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Sara A. Newland
Smith College, snewland@smith.edu

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Teaching Chinese Politics in the “New Cold War”: A Survey of Faculty

Sara A. Newland

Assistant Professor of Government, Smith College

snewland@smith.edu

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Abstract

How have worsening US-China relations affected faculty teaching Chinese politics in the US? This paper presents results from a 2022 survey of political science faculty. While student interest in Chinese politics remains high, faculty report a range of new challenges arising from increasingly nationalistic sentiments among both Chinese and American students, negative effects of both US and Chinese government policies, and an increase in anti-Asian bias. This article documents faculty experiences teaching Chinese politics, and offers recommendations for addressing common challenges.

1 Introduction

The past decade has been a difficult time to be a scholar of Chinese politics. After Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, opportunities for international collaboration began disappearing, and local interlocutors became increasingly nervous about speaking with foreign researchers. Since 2016, these problems have been compounded by the increasingly tense US-China relationship. Changing attitudes and policies in both countries have hindered those who conduct research on China, work with Chinese collaborators, or recruit Chinese students. The Fulbright program in China and Hong Kong was closed, NIH investigations into foreign influence in US science have caused US-based scientists’ research productivity to decline, and visa restrictions have hindered efforts to recruit Chinese graduate students (Jia et al., 2023). Legal changes in China, including the 2021 Personal Information Protection Law and the 2023 revised Counter-Espionage Law, could be used to target foreign scholars who conduct research in China (Lewis, 2023; McCarthy and Gan, 2023). The COVID-19

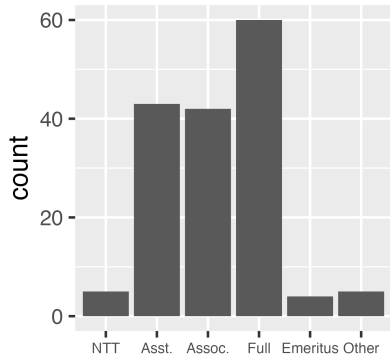
pandemic compounded these challenges in several ways: It caused a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment in the US, and created severe pedagogical challenges for those teaching Chinese politics and other courses containing “sensitive” material that could put students—some now physically located in China—at risk (Gueorguiev et al., 2020).

While individual faculty members often share anecdotes, no systematic data have been collected about the frequency and severity of the problems that these changes have caused for scholars and teachers of Chinese politics. This article uses the results of an original online survey to fill this gap. In Spring 2022, research assistants and I identified 510 faculty members teaching Chinese or East Asian politics courses at four-year colleges and universities in the US by searching the websites and course catalogs of a list of 1050 known .edu websites, cross-checked with all colleges and universities in the *US News and World Report*. We fielded the survey online between June and August 2022, and received 169 responses (a 33 percent response rate). Respondents varied widely (see Figure 1). The survey asked respondents 27 open- and closed-ended questions about themselves, their classroom experiences, and the campus climate as it relates to Chinese politics. Questions asked about respondents’ experiences in the last five years, to focus attention on the period of greatest US-China tensions.¹

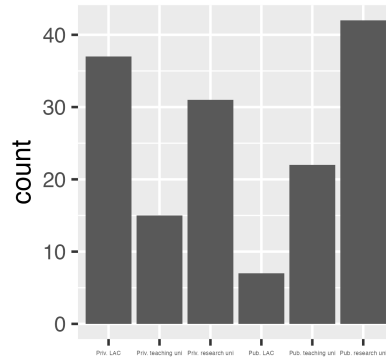
The survey shows that student interest in Chinese politics remains high. Most faculty report that their enrollments have increased or stayed about the same (see Figure 2), a striking contrast to Chinese *language* enrollment declines of 21 percent between 2016 and 2020 (Modern Language Association, 2022). However, faculty report a range of new challenges arising from increasingly nationalistic sentiments among both Chinese and US students, negative effects of both US and Chinese government policies, and an increase in anti-Asian bias. This article documents these challenges using both quantitative evidence from the survey responses and direct quotations from responses to open-ended questions. The quotations included here reflect shared views expressed by multiple respondents.

