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How China Says No: Thoughts on Being Blacklisted by China

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By Dru C. Gladney

China can say no, as was once declared in the title of the popular 1990s Chinese book. A sovereign country, China has every right to admit or exclude those who seek permission to enter. That it has chosen to exclude a group of scholars who contributed to an edited volume on the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, now known as the "Xinjiang 13," should not and will not elicit much concern in the wider academic world, despite a slew of recent articles in *Bloomberg*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, blog fora like China Beat, and on listservs such as China-pol, etc. It is also interesting that this issue has only now emerged in the popular press, nearly eight years later. What does concern me, as one of the names on the list, is the suggestion that there is anything one can do personally, or even collectively, to be removed from such a list, so that's what I'll focus on here.

[Jim Millward](#) suggests there are certain lessons that can be learned from this experience to help prevent it from happening to someone else. More importantly, he argues that if university and other academic institutions had acted collectively to put pressure on China, our visa troubles "could have been quickly resolved." Although I agree with Jim on almost all of his astute responses to the *Bloomberg* and *Post* articles regarding our situation, I could not disagree more with this particular assertion. I'm also concerned that this idea bears a faint resemblance to certain 19th century Western efforts to "change" China, and even "save" it (from what exactly, I never have been clear). Just as the perfect storm of events that came together to create perhaps the very first "group blacklist" of a wide range of scholars working on a similar topic by *any* nation – there are a plethora of scholars and activists who have been denied entrée to many countries – is highly complex and impossible to explain, so too the ability of the Chinese state to both impose and perhaps then, to reverse, a decision will perhaps never be fully understood. As one high-ranking Chinese scholar-official suggested to me: "It takes a certain amount of power to put one on such a list, but much greater power to take one off it."

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson once famously labeled the sort of haphazard and unpredictable process outlined above "schismogenesis." I suggest that when it comes to a place like China, with 1.3 billion people ruled by a Communist Party under the presumed enlightened guidance of a Chairman and nine-member politburo (all chosen through a selection process that no one has ever explained), the dynamics of schismogenesis are raised to a whole new level of intensity and complexity.

The seemingly arbitrary and idiosyncratic process by which I have been able to obtain three visas to China since the blacklist was put into place in 2004 illustrates this rather unpredictable process. I believe only one other scholar from the group has been able to travel to China more than twice since the list was drawn up, and neither of us have visited Xinjiang (whereas I had travelled to China more than ten times the previous year, and at least six times to Xinjiang in that year alone). It has been noted that it took quite a few years after the Frederick Starr edited volume, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (M.E. Sharpe, 2004), was published that the contributors began to become gradually aware we were all on the same list.

In my case, I was actually carrying around a stamp in my passport that indicated I was denied a visa in Hong Kong in 2006 for over a year, before I realized the meaning of such a stamp. It is a simple red stamp that gives a date and a place (in Chinese), presumably signifying where the denial took place. It was situated nowhere near any of the previous Chinese visas that adorned almost every other page of my passport. Once I discovered the stamp (pointed out to me by one of my fellow contributors who had been unsuccessfully trying to overturn the denial for two years), I immediately "lost" that passport and applied for a new one (a photo of the

stamp can be viewed in [a powerpoint presentation linked to the Bloomberg article](#) on the blacklisting of US scholars).

On my next visa application, I found a new stamp had been surreptitiously placed in the back of the new passport. When I asked the consular clerk why I was denied, I was told: "You should know." None of the Xinjiang 13 have ever been given an explanation, any kind of explanation, regarding why our group was singled out, whereas many of the authors of other works much more critical of China than ours, on a range of topics from Xinjiang, to Tibet, to Taiwan, to human rights, to the treatment of women, and the repression of artists, writers, and activists, continue to travel to China with relative impunity.

Once I realized I could no longer obtain a multiple entry visa to China within an hour of arriving in Hong Kong, as I had done in 2003, I began to speak to my Chinese friends and colleagues about this. Most were equally shocked and dismayed. Almost all of them believed they could help me and that this "inconvenience" would be easily and quickly resolved. To their credit, all of them tried, and many of them have continued to exert great efforts to bring me back. I was particularly dismayed in 2006 that I could not immediately travel to China to attend the funeral of my adopted "dry" Muslim Chinese father and mentor, to whom I dedicated my first book in 1991.

It was only after I inadvertently mentioned this problem to a Chinese acquaintance, a journalist from Shanghai based in the U.S. who had often interviewed me on the "Xinjiang problem," that he offered to help. It turned out that he happened to be an elementary school classmate of Wenzhong Zhou, who was then the Chinese Ambassador to the US. For my first visit, I was told to meet with a consular official in Washington, D.C. After waiting for two hours, I was courteously received and merely asked my opinion regarding the Uyghur, and specifically the businesswoman, Rebiya Kadeer, who was at that time being held in a prison outside of Urumqi. I told him my views as presented in a public lecture at Georgetown University the night before, and that I believed it was in China's interest to release Ms. Kadeer as soon as possible.

I was never asked to write or sign anything. I was asked to not speak to media, nor travel to Xinjiang, and to be "objective" in my assessment of Xinjiang. My interlocutor did not seem well-briefed on the problems in Xinjiang nor familiar with the content of the Starr volume. After I received my visa, I immediately flew that evening to Beijing in order to present a lecture at the prestigious Beijing Forum hosted by Peking University. When I arrived at the Beijing Capitol Airport, I was unexpectedly taken by the visa officer to a small windowless room and forced to sit there for over four hours without recourse to telephone or communication with the outside world, while they presumably checked to see whether my visa was valid.

On a subsequent trip, I was detained for over an hour at the Shanghai airport. On my third trip in 2009, I was detained slightly on my way out of the Beijing airport. I was never at any time given any explanation why my papers were suspect. Prior to every visit I filled out the requisite visa application and attached official letters of invitation from the various universities and institutes who inviting me to speak or meet with them.

While in China, to my knowledge my activities and movements were not monitored in any obvious way. I did meet with my sponsor's associates and spouse on each visit and asked politely to be careful and "objective." I was widely received and warmly welcomed "home" by my many Chinese friends and colleagues, some of whom I had known for nearly 30 years, and who seemed equally mystified and angered by my visa problems. I'll never forget the conflicted emotions I felt when, upon my rather tardy arrival at the Beijing Forum plenary session, which at that moment happened to be in session in the Great Hall of the People, a large group of my Chinese colleagues stood up during the middle of the lecture and cheered when I entered the room.

The schismogenetic mixture of personal relationships, political connections, shifting contexts and questionable contents that led to that moment, my subsequent trips, and later continued visa denials, as well as the placing of my name on such a list, I doubt can ever be fully understood or accounted for. Nor do I believe that this decision can be easily reversed or influenced by any individual or institution. Now that my friend in D.C. has retired and returned to China, and Ambassador Zhou has stepped down, I have no idea if I will be able to travel to China again, and I have been told that some Chinese academies are wary of inviting me.

Western universities and academic institutions can and should play a role in supporting their scholars and promoting the open exchange of different opinions and points of view. That is what defines the essence of academic freedom. I do think that it is only when a wide range of individuals and institutions in China come to the realization that it is through open and regular dialogue with different points of view and a wide range of individuals that we might fully begin to resolve our differences and address our societal problems. Chinese themselves must change China, and realize it is in their best interests to do so. To paraphrase my friend, it takes a certain level of strength for China to say "no," but even more, in my opinion, to say "yes."

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