

## **How Can We Talk about China and against Sinophobia without Feeling Guilty, Apologetic or Defensive?**

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### **Abstract**

*Drawing on our experience as early career researchers who identify as Chinese, we discuss how such an identity has inevitably and unjustifiably come to entrap us in the politics of the great power rivalries of our time. We call for attention to the discrimination against Chinese scholars in the process of academic knowledge production, in particular, in peer review processes.*

**Keywords:** Sinophobia, discrimination, academia, peer review

The COVID pandemic has led to the resurgence of anti-Asian sentiments around the world, adding to the history of Sinophobia that dates back to Sino-Western relations of the colonial era. While ‘orientalism’ has been lambasted for nearly half a century following Edward Said’s (1978) seminal work *Orientalism*, East Asians have remained marginal in global intellectual movements against imperialism, coloniality, and racism.

Against this backdrop, we hope to contextualise, and attempt to address the question of how we can talk about China and against Sinophobia without sounding or feeling guilty, apologetic or defensive. We write from our experiences as early career scholars with the heritage of being Chinese; that is, we identify as Chinese in some form or other, whether in ethnic, cultural, or citizenship terms, or in combination of some or all of the above. It is important to highlight that while we broadly identify as ‘Chinese’, we feel that such an identity has inevitably and unjustifiably come to entrap us in the politics of the great power rivalries of our time, particularly as they play out in the academic realm. We are thus offering this opinion piece as a critique of the Sinophobic identity politics, explicit as well as covert, conscious as well as unconscious, that have become rampant in our times.

Although we acknowledge the inadequacy of the term ‘Chinese’ to refer to such a heterogeneous group, we deploy this term as we feel such an identifier constitutes the basis of today’s increasing Sinophobic and, by extension, anti-Asian discrimination. As we have seen since the outbreak of COVID-19, hatred directed towards Chinese has resulted in racism against all Asians.

In a dangerous trend towards the politicisation of science, national governments are becoming more cautious in employing scientists with multiple identities, especially if they are seen to be serving two governments simultaneously. This is evident, for example, from Chinese scientists being denied visas for short or long-term visits to the US for academic collaboration (Sharma, 2020), from the presumption of guilt of Chinese American scientists (Toomey & Gorski, 2021) and unfounded accusations laid against scholars associated with Confucius Institutes (Schengenvisainfo News, 2020). While such trends are more obvious in the natural

and applied sciences, we have discovered through our communication with fellow researchers that indirect discrimination against Chinese scholars in the social sciences and humanities has become a recurring feature as well.

Discrimination against Chinese scholars in the process of knowledge production is, of course, not new; it has long been part of the institutional racism that denies the value of knowledge produced by non-Western people (Vukovich, 2012). This history of anti-Chinese discrimination is longstanding and dates back to the Enlightenment philosophers. As a good example, Immanuel Kant, who is commonly upheld as the Enlightenment's foremost philosopher, had the following to say about the Chinese: "Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient... Their teacher Confucius teaches in his writings nothing outside a moral doctrine designed for the princes... and offers examples of former Chinese princes... But a concept of virtue and morality never entered the heads of the Chinese... In order to arrive at an idea ... of the good [certain] studies would be required, of which [the Chinese] know nothing." (cited in Ching, 1978: 169).

At best it can be said that this contempt for or disapproval of oriental and other non-Western thought systems is ostensibly based on different criteria of what constitutes valid knowledge. At its worst, it attests to the deep racism and epistemic violence of the European Enlightenment, with talk of 'criteria' merely serving as acceptable 'intellectual' cover for the latter. Kant continues on to state that Confucian morality and philosophy 'are nothing more than a daily mixture of miserable rules that everybody knows already by himself... the entirety of Confucian morals consists of ethical sayings that are intolerable because anyone can rattle them off' (cited in Reihman, 2006: 58).

Today, discrimination against non-Western knowledge production typically occurs in a less overt fashion. Even so, academia has become increasingly hostile. For example, it is not uncommon for Chinese scholars to receive intrusive questions such as "What's your relationship with the Party?" There have also been instances of warnings being issued against works written by Chinese scholars because of their connections with Chinese officials, even when such works have been essential to understanding how Chinese politics work.

