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Being Blacklisted by China, And What Can Be Learned from It

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by James A. Millward
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[Bloomberg](#), and more recently [The Washington Post](#), have run stories about the visa problems of scholars who contributed to *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, a volume edited by Frederick Starr and published by M.E. Sharpe in 2004. The *Bloomberg* piece was exhaustively reported; the reporters who wrote it, Dan Golden and Oliver Staley, conducted interviews with Chinese as well as western participants in the episode, and all in all did a good job with a complicated story.

Inevitably, however, the *Bloomberg* piece creates some misconceptions, and these are as likely to be reinforced as cleared up in news reports that build on it, as the *Washington Post* story of last weekend shows. Now seems the time both to correct the problematic aspects of the *Bloomberg* piece and also to discuss lessons we may take away from the entire episode. There are a couple of key issues involved. Of special importance to scholars of China: are you in danger of being banned for what you write? My answer below will be, "not really." And for universities, grant agencies and other institutions involved in academic exchanges with China, the episode raises the question of what you should do in the face of official Chinese interference in curriculum, research, guest lectures or other academic matters. I will suggest that a strong and collective response, organized by institutions and not left to the affected scholars themselves, is imperative. The reason for such a response is not simply to help individual scholars get visas, but to make the point that academic exchange must be unhampered and reciprocal and to set the right tone for future academic interchange with China.

1. Why were contributors to this book refused visas?

Believe it or not, it was not the content per se of the Starr volume that caused the trouble. Those who have read it, in China and outside, are surprised that it caused such a furor. This volume on Xinjiang doesn't touch directly on the most sensitive issues of human rights or terrorism, for example. Is it different in approach and argument from writing on Xinjiang published in China? Of course. Could it have been translated into Chinese and openly distributed in China? No. But in this it is no different from anything written outside China on such "sensitive" 敏感 issues as contemporary Chinese politics, Taiwan, Tibet, the environment, Falun Gong, the Cultural Revolution or CCP history. We can't know for sure (few if any people are ever told explicitly why a visa is denied), but it seems that the contributors to this volume were refused visas more because of context than content, because of the fact of the book's existence and the manner in which authorities learned of it, rather than what was in the book itself. The following are among the special circumstances that led to the trouble:

•*Politicization of the project:*

Editor Frederick Starr, not a China specialist, contacted the Chinese embassy at the very start (without prior knowledge or consent of the contributors), seeking official Chinese collaboration. I believe this put the work on radar screens it otherwise would not have got on. A better approach would have been to work through Chinese academic contacts, either individual scholars or the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Also possibly contributing to the problem was the fact that meetings associated with the book were held in Washington, D.C. Besides this, there was the unfortunate Chinese rendering of the initial working title, "Xinjiang Project," as *Xinjiang gongcheng* 新疆工程. Unlike "project," a term innocuous enough in English, "*gongcheng*" has political connotations. The more neutral *xiangmu* 项目, or even simply *yanjiu* 研究, would have been preferable and more accurate. The fact that the book was mischaracterized in Chinese as a US government-funded project arises from these and related

circumstances. The book received Luce Foundation funding, and meetings were held at Johns Hopkins SAIS. The only government involvement was that which Starr sought from the Chinese government.

- *9-11 and the "Global War on Terror" frame.*

The book project was conceived and largely drafted before 9-11. But the US war in Afghanistan and opening of bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan raised Chinese fears of US "encirclement." Chinese official rhetoric recast dissent and disturbances in Xinjiang as international terrorism in the "Global War on Terror" mode, and there was much discussion and exaggeration of the role of the East Turkestan Independence Movement. The US then listed ETIM as an international terrorist organization in order to receive a Chinese abstention on the UN resolution against Iraq. All of these events, none of which is dealt with in the Starr volume, served to raise the political temperature regarding all Xinjiang affairs while the book was being revised and edited, and to reinforce the misconception that our book was a US government project.

