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A prominent Chinese dissident who moved to the United States after being fired by Peking University last year warned on Thursday of the dangers of academic exchanges with China, saying Beijing sent spies as visiting scholars.

Xia Yeliang, an economics professor, was expelled from Peking University in October amid a broader crackdown on dissent, having drawn the ire of school officials for blog posts calling for democratic reforms and rule of law in China.

He took up a post at Washington's Cato Institute in February.

At his first public event at the think tank, Xia said that the fact so many high-ranking Chinese officials sent their children to study abroad showed a lack of trust in China's own education system and a desire to "borrow the good fame and name" from prestigious U.S. universities such as Harvard and Stanford.

"I just have the warning for all those top universities in the U.S.A.: you think you've got some benefits through cooperation with China, but who will win in the future? It's hard to tell. How can you say the Cold War has been ended; there's no enemy for the U.S. any more?"

Xia pointed to the build-up of China's navy, including acquisition of new aircraft carriers and asked: "I don't want to exaggerate the situation, but ... why do you want to build that - only for fun?"

He said U.S. colleges must not compromise fundamental values such as freedom of speech in pursuit of money from the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students who come to study in the United States every year.

"American institutions are so lacking in money?" he asked, adding: "If Hitler is here and he tries to make some cooperation with Western universities and give them money, then you would like to accept that cooperation?"

"Some people say you can't compare like that, but some aspects are quite similar," he said.

Xia said he was not advocating cutting off all educational exchanges, but urging caution - especially when it came to visiting Chinese academics.

"Every year among those top universities there are some visiting scholars, and among them I can definitely say there are some people who are actually spies," he said.

"They don't do any research - probably they just do some surveys for their boss."

Thomas Cushman, a sociology professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where 136 faculty members signed a letter to Peking University last year expressing concern about Xia's treatment, said U.S. universities were bringing in billions of dollars a year from an estimated 235,000 Chinese students in the country.

The Wellesley letter was prompted by the fact that the college signed an agreement on student and faculty exchanges with Peking University last June, and Cushman said it was vital that academic freedom was not compromised by such deals.

He expressed concern that the financial allure of such exchanges could lead to pulling of punches and self-censorship when it came to discussing topics deemed sensitive to China on U.S. campuses.

"There is a presence of Chinese politics in American universities now that wasn't there when I started off in academia, and we need to look at it carefully," he said.