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Policing University Partnerships in Authoritarian Countries

By KARIN FISCHER

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Wellesley, Mass. — A year ago, Wellesley College found itself embroiled in a debate about academic freedom in China.

Led by Thomas Cushman, a sociology professor at the college, a group of faculty members rallied support for a Peking University professor who said he was under fire for his political views. Mr. Cushman and others argued that the case raised questions about Wellesley's work in China and challenged the administration to reconsider a nascent partnership with the university.

A year later, Wellesley, a liberal-arts college, still works with Peking University but has overhauled its process for setting up international collaborations, giving faculty members a bigger say. And although the controversy has died down at Wellesley, Mr. Cushman wants to take his campaign beyond the campus.

He is working with the Chinese professor, Xia Yeliang, who is now a visiting fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, to press for a broader conversation about the agreements struck among American colleges and those in China and other authoritarian countries.

Colleges need to examine the consequences of these relationships, they argue, and American faculty members must play a more prominent role in setting the terms for overseas partnerships, particularly in places with differing notions of academic freedom.

Mr. Xia said: "What's the purpose of education? What's the purpose of international exchange? You have to keep that principle in mind."

Otherwise, he warned, international partners may "just want to borrow your good name and ruin that name."

With its gracious buildings and verdant lawns, Wellesley, a 140-year-old women's college, seems the picture of serenity. But the atmosphere last fall there was anything but. Over several contentious months of debate, Mr. Cushman and his allies were branded as cultural imperialists seeking to impose Western academic principles. And he was not shy about playing hardball, suggesting that those who wanted to continue the relationship with Peking University had an agenda and even accusing one, a Chinese-born mathematics professor, of being an agent of the Communist Party.

That a relatively modest partnership led to such acrimony highlights what a sensitive issue international projects can become. After all, Peking and Wellesley have no plans to set up a joint campus or joint degree programs, just exchange a handful of students and scholars.

In fact, the debate was really three: one about Mr. Xia, another about Wellesley's work with Peking and in China, and a third about professors' part in major initiatives at the college, including its global strategy.

The uproar began when professors at Wellesley learned that Mr. Xia, an economist and human-rights campaigner, said he might be fired by Peking. Mr. Cushman and others drafted a petition, eventually signed by nearly 40 percent of the faculty, protesting Mr. Xia's possible dismissal and calling on Wellesley to rethink the partnership if he lost his job.

Mr. Xia was indeed dismissed, a year ago, and maintains that the firing was retribution for his criticism of the Chinese government, including his decision to sign Charter 08, an appeal for democracy and human rights in China. Peking administrators have disputed that, saying his contract was terminated because he was a poor teacher.

The contested narrative around Mr. Xia's firing led several petition signers at Wellesley to withdraw their support.

Philip L. Kohl, a professor of anthropology, was one who came to see the Xia case as less than clear-cut. In the end, he said, he felt that there was a greater chance of effecting change in Chinese higher education by continuing the partnership, rather than dissolving it. "I think positive results are better achieved by being engaged than by condemning from afar," he said.

Mr. Cushman said he was not out to kill the partnership, pointing out that the Wellesley petition never called for severing connections, only reconsidering the relationship.

Early in his academic career, he studied dissidents in the twilight of the Soviet Union, and he brings a Cold Warrior's skepticism to working with China.

"You can say that exchanges are a good idea and that we need to be careful," Mr. Cushman said. "I don't know why you can't do both. 'Make friends with the wolf but keep one hand on the ax,' as the Russians say."

Others on campus viewed Mr. Cushman's critique as too black-and-white.

"I understand my colleagues' desire to help the guy," Charles Bu, the professor accused of being a Communist agent, said of Mr. Xia. (Mr. Bu has denied being a spy.) "But they don't understand the culture. The way they went about it was just shortsighted."

The heart of the critique by Mr. Cushman and Mr. Xia is that working with universities in authoritarian countries like China could limit academic freedom on American college campuses.

Will topics taboo in China, like Tibetan independence and democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, be similarly off-limits at Wellesley, at least in the context of the partnership with Peking?

American colleges have not done enough, Mr. Cushman argued, to ensure that core academic values are part of international partnerships. Instead of pressing for these principles, he said American colleges had too often adopted a cautious approach.

"We're being deferential to realpolitik concerns," Mr. Cushman said. "We're being more diplomats than critical intellectuals."

The agreement signed in June 2013 by the presidents of Peking and Wellesley, a copy of which was obtained by The Chronicle, makes no mention of academic freedom, characterizing the partnership only in the broadest of terms. That will not be the case with new international agreements. A special panel, named in the wake of the Xia case and led by Wellesley's provost, Andrew Shennan, has drafted a template for future collaborations with foreign universities that includes provisions on academic freedom.

In addition, all institutional partnerships will now have to be vetted by a faculty international-studies committee, though relationships between individual researchers or at the department level won't be subject to such review.

Mr. Shennan called the past year's discussion constructive and said faculty members were right to insist that they be "central actors" in overseas projects, like the one with Peking, that have an academic component.

While Mr. Cushman, too, is satisfied with the outcome, he and Mr. Xia said they believed that it was not sufficient for such discussions to happen at Wellesley alone. After all, similar debates over international linkages and professors' roles have convulsed other institutions, including Duke and New York and Yale universities.

Indeed, such concerns are not limited to American higher education. This summer, Mr. Cushman was asked to give a speech on the subject at the British Parliament, sponsored by the Henry Jackson Society, a think tank in London. But Rupert Sutton, the author of a report on the influence of foreign sources of revenue on British universities released by the society, said

institutions' decisions to forge connections with and accept funds from abroad were rarely discussed. Instead, the debates that occurred tended to be one-off, on a campus-by-campus basis, and "really only come up when there's something really big and controversial," Mr. Sutton said.

Mr. Xia and Mr. Cushman would like to encourage a broader and more sustained conversation about — and scrutiny of — colleges' overseas activities. They hope to organize a scholarly conference that would bring together academics to examine the implications of overseas partnerships from a variety of perspectives, including economic, political, and anthropological. Mr. Xia is also a visiting fellow at the Freedom Project, a Wellesley academic endeavor that explores the concept of freedom in different societies and is directed by Mr. Cushman. As a sociologist, Mr. Cushman is interested in questions like how international academic exchanges may influence the transmission of knowledge and whether they affect the policies and institutional processes of colleges themselves, a concept known as isomorphism.

Eventually, they want to publish an edited volume. Plans for the meeting and the volume, however, have yet to move from conceptual to concrete. Given Mr. Cushman's tough view of China and the lingering questions about Mr. Xia's firing, however, an open question is whether the pair can rally others to rejuvenate a long-simmering debate.

Mr. Cushman is confident that they will. In the end, he said, he hopes that when American college administrators "think about doing business with a sultan or a shah or a premier or a czar or the autocrat du jour, they ask some questions about what they gain, what they lose, what the risks and benefits are."