- *Opportunism of a few Chinese scholars.*

A copy of the manuscript in draft form made its way to security organs in China, and was internally translated and distributed to relevant units "for rebuttal" 反□. Starr provided the draft manuscript (without consulting the contributors) to an unnamed Chinese scholar in China. It is possible that this scholar passed the manuscript on to authorities. We have heard from several separate Chinese sources that one Chinese scholar brought the book to the attention of the security services and denounced it as "separatist," though of course nothing in the book advocates a "separatist" point of view. After the book was formally published in the US, it was translated again by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences in an edition that included material from the draft chapters that had been cut from the final edition, highlighted material in the final version that was not present in the draft, and reprinted, in special typeface, Starr's marginal comments on draft chapters. This edition was published as "secret" with a preface by XJASS researcher Pan Zhiping (as mentioned in the Bloomberg piece). Pan claimed in his preface that the Starr book "provides a theoretical basis for one day taking action to dismember China and separate Xinjiang [from China.]" The translation is less than perfect. For example, where I labeled one subheading "assumption of power by the Chinese Communist Party," referring to Xinjiang in 1949, the translator rendered "assumption of power" as "*duoqu quanli* □取□力"—i.e. as "seizes power." Nevertheless, there is nothing in the text of the book, nor even in its Chinese translation, that remotely suggests we were laying the groundwork for a US intervention. Even Starr's auxiliary "policy paper" (published separately from the book in English, but bundled with it in the Chinese edition) focuses its bullet-pointed recommendations on how to *minimize* the threat of violence and dissent in Xinjiang. One wonders, however, how many political figures in China ever read past the inflammatory preface of the translation.

Ironically enough, the same author who calls the contributors "a hodgepodge of scholars, scholars in preparation, phony scholars, and shameless fabricators of political rumor" also argues in the preface's final pages that engagement with foreign scholars is better than alienating us, on the grounds that such communication helps us understand Xinjiang better. This I would not dispute.

It is the case that Chinese academics can in some cases receive government recognition and funding for their own projects by denouncing US scholarship. This, I think, is partly what happened to us. However, like other contributors, I have been heartened and moved again and again by the opposite phenomenon: Chinese scholars who have supported us not only by issuing invitations, but by directly making the case to authorities that banning us was a bad idea, that our work does not represent a threat to China but is, rather, worth consulting, and that mutually beneficial academic exchanges require reciprocity. With the exception of one or two individuals, then, Chinese colleagues have vocally regretted our banning and maintained close contact with me throughout the time I could not get a visa. It is worth noting that

banning a cohort of foreign Xinjiang scholars had tangible negative effects on our Chinese counterparts as well. The word quickly got around, and over the past few years I have attended several symposia on Xinjiang held outside China, for which it was decided not to invite Han scholars from China, lest they report back and get other conference attendees in trouble. These decisions were not made in a punitive spirit, but in one of self-protection. Such concerns were perhaps excessive, but we have generally been more reticent in our conversations with Chinese scholars about Xinjiang since the blacklisting. While not universal, this regrettable climate has thus resulted in Chinese scholars working on Xinjiang likewise being cut off for the better part of a decade.

2. Resolution of the visa problems

There was something of a breakthrough in the spring of 2010, when a few of us were granted visas. PRC embassy staff members have been noticeably friendlier to me over the past year or so; I have even been invited to cultural and social events held at the embassy.

- *Has the situation been resolved?*

The situation has not, however, been fully resolved. Though some of the contributors have been allowed to return to China, it is only after a process involving an invitation from a Chinese *danwei* and an interview with a Chinese political councilor, usually at the embassy in Washington D.C., that we have been given visas. This is better than not going at all, but it is cumbersome, time-consuming, and occasionally humiliating and frightening. When my plane landed in Beijing last July, I was met *onboard the United Airlines flight* by a uniformed Chinese woman who apparently knew who I was. She took my passport and asked me to follow her; we took a different route from the other passengers and I was ushered into a room labeled "interrogation room" 审问室 while she went off with my passport. Fifteen minutes later, I was photographed and sent on my way. To be fair, everyone was very nice, and I got through more quickly than I would have if I'd had to go through passport control with the masses. But still: we should be able to get tourist visas in an ordinary fashion.

More seriously, some of the contributors have not yet been granted visas, despite recent applications. These recent denials may be because the units that invited them got cold feet and withdrew the invitations, or because there was insufficient time for the lengthy process we now must endure to get a visa. I first contacted my handler at the embassy at the end of April 2011, and received the visa only in late June, after which I bought an expensive ticket to fly in mid-July. (A third group of the contributors have not for various reasons applied for visas or sought to go to China since 2003. It is thus inaccurate to refer to us as the "Xinjiang 13.")

- *Did we have to write [self-criticisms](#) or censor our publications to get visas?*

The Bloomberg story leaves the impression that I received a visa because of a letter I wrote the Chinese ambassador, while other affected scholars who did not write such a letter do not receive visas. This is wrong.