2 Faculty fear personal consequences for teaching Chinese politics

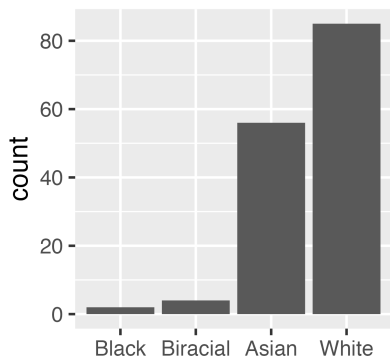
The survey asked faculty about their concern over potential consequences that they might face from teaching Chinese politics, and about any real consequences they had suffered. Three key findings emerge. First, faculty are anxious about personal, career, and family repercussions from teaching Chinese politics; a majority of respondents reported at least one concern (see Figure 3). Second, both the level and type of concerns that faculty report vary by race; a higher share of Asian-heritage respondents than white respondents agreed with most of the response choices, and significantly fewer Asian-heritage respondents reported having no concerns (44% of white faculty reported no concerns, versus 27% of Asian faculty).² Finally, faculty *worry* about



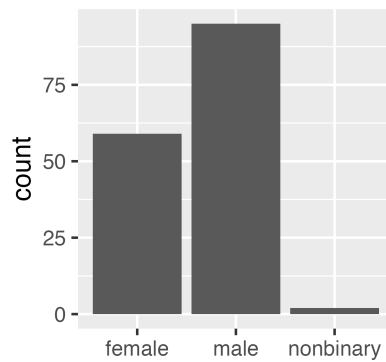
(a) Respondents by rank



(b) Respondents by institutional type



(c) Respondents by race



(d) Respondents by gender

Figure 1: Survey respondents by rank, institutional type, race, and gender

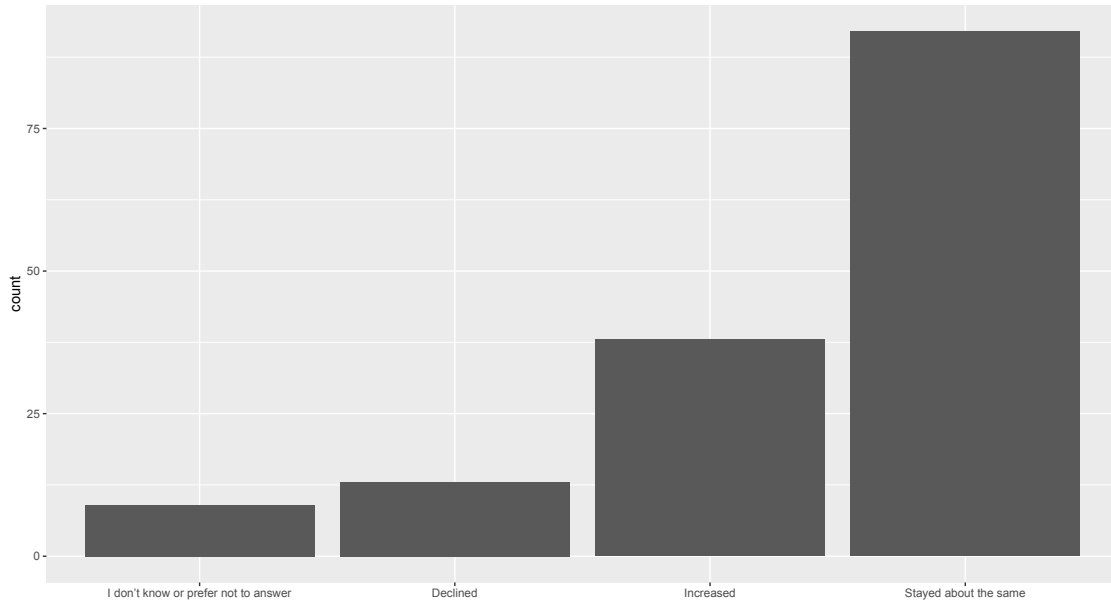


Figure 2: “Over the past five years, how have enrollments in your courses related to Chinese politics changed?”

negative consequences at much higher rates than they actually *experience* negative consequences from teaching Chinese politics, though there are several possible explanations for this disconnect.