As early-career Asian scholars on Chinese affairs, we are particularly affected by the peer review publication process. Implicit discrimination in the publication processes is difficult to detect because the review comments are usually not publicised. It is also difficult to reject as young and early-career scholars have little to gain and too much to lose in protesting against what they feel constitutes implicit discrimination. This is especially the case if the review has already been endorsed by editors since any sort of objection necessarily risks ruining their prospects for publication.

An example of discriminative review feedback starts as follows: "This paper reads as though it is written from a Chinese perspective..." before proceeding to criticise the author's ideas for "resembling Chinese propaganda", being "apologetic or defensive", or "rehabilitating Beijing's position", without giving a convincing argument against the evidence-based paper it is criticising. Cloaked in scholarly peer review, this discrimination reflects the uncritical Enlightenment-based conceit of universalism and its intolerance of non-Western forms of knowledge, as well as the belief that Chinese authors are incapable of thinking independently because of the alleged influence of the Chinese state.

Undeniably, knowledge production in China is heavily influenced by the state, which plays a critical role in guiding research through funding and censorship. However, the conflation of Chinese authors with the Chinese authorities seems to be made too quickly too often, despite the diversities within the imagined community that 'looks' Chinese on paper.

Double-blind review does not prevent reviewers from speculating about the author's national, ethnic, and/or cultural origins through questioning topic selection or the writing style of someone whose first language is not English, and, as a consequence, from making inferences about their intellectual and political orientations.

The post-pandemic world is heavily polarised and divided, and it is a form of intellectual 'laziness' to conflate Chinese people and their beliefs with that of the Chinese authorities (Lee, 2021: 19), to say the least. It makes it easier to dismiss views that people in the West find uncomfortable because of their 'otherness' when they are labelled as 'Chinese propaganda'.

This discrimination is particularly relevant to China Studies. As Daniel F. Vukovich (2012: xii) discusses, writings on China seem to qualify what Edward Said wrote about Orientalism – “not classical, literary types of discourse about an essential other, but a social-scientific, Cold War-inflected writing that is less overtly orientalist and racist and more full of detail. More modernizationist than exoticizing.” Whereas classical orientalism stresses difference from the West, Vukovic's argument is that contemporary sinological orientalism emphasises sameness or equivalence and, therefore, the expectation that China will become more like the West in the course of its modernisation.

At any rate, whether the emphasis is on China's difference or sameness, for over several centuries, the “Western imaginary of China” (Lee, 2018: 3) has remained dominant in knowledge production in the Anglophone sphere. It is evident when we look at the institutions where research centres and major contributors to China Studies are based. Reviewing early generations of scholarship on Chinese politics and political culture, Harding (1984), Perry (1994), and Moody (1994) cite primarily scholars based in the West. Early scholarship in this field is replete with “Western sentimental misinterpretations” (Moody, 1994: 734), the essentialist gaze at the 'otherness' of the Chinese polity as something distinct from Western democracies (Harding, 1984: 298). Perry (1994: 708–709) specifically discusses how concepts originated in the West, such as 'civil society', have been applied in a decontextualised way. A few decades on, China Studies is still dominated by leading institutions and journals based in the West, where established paradigms and the heightened ideological tensions of the past few years have made it harder for young scholars to challenge long-standing misconceptions about China.

It should be clear that this paper does not seek to give justification to those wishing to police academia and to deflect criticism. While we acknowledge that diversities exist within the 'West', we also note the conspicuous emergence of a dominant echo-chamber of anti-China sentiments in Western media—sentiments that reflect the international political concerns of Western elites on the one hand and their need to answer to populist constituencies on the other.

How can we talk about China and against Sinophobia without feeling guilty, apologetic, or defensive? The solution we propose is simply that we return to the demand for empirics and evidence: evidence-based research deserves evidence-based criticisms. Recent experience shared by a number of Chinese researchers calls for much more rigorously substantiated criticisms than those that reject a paper simply because it looks too 'Chinese'. The avoidance of such identity-based politics in the production of knowledge is important for ensuring the credibility of all scholarship.

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