I mentioned to Bloomberg reporter Dan Golden that the National Committee on US-China Relations, in the course of pressing for my inclusion in a delegation headed on a study trip to China, had passed on a request from Chinese Ambassador Zhou Wenzhong that I write a letter explaining the situation behind the book and our failure to get visas. In the fall of 2006, I wrote a two-page letter which simply explained the situation, making many of the same points I make here.

I pointed out that the book posed no threat to China, and pressed the importance of untrammled academic exchange between our two countries. Since we had been accused of being Xinjiang separatists, I also wrote that I did not advocate a separate Uyghur or any other kind of state in Xinjiang. This may have been something they wanted me to say, but since it accurately reflects my views, not to mention the public position of every country internationally and even the stated position of mainstream Uyghur advocacy groups in exile, it

is hardly a self-criticism, confession, or retraction. Except when my own research and evolving thinking has dictated it, I have never changed my views on Xinjiang history as expressed in the two chapters I co-wrote in the Starr volume, or in work before or after that time, nor was I asked to. I did indeed receive a visa in 2007 after this letter and the lobbying of the NCUSCR. But in 2008 and 2009 I was again refused visas. So it wasn't the letter that did it, but rather the successful strategy and unstinting efforts of the NCUSCR—on which, see below.

One of the reasons I believe that peculiar circumstances were more important than content in causing our visa troubles, is that since the Starr volume and during the time I could not receive visas, I subsequently published a book (*Eurasian Crossroads*) and two articles containing material that might be seen as more critical or at least more sensitive than anything I wrote in the Starr book. In *Eurasian Crossroads*, though not in my chapters in the Starr volume, I discussed the latter 20th century, i.e. Xinjiang under the CCP. My short 2006 study, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: a Critical Assessment" (downloadable from the East West Center), directly challenged the PRC narrative that Uyghur disturbances arose from international Islamist terrorist connections and Islamist Uyghur organizations.

I also edited a special edition of *Central Asian Survey* (Dec. 2010) on the July 2009 Urumchi riots. In my introductory article I put forward my own early attempt at a history of these riots, arguing that official Chinese propaganda and restrictions on media contributed to the expansion of tensions after an earlier attack on Uyghurs in a Guangdong factory, and for the widespread panic and violence among Han and Uyghur in Urumchi during and following July 5th, 2009. I heard nothing about these publications from Chinese authorities or colleagues; a few months after the *Central Asian Survey* number came out, I received a visa to return to China for a conference, and subsequently traveled in China for a couple weeks with my family.

- *What worked (and didn't work) in getting past the visa problem?*

Once we were blacklisted, it became bureaucratically difficult to lift the ban—and indeed, we are still on what might be called a gray-list—even after many in Chinese officialdom apparently recognized that it was a bad idea to exclude us. But what made possible the visas some of us have received over the past two years was, I think, a combination of factors. One may have been the transfer in April 2010 of Wang Lequan from his longtime position as Xinjiang Regional First Party Secretary and effective head of the region. Likewise, the Obama administration's dropping of the "Global War on Terror" rubric for US foreign relations, the erosion of the US position in Central Asia, and the winding down of the Afghanistan war no doubt helped change the climate.

A more direct reason was likely the cumulative effect of lobbying by Chinese scholars with access to the Chinese leadership, possibly by Chinese foreign ministry figures, and by a group of prominent US China hands who signed a joint petition and whose representatives met directly with the Chinese ambassador about this issue. (I've been told that the US State Department also repeatedly raised the issue with Chinese interlocutors, but no US official ever spoke with me either to ask about the situation or to tell me of US government efforts on our behalf; a State Department official rejected my initial request for help in 2005.) Such interventions, and time, I believe, allowed a partial break in our visa logjam.

The Bloomberg piece accurately reflects my and other contributors' frustration at the weak responses by our own universities; to the list of universities that come in for criticism, I might add the Fulbright Program (which allowed an American grantee to be refused access to China for no good reason while continuing to fund Chinese grantees' research in the United States). I also wrote to the SSRC and ACLS, hoping for help in organizing a coordinated response. I received notes of consolation, but no tangible help or acknowledgement that there was a broader principle to be defended here.

To be fair, ours was a new situation for many of these institutions, and my co-contributors and I could have raised the issue more aggressively. (For why I, at least, didn't, see below.) I do not want to dwell in the past, cast aspersions, or sound bitter. I don't believe, for example,

that universities were unwilling to stand up for us because of financial considerations per se, as is simplistically suggested by the news reports. Nevertheless, because all along the way I encountered an institutional urge to hush up the visa banning—like it was an awkward social disease and I an embarrassingly afflicted family member—it is worth airing my criticisms frankly now so that if a similar situation arises later, we will have some idea of what to do.

