong Kong and Macau). And all of this is occurring against a backdrop of the various changes to study and teaching wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is the future of China studies in the United States given this changing environment? How are recent politics in China and in China's relations with the U.S. likely to alter the mechanics and substance of China studies in the United States? What kinds of changes, if any, should China scholars in the United States consider making in their research and teaching methods? And how might these changes affect the direction of the field as a whole?

—*The Editors*



[Sheena Greitens](#)

America's Universities Need a China Strategy

Two developments raise new challenges for teaching China-related courses: passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL), and the COVID-induced switch to remote teaching.

The NSL potentially criminalizes words/actions regarded by Chinese authorities as supporting or advocating secession, terrorism, subversion, or collusion with foreign countries—regardless of an individual's location or citizenship. Although it's not clear what content might be deemed subversive enough to warrant official attention, the definition is broad enough that most China-focused courses would likely have content meeting that threshold. But so could courses on international security, global history, migration, contentious politics, national identity, conflict resolution, gender studies, and more—meaning that the law touches not just on how universities teach China, but how we teach about the world writ large.

Virtual education augments this in two ways. First, it creates additional legal hurdles for Chinese students who have returned to China and are taking American courses online. They must try to access course content while [complying with](#) Chinese law—making data access and tools like proxy servers an issue. Second, online education may make student behavior in an American classroom visible to authorities in China. If content is accessed by non-participants or recorded and comes to the attention of Chinese authorities, they may then feel pressure to enforce the law.

There are a [number](#) of [strategies](#) instructors can adopt to mitigate risk and protect students' freedoms. Ultimately, however, we must be honest—with ourselves and students—that nothing an individual instructor at an American university can do will completely remove the risk generated by the NSL. Fundamentally, that risk is generated by the People's Republic of China national security law and its extraterritorial scope.

As Chinese law, domestic politics, and foreign/security policy change rapidly, with global impacts, it's imperative that faculty are able to continue their work. Instructors must be able to present as comprehensive and accurate a picture of China as possible, so that citizens and students in the U.S., around the world, and inside China itself can understand the country and the challenges its growing role presents.

The U.S. cannot afford to handicap research on China, or student understanding of it, by truncating course content on the very issues that make China a global strategic challenge. So parts of the approach taken by American universities should *not* change.

At the same time, though, universities must think comprehensively about how to handle the complex issues they face vis-à-vis China. These emerging issues are not going away; universities need to set a strategy to address these challenges long-term.

In a previous era, when a frequent issue was scholars [encountering](#) repression during research, faculty often dealt with China-related challenges without much institutional involvement or support. That needs to change, especially now that student safety is involved.

Universities should discuss elevated risks with faculty whose research and teaching center on China, as well as with students who may be at risk under the new law. They should offer flexibility to address their concerns, and start thinking about what kind of long-term adjustments may be necessary.

But they should not stop there. Today, university engagement with China spans not just research and teaching, but institutional partnerships and donor engagement. Here, many China faculty have expertise that could be helpful: They can identify risks, warn of side effects, and offer solutions that might not be obvious to those less familiar with China.

Domain-specific policies are also necessary. As recent federal investigations have [highlighted](#), STEM fields face higher risks of tech transfer and fraud—whereas in the social sciences, some of these risks are lower and the benefits of interaction higher. To the extent that American national security depends on a clear-eyed understanding of the challenges China presents, continued conversation with Chinese counterparts is both necessary and advantageous for the United States.

Universities should now think carefully and comprehensively about the full range of China-related activities they engage in: partnerships, research, exchanges, fundraising, etc. After taking a full inventory, they should develop a coordinated, proactive strategy grounded in fundamental academic principles such as free inquiry and safety. Only then will they, students, and faculty have a realistic sense of how to navigate the tricky times ahead.