Concerns about possible consequences are prevalent and unequally distributed. Respondents’ most common fear is visa denial if they teach about topics that the Chinese government treats as sensitive. Faculty also worry that students might monitor them and report on their course content to PRC consular officials. Although faculty worries were widespread, open-ended responses also indicate that many see students and teaching assistants as more vulnerable than faculty. In particular, respondents worry that Chinese students on US college campus may be surveilled by PRC officials, fellow students, and classmates’ parents (some of whom have government ties), with negative consequences for students who are critical of the Chinese government. Table 1 suggests that this concern is on the minds of students as well.

Although faculty anxieties are high, direct negative experiences are relatively uncommon; of the 144 responses, 90 reported that they had not experienced any personal problems related to their Chinese politics courses in the last five years. Although 50 respondents reported worrying that the content of their Chinese politics class might result in a Chinese visa denial, only two reported that they had actually had difficulty obtaining a visa.³ 47 respondents expressed concern that students might monitor the instructor and report on the content of their class to PRC consular staff or other Chinese government officials, but only four reported that they believed students had actually reported on them or their class. This is consistent with Greitens and Truex

(2019), which shows that most China scholars believe their research to be “sensitive,” even though a minority received a signal from the Chinese government indicating the sensitivity of their research or directly experienced repression.

As Greitens and Truex note in their own work, these results should not be taken as evidence that scholars are irrationally worried. There are several possible explanations for the disjuncture between respondents’ worries and their lived experiences. First, ambiguity is a hallmark of Chinese government repression. Uncertainty encourages subjects to police their own behavior in order to steer well clear of the “red lines,” wherever they may lie (Stern and Hassid, 2012). The fact that a small number of documented incidents has inspired widespread anxiety may be evidence that this strategy is effective, rather than that scholars are misjudging the risks they face.

Second, respondents (and their students) may be preemptively altering their behavior in order to avoid negative consequences. In open-ended questions throughout the survey, respondents were emphatic about the importance of academic freedom and of resisting pressure to alter course content. In response to a closed-ended question about pandemic-related course modifications, only five respondents reported that they had altered their course content out of concern for the safety of students studying remotely from the PRC.⁴ Nonetheless, respondents worry about the incentives for self-censorship, on the part of both faculty and students:

- “The main concern is self-censorship about what I want to cover and how I cover the materials. Sometimes, I might opt for easier or less controversial materials.”
- “Although my answers thus far to the questions indicate little to no concrete problems in the classroom, the reality is that difficult issues certainly cast a shadow over discussion. Students from China are generally (but not always) reluctant to participate in discussion but it’s hard to tell how much this reflects self-censorship as opposed to lack of familiarity with non-lecture based classes.”

3 Faculty are navigating increasingly complex classroom and mentoring dynamics

Although respondents’ worst fears about the possible personal consequences of teaching Chinese politics have mostly not come to pass, faculty report significant changes to the classroom and campus environment that have required new investments of time and emotional labor. The challenges that Chinese students now face in the US significantly impact faculty mentoring. Chinese students at US colleges and universities have encountered a daunting set of challenges in recent years, including rising anti-Asian racism in the US, isolation from friends and family in China as a result of pandemic-related travel restrictions, and anxiety about China’s changing political environment. COVID-19 had a disproportionately negative effect on the mental