I was a member of the first group selected for the National Committee on US-China Relations' "Public Intellectuals Program," intended to help China scholars of all disciplines learn more about contemporary issues and US-China relations, and to encourage and prepare us to interact with the media. This program involved study trips to Washington and to China. Knowing of my visa troubles, officers of the NCUSCR began pressing contacts in the Chinese Foreign Ministry many months before my scheduled departure on the China tour. They laid out the virtues of free academic exchange in a reasoned way, but were also uncompromising: if Millward was not a member of the delegation to China, the delegation would not go. Their principle in this case, as in earlier ones, was that China cannot veto members of the delegations NCUSCR puts together. This was the strategy that gained me a visa in 2007. It did not put any Chinese colleagues in jeopardy.

My own university helped me in one way: both the university President and the Provost's office wrote letters to accompany my applications for visas. (I received similar help at various points from deans in our School of Foreign Service.) But these letters, like those from university presidents of my fellow contributors, were simply ignored, and after each visa refusal, I could not get Georgetown to press for follow-up dialogue with the embassy. Thinking of the NCUSCR strategy, I asked my university to include me in the semi-annual delegation we send to a joint symposium at the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, an institution with which Georgetown had recently formed a ["cooperative agreement to engage in scholarly exchange."](#) At the very least, I thought, it would be interesting to be denied a visa when invited by the Central Party School, whose president was then and remains Xi Jinping! But I was told that any plan to draw on our Central Party School relationship was "a non-starter."

The Bloomberg piece includes another example of a disappointing Georgetown reaction—or rather, non-reaction—when PRC authorities scuttled a promising Georgetown course exchange with Fudan University. After I applied for a visa to go to Fudan for two weeks of planned co-teaching with my collaborator there, PRC authorities instructed the Fudan waiban to stop the collaboration. I never received a visa, and Georgetown received no explanation.

I also suggested, but in retrospect did not work hard enough to mobilize, a joint response by the affected universities, which included Dartmouth, Johns Hopkins, Miami University of Ohio, Mt. Holyoke, University of Indiana, University of Hawai'i, and ultimately Pomona College and Yale in addition to Georgetown. Whether it would have helped at the start of the visa trouble I can't say; but it would have been the right thing to do to make a strong statement on academic freedom while simultaneously mitigating the universities' own (exaggerated) fears of retaliation by spreading the risk. And of course, if the universities involved had been willing to link our visas in some way with any of their on-going exchanges with China, I believe our visa troubles could have been quickly resolved, especially if the institutions acted collectively.

Georgetown did not embrace my suggestion of a joint multi-university response, and I did not push further. The reasons I did not push harder are worth noting, should academics be denied visas again: first, an individual scholar does not have the time, access or staff resources to organize a multi-university response or engage in on-going dialog with Chinese representatives; second, to someone on a blacklist, it feels self-serving to ask other scholars or institutions to help. A scholar who has been denied a visa, when pushing for a strong response, must ask others to spend time and take some risk for the banned scholar's personal benefit. When an institution responds, however, or better still a group of institutions, they are making the case for the general principle of academic freedom and reciprocal exchange, as well as defending their legitimate "business interest," namely access to China by the people they pay to study China.

3. Lessons from the Xinjiang scholars' visa problems

- *Should Chinese studies scholars be careful about what they write?*

I have recently heard stories of US China-scholars avoiding certain topics, pulling papers from collections, hesitating to have their work translated, and so on, as a result of what happened to my co-contributors and me. As I explained above, however, our experience does not suggest that we were blacklisted specifically for the content of our writing, though of course Xinjiang is one of the most sensitive topics in China. Everyone in the Starr book, regardless of subject, suffered difficulties—including one non-contributor simply mentioned in passing in the introduction. No one of us to my knowledge has censored him- or herself since the visa troubles began (though I am always careful to maintain a fair approach and objective tone.) If anything, we've become more outspoken, yet many of us are now getting visas. I have written about more sensitive matters since after the Starr book came out than I did in it, with no further ill effects. Chinese embassy personnel have as much as told me that they disagreed with the visa refusals. We know how the Starr book got to Chinese authorities' attention, and this suggests that no one in China's security services is tasked with trolling through US academic writing looking for western scholars to ban. And while some Chinese academics are closely associated with the state and do write official reports about our work, the vast majority are not interested in sticking it to US scholars. I suspect that after this episode, moreover, Chinese scholars and scholar-officials will realize that in a globalized world foreign scholars will find out sooner or later what they write or say about us, and that it does not behoove Chinese scholars expected to present and publish in international venues to advance their careers domestically at the expense of foreign colleagues.

