

## **We All Lose in the U.S.-China Visa Wars**

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I recently flew to China for an academic conference on some of the geopolitical and security issues dividing Washington and Beijing. I had attended the same event two years before and enjoyed the wide-ranging discussion. The conference was to bring together scholars from throughout Asia and beyond.

When I landed, however, my host informed me that the school needed higher approval to host any foreigners, so only domestic academics could participate in the next day's sessions, and my separate talk scheduled for the following day was cancelled.

I wasn't the only person affected, but I had traveled the furthest. I spent my two days playing tourist and chatting informally with some of the other scholars. It was a lost opportunity to consider approaches which might halt the seeming slide toward possible military confrontation. I was later told that the extra level of approval was always required for international participation but had been routinely ignored in practice. No longer, it seemed.

Whatever the genesis of the restriction, it obviously reduced one set of unofficial contacts which have helped draw together the U.S. and People's Republic of China. That comes on top of actions by both governments which threaten to further close the door to academic and other exchanges.

One of the most important, if low key, steps taken by the Obama administration in expanding Sino-American contacts was to initiate the issuance of ten-year visas by both nations. That eased requirements for participating in conferences, especially in response to last minute invitations, and the measure encouraged more routine travel, since the process to acquiring a visa had grown more difficult over time.

Yet Washington has shifted that process in reverse. The New York Times recently reported on the case of Zhu Feng, a well-known and well-traveled specialist in international relations, now teaching at Nanjing University and heading the China Center for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea. As he prepared to board his flight back to the PRC two FBI agents accosted him, demanded his passport, and crossed out his oft-used ten-year visa without explanation.

Some scholars, such as Wang Wen, Director of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies in Beijing, were notified by email that Washington was cancelling their ten-year visa. He told National Public Radio that the U.S. embassy said he could apply for a single-entry visa in the future—if he disclosed his last 15 years of travel. His response: “It was too much personal information to [the] American government, so I rejected having to apply again.” The list of those whose travel privileges have been revoked include academics who have spent months or years studying and/or working in America.

The new U.S. approach likely in part reflects the administration's hostility to all things foreign. If Washington is prepared to reject already-certified Christian refugees fleeing Islamist persecution—as it has—then who will it allow to enter America?

More importantly, reported the Times, the FBI apparently is targeting academics it believes to have contacts with Chinese intelligence. However, that seems to be almost inevitable in an authoritarian dictatorship. Refusing to cooperate with the Chinese government would likely bar advancement to positions which lead people to travel to the U.S.. Said Zhu: "China is, by its nature, a police state. When a national security official comes to my office, I have no way to kick them out." Indeed.

Moreover, those scholars with strong official connections offer an important and unofficial conduit of information between governments. Their attendance in conferences is particularly useful since they help participants grapple with what Chinese policymakers likely are thinking. Obviously, it is important to stop serious espionage, but that seems unlikely from academics attending policy-oriented forums.

Some advocates of a tougher approach complain that the PRC is not as open as America. Of course China is less open, but limiting the entry of Chinese scholars isn't likely to cause Beijing to welcome American critics of PRC policies in Tibet and Xinjiang, for instance. That is no reason for Washington to bar from America foreign academics likely to be among those who best understand and appreciate the U.S.

There obviously is a limit to their influence: they haven't prevented the ongoing crackdown by President Xi Jinping, who is waging a veritable war on liberal values in China.

Nevertheless, today's climate makes sympathetic voices even more important. Argued Susan Shirk of the University of California, San Diego: "These people are among the most sophisticated in how the U.S. works and are some of the strongest advocates of good relations with the United States." She worried that "We are alienating some of America's best friends in China."

That seems to be the case with Wang, who said that he had "often suggested to [his] audience and readers that China should learn from America." After being stripped of his ten-year visa he said "I [will] never write such articles again."

In any case, Beijing has not responded to the U.S. crackdown by opening the visa floodgates. To the contrary, they showed their willingness to play the opposite game, denying a visa to the Hudson Institute's Michael Pillsbury, a China critic. A Chinese official he knows suggested it was in retaliation for the growing list of PRC scholars losing their visas. Pillsbury called for "a ceasefire in this visa war," since "it is in both sides' interest to have scholars on the topic of U.S.-China relations be able to understand what is going on and bring their experience to bear."

He's right.

Beijing's shift back toward suffocating totalitarianism is a great disappointment to China's friends in the U.S. However, it is vital to keep as many channels of communication open as possible. That includes academics and scholars, especially those with the most sophisticated understanding of the bilateral relationship.

Both governments need to act to halt the ongoing deterioration of relations almost across the board. Sometimes difficult disagreements will be inevitable. Violent confrontation is not. Yet as the foundations of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship crumble, conflict will become more possible.

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