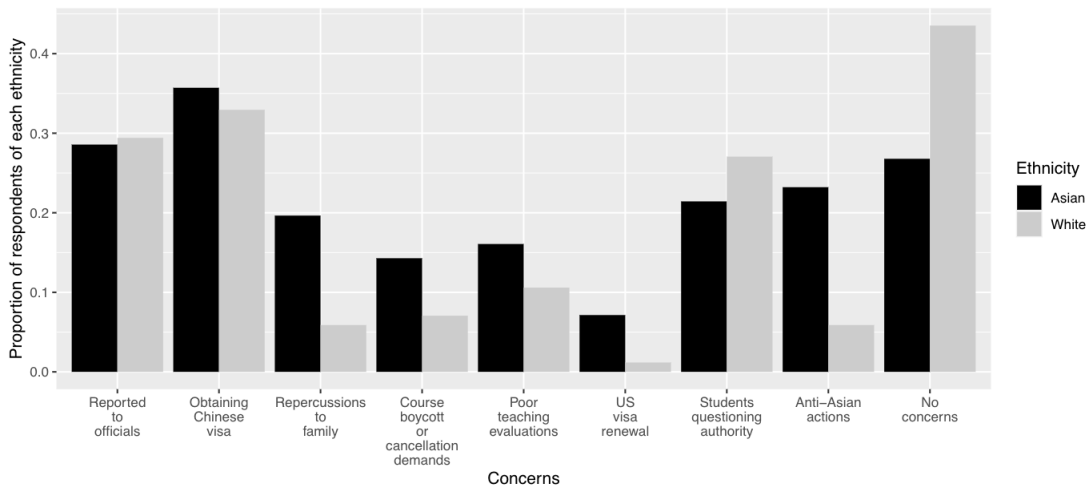


Figure 3: “Which of the following, if any, worry you about teaching Chinese politics today?”

health of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants in the US (Wu et al., 2021). Survey responses reflect these challenges: Nearly twenty percent of respondents report that in the last five years, they have experienced “significant new demands on your time related to mentoring and supporting students as they deal with anxieties and problems related to the US-China relationship”:

- “Several of my PRC-based students appear to have experienced severe anxiety or depression in the recent past, likely due to the combination of increasing anti-China sentiment in the US, inability to easily travel to/from China, and concerns about their own families and futures. I have spent more time discussing such issues with students and I have also worried more about exacerbating such student mental health issues through my own teaching of China and China-related issues.”
- “I have had multiple students from China who are related to persons who have undergone persecution in recent years— this has resulted in a need for more personal and emotional unpacking with these students and help getting counseling support on-campus.”

The second most widely reported challenge is “significant new demands on your time related to resolving student conflicts.” Open-ended responses suggest several sources of conflict. First, rising nationalism and increasing US-China tension mean that both US and Chinese students may be quick to defend their country against perceived slights:

- “I’ve had more highly nationalist Chinese students (almost always men) who question my authority/ expertise. It’s not a major problem, but it’s something new. It feels a bit like trying to teach about the January 6 insurrection to a QAnon adherent.”
- “My institution has a large majority of white, conservative students, and if I contradict whatever the current right-wing American ideology about China is, I’ll definitely hear about it in my evaluations and have to talk about with it with my chair...”

These conflicts often occur over issues that the Chinese government (and many Chinese citizens) perceive as core questions of national sovereignty, such as Chinese government policies in Xinjiang and the 2019 Hong Kong protests—also topics that non-Chinese students often have strong opinions about before they arrive in the classroom. Responses across the survey suggest that they occur both within classrooms and outside them (see Figure 4 and Table 1 for frequency of conflicts on campuses and in respondents’ classrooms, respectively). Examples include the following:

- “[Time spent] mentoring a student who was working with a PRC classmate to understand each other’s views of Xinjiang. Dealing with angry PRC students when Tibetan monks displayed images of the Dalai Lama and information criticizing PRC policy during a visit to campus.”
- “In a course with both mainland and Hong Kong international students, there were heated exchanges in class over tightening mainland Chinese control of Hong Kong. Chinese students have claimed I was biased against China in course evaluations.”
- “I used to have debates about Taiwan in my US-China relations class, but on one occasion the attitude towards Taiwan students who supported independence became so confrontational and uncomfortable, I no longer have debates about Taiwan policy.”

Some faculty report that they rarely teach international students and therefore do not face these challenges. However, rising US-China tensions are altering the Chinese politics classroom across a broad range of campuses. Students now arrive on campus more set in their views of China and the US-China relationship than they were before. As a result, getting students to engage with course material and consider alternate viewpoints has become increasingly challenging: “...students in general are more anti-China, suspicious of the Chinese government, and more hardened in these views than in previous years. They don’t necessarily know more than prior students; it seems to me their opinions are formed outside the classroom (in media, popular discourse, political language of US officials) and it is a bit hardwired.”

4 Problems on Campus

The survey asked respondents about problems they had directly encountered in their Chinese politics courses (Table 1) and ones that had occurred on their campuses (Figure 4) in the past five years. A minority reported no problems in their own Chinese politics classes (60 respondents, 35.5% of the total) or elsewhere on their campus (77 respondents, 45.6% of the total). However, most respondents reported at least one problem, and many reported multiple problems. Two important takeaways emerge from these responses.