Thus my advice to my colleagues outside of China is, speaking purely practically, to go ahead and publish in English in normal academic publications without concern about visas. What you write may be too much for publishers in China, and thus cannot be translated and published there—but those editors will make that calculation. I know of no other example besides the Starr book, with its peculiar circumstances, where Chinese authorities have denied visas to western academics because of what they published in English academic venues. It would be useful to know of other examples, if there are any.

Public comment in mass media outlets and more direct advocacy bears greater risk, as the experience of the few blacklisted scholars not part of the Starr project shows. It requires courage, conviction and even heroism to be an intellectual who publically takes up the most controversial matters, materially rescues a Chinese colleague, or mobilizes opposition to Chinese policies. While such individuals a fortiori deserve robust support from institutions, this is not a calling all academics rise to, and I by no means consider myself in that league. Nevertheless, the examples of Chinese blocking access to scholars simply for their media comments are few—I know of only one example at present, though there may be more.

In any case, while it is ethically incumbent upon scholars to communicate their knowledge and speak the truth as best they can determine it, I believe one may with integrity chose the manner and venue through which one communicates. Expressing oneself second-hand through a reporter can be frustrating and inaccurate as well as hazardous. Even when writing themselves as commentators, scholars seldom receive enough space in mass media outlets to explain complex issues with any nuance. But academics can in good conscience, and should, publish academically. Moreover, foreign scholars can indeed do so with little fear of reprisals, even in the current restrictive climate in China. To put it more strongly, I think we have an obligation—to our Chinese colleagues and friends as well as to our profession—not to be "chilled" by such episodes as the blacklisting of contributors to the Starr volume. While we can at present still fulfill this obligation at little personal risk, the promise of real institutional support is a necessity as we go forward.

- *What should universities do if one of their faculty members faces visa trouble?*

What if an academic does get blacklisted? Universities, please be as upright and courageous as your scholars, who understand China better than administrators do. Do not seek out publicity, necessarily, but understand that the issue will become public eventually if not firmly addressed. Stand up for reciprocity of exchanges and academic freedom—that is what you are about, after all. Work collectively, so as not to be picked off one by one. Lobby hard for support from government, foundations and granting institutions with relations to China, since visa denials affect us all. (How often have I longed, during these years, for an institution like the former Committee on Scholarly Communication with China, which in the late-1970s and 1980s represented all American scholars and institutions in first negotiating and managing reciprocal Sino-US academic exchanges!) Engage in on-going dialogue, not just before a visa application, but after a failed one as well. Leave plenty of time before the travel date for an application—six months to a year—and lobby Chinese interlocutors throughout that time, understanding that Chinese bureaucracy can move slowly. Think of creative ways to link the effected scholar's visa to other exchanges. Hey, Mr. University President! Why not take the blacklisted scholar on your next trip to China? She speaks good Chinese, knows the protocol at banquets, and can show you the best places for shui zhu yu 水煮鱼 and foot massages. Linkage should be designed so as to inconvenience innocent Chinese or foreign scholars as little as possible—though I firmly believe that if a large university called a temporary halt to significant exchanges until its faculty member was again granted visas, the problem would be resolved very quickly indeed. There is a reason why Chinese students and visiting scholars are flocking to US universities: we have a lot to offer.

It's simply not on for one side in academic exchange to arbitrarily pick and choose, like a toddler crying, "you can't play in my sandbox." Nor is it right for government to interfere in academic exchange, or for opportunists to smear colleagues to advance their own careers. Such behavior does no one any good, including our colleagues in China, as they well know. Our own institutions must recognize this as well, and for reasons both of principle and practicality help to protect academic freedom and reciprocity as we forge ever broader academic relations with China. If our universities, foundations and other academic institutions take a prompt, uncompromising, collective stand, not only will visa refusals be overturned more quickly; the issue of scholars being denied visas to China is less likely to come up. However, if institutions don't support their own faculty, but allow visa refusals to occur and go on unchallenged for years, American academics may well gradually be placed in a situation akin to that of our Chinese colleagues: facing the Chinese state on our own, forced to consider the possible personal repercussions of everything we write.