First, Sinophobia and Asian hate are common, though not universal, problems. 25 respondents reported Anti-Asian or Sinophobic speech or action by students in their course, and 28 reported being aware of such incidents on their campus. 4 also reported that they had themselves been the targets of Sinophobia or anti-Asian hate speech on campus. Anti-Asian sentiment negatively affects campus experiences for students and faculty, and more effectively addressing these problems should be an urgent priority for university administrators.

Second, though Chinese government “infiltration” of university campuses makes for good clickbait, respondents report greater pressure from US government officials than Chinese ones.⁵ Few respondents reported demands from the Chinese consulate that campus events be cancelled, while many more reported that their university had experienced difficulty securing US visas for Chinese students or that ethnically Chinese researchers had been investigated (either internally or by the FBI) for ties to Chinese collaborators or government-funded research programs (see Table 4). Many respondents commented on the closure of their campus’s Confucius Institute—an unsurprising development given changes in US federal funding to universities that strongly incentivized the closure of these Chinese government-funded centers. However, these closures do not support a straightforward story of cleansing US campuses of malign foreign influence. Instead, one respondent reported that the CI closed “primarily because of concerns that it would create needless US government suspicion,” and another because the CI “was under too much political pressure from the U.S. Congress.” While concern about Confucius Institutes is warranted, these closures have come at a cost to universities and their students, as US government funding has not replaced the resources once provided by the now-defunct CIs. One respondent reported that the administration closed the Confucius Institute, but “have not replaced the funding for language study or our exchange program with our CI partner.”

5 Recommendations

Finally, I asked respondents to provide recommendations for administration and fellow faculty. Their recommendations to administrators fell into several distinct categories. Of the 54 substantive responses to this question, 12 (22 percent) focused on better supporting the Asian- and Asian-heritage student population, both by providing more

	Never	Once	2+ times
Conflicts between students from the US and mainland China	124 (86.7%)	8 (5.6%)	11 (7.7%)
Conflicts between students from mainland China and Hong Kong or Taiwan	117 (81.8%)	18 (12.6%)	8 (5.6%)
Students expressing concern that other students might be monitoring them and reporting on their behavior to PRC officials	110 (76.9%)	18 (12.6%)	15 (10.5%)
Students reporting that they are afraid to participate in class because of fear of offending or being judged by other students	91 (64.1%)	31 (21.8%)	20 (14.1%)
Students reporting fear of enrolling in your class due to possible danger to themselves or their family members if they do so	123 (86.6%)	15 (10.6%)	4 (2.8%)
Anti-Asian or Sinophobic speech or action by students in the course	117 (82.3%)	15 (10.6%)	10 (7%)
Difficulty facilitating conversation between students from the US and students from mainland China	107 (75.4%)	13 (9.2%)	22 (15.5%)

Table 1: Negative classroom experiences in the past five years

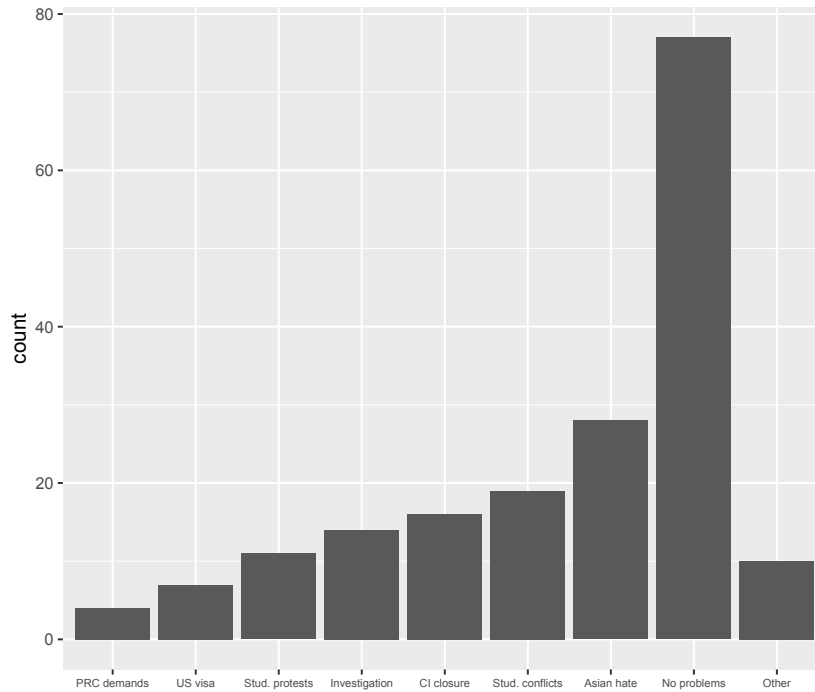


Figure 4: Problems on respondents' campuses in the last five years

concrete mental health and other support and by improving DEI efforts on campus. For instance, respondents noted the importance of ensuring that DEI office staff are fully informed about anti-Asian hate on campus, and that incidents of Sinophobia are taken as seriously as other types of racism.

Twelve respondents also emphasized the importance of better educating university administrators about the effects of a more confrontational US-China relationship on US campuses. While respondents emphasized varying challenges—ranging from racialized investigations of Chinese scientists by an FBI field office to concerns about Chinese Students and Scholars Associations to misunderstandings regarding international research collaboration—there was widespread concern that university administrators are insufficiently attuned to these challenges:

- “Overall, we need to have administrators who know something about the world. But they are, literally all of them, from my chair up on the ladder specialized in the United States.”
- “The university leadership is for the most part oblivious. The Provost for International Affairs is the only exception.”

These concerns were not universal. Some faculty reported effective administrative responses, including legal support for a faculty member targeted by a government investigation; regular briefing of top administrators by China specialists; and meetings convened by the provost for international affairs with administrators, faculty and students to discuss China-related challenges on campus. Nonetheless, they were widely shared, and echoed similar concerns about the lack of institutional support for China scholars discussed in Greitens and Truex (2020). Greater knowledge-sharing—both between faculty, students and administration at a given institution and across different institutions—could yield more effective responses to shared challenges.

To fellow faculty, respondents recommended setting student expectations at the start of the semester in three broad domains: bias, risk, and academic discourse. Throughout the survey, faculty noted the increasingly anti-China attitudes that many students now bring with them to the classroom, and reported incidents of anti-Asian hate on their campuses and in their classrooms. In this context, it may be useful to engage in pedagogical exercises that seek to disrupt implicit bias, and to offer clear guidance in the syllabus about stereotypes and harmful language. Faculty also worry about potential risks to Chinese students who enroll in a Chinese politics course, particularly due to Hong Kong’s 2020 National Security Law, which could potentially be used to punish dissent anywhere in the world (Gueorguiev et al., 2020).⁶ Several respondents recommend including an explicit statement on the syllabus about potential risks to Chinese students of engaging with the course material, as well as clear policies intended to keep the make the classroom a safe space for discussion (adopting Chatham House rules for course discussion, prohibiting students from recording class discussions, etc.). Risk and confidentiality statements must be handled carefully: At

a moment in which some students may already view their Chinese classmates with suspicion, it is essential to avoid priming them to see fellow students as potential spies.⁷ Amplifying the voices of Chinese student groups that express the desire for a free exchange of ideas about China on their campuses, unconstrained by pressure from Chinese government officials, may help other students understand Chinese students are not politically homogenous, and that such policies are important to ensuring that all students feel safe participating in the class.⁸

Finally, faculty recommend articulating clear standards regarding academic freedom and classroom discourse. Constraints on the free exchange of ideas about Chinese politics come from multiple directions. In several widely reported incidents, nationalistic students from the PRC have disrupted campus events that criticize Chinese government policies, and these types of disruptions—some on their own campuses—loom large for some respondents.⁹ But other faculty note that American students and colleagues also sometimes constrain the range of acceptable conversation about Chinese politics in the classroom and outside it: “[I have] concerns about being harassed by students who are ideologically opposed to the course content. Both extremes, pro-China and anti-China, exist within a single course.”

To preempt these problems, some respondents recommend including a clear statement of free speech principles (and consequences for violating them); encouraging students to treat classmates with respect; and requiring them to root their arguments in evidence. Intervening quickly when students fail to meet these standards can prevent larger conflicts from emerging.

A second set of recommendations involve ongoing teaching practices. First, faculty recommend presenting a diversity of perspectives so students confront material that may challenge their own: “My strategy is to be as fact-based and evenhanded as possible. I will speak up for unpopular (often Chinese government) views in order for students to see why Chinese officials or Chinese people might see things differently than they do. Keeping with balance, I try to give translated Chinese leader speeches AND reports from human rights groups.” Simulations with assigned roles can build students’ empathy (Stover, 2005). Students who might otherwise be reticent can participate without needing to reveal personal views. They can also allow students to discuss hot-button issues with a degree of remove and objectivity.

Finally, creating multiple venues for participation can reduce risks and improve classroom discourse. Sustained groupwork that enables small groups of students from different backgrounds to get to know each other may sometimes be more productive than full-class discussion. Perusall, a collaborative reading annotation platform that enables asynchronous discussion of course readings with an option for confidential participation, can enable students to safely participate in discussion of “sensitive” topics. Several respondents emphasized the value of building trust and connections with students, both in the classroom and privately. Some students may feel uncomfortable actively participating in a large class but be interested in sharing their views more privately. Individual connections can help faculty support students who are

facing new challenges as a result of the negative turn in the US-China relationship, and may also help prevent classroom conflicts by giving faculty insight into sources of student frustration before major problems arise.

6 Conclusion

In some ways, the challenges that Chinese politics faculty face today are emblematic of broader debates over DEI, free speech, and the challenges of teaching in a moment of extreme political polarization. However, the context of what some are calling a “new cold war” between the US and China creates additional complications. Faculty worry about career consequences and student backlash if they are either too critical of or too sympathetic to Chinese government policies. And as both US and Chinese policymakers have soured on US-China academic collaboration, the risks for faculty who maintain research and institutional ties to Chinese universities and collaborators have grown.

These challenges are especially severe for pre-tenure faculty who worry about the effects of poor teaching evaluations. Navigating this terrain may also be particularly complicated for Chinese and Chinese-heritage scholars. These scholars are vulnerable to targeting both within the US (e.g., by FBI investigations that have disproportionately targeted Chinese scientists) and in China—for instance, via “relational repression” that uses scholars’ family connections in China as a tool for surveilling and controlling the diaspora (Deng and O’Brien, 2013; Greitens and Truex, 2019). In many cases, they must contend with these challenges alongside rising Sinophobia on campus and in their communities.

Some universities have started to seriously contend with the implications of continued engagement with China and to formulate concrete policies for addressing these challenges. For example, MIT’s detailed action plan may serve as a useful model (MIT China Strategy Group, 2022). By shedding light on the range of obstacles that Chinese politics faculty currently face, this essay seeks to contribute to a conversation within the discipline about shared solutions and best practices for confronting this ongoing challenge.

Notes

¹The survey instrument is available as an online appendix.

²All but 6 of the 147 respondents who reported their ethnic identity described themselves as white or Asian, and the extreme underrepresentation of Black and Latinx scholars within the China field warrants greater discussion. In Figure 3 we present responses from white and Asian faculty; the share of responses from other groups are misleading because the numbers are so small.

³It is possible that this number would have been higher in the absence of the pandemic; because of China’s border closures, very few scholars even applied for a Chinese visa between 2020 and 2022.

⁴Many more altered course *policies*—for instance, by only holding class asynchronously.

⁵Ethan Epstein, “How China Infiltrated U.S. Classrooms,” *Politico*, January 16, 2018.

⁶Evidence now suggests that the NSL has been used primarily to punish dissenters in Hong Kong, rather than to discipline speech abroad. However, the April 2023 arrest of a Hong Kong resident for social media posts she wrote in Japan suggest that faculty fears were not completely unfounded. See William Yang, “Hong Kong student arrested over social media posts in Japan,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 24, 2023.

⁷I am grateful to participants in the 2023 AALAC conference on teaching and research about China for this point.

⁸See, for instance, the statement announcing the creation of the GWU Independent Chinese Student Union, April 25, 2023.

⁹For recent examples, see Josh Moody, “China-Uyghur Conflict Comes to Cornell,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 17, 2022, and Josh Rogin, “Opinion: Another university learns the hard way about Chinese censorship on campus,” *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2022.

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