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Chinese Dissident Lands at Cato Institute With a Caution to Colleges

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#), FEB. 9, 2014

A Chinese dissident, dismissed from his job as an economics professor at Peking University after clashes with his government over liberalization, will become a visiting fellow at the [Cato Institute](#) on Monday, he said.

In an interview on Friday, the dissident, Xia Yeliang, warned that American universities should be careful about partnerships with Chinese universities. “They use the reputations of Western universities to cover their own scandals,” he said.

“Perhaps Western universities do not realize that Chinese universities do not have the basic value of academic freedom, and try to use Western universities to cover their bad side,” Professor Xia added.

He said he had been told that the foreign support he received — including a September letter from professors at Wellesley College — hurt his chances of keeping his job at Peking University.

Interviewed at the New Jersey home of a childhood friend, Professor Xia, 54, said he would miss direct engagement in the struggle to change China, but hoped his writing and research would continue to have an impact. While his wife will remain an accountant at Peking University for the time being, he said, he is unlikely to return to China until the political situation changes.

Professor Xia found himself in the sights of the Chinese authorities six years ago when he was a drafter of Charter 08, a petition demanding sweeping political changes in China, including individual rights and an end to one-party rule.

“If you want institutional change, someone must be willing to stand out to make a contribution, even sacrifice,” said Professor Xia, who at one point was placed under house arrest for three days and then under the 24-hour watch of police officers.

The main author of Charter 08, Liu Xiaobo, was convicted of trying to overthrow the government and sentenced in 2009 to 11 years in prison. In 2010, he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his “long and nonviolent struggle for fundamental human rights in China.”

The political labels of Professor Xia and the Cato Institute, in Washington, are strikingly different. Professor Xia got into trouble in China for being too liberal, while the institute is

known as libertarian or — less to its liking — ultraconservative. But the professor and Cato officials say they have the same focus.

“Here’s a guy who promotes market reforms, human rights and limited constitutional democracy, and we share those values,” said Ian Vásquez, director of Cato’s [Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity](#). “If he can use the Cato platform to call attention to the most urgent reforms, both economic and social, in China, that would be a lot.”

Peking University allowed Professor Xia to leave China to become a visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, starting in July 2011 and then at Stanford the next year.

But in March 2012, as Professor Xia’s year at U.C.L.A. was nearing its end, Wen Jiabao, who was prime minister of China, gave a speech calling for reform of the Communist Party’s leadership and the country. Professor Xia took to social media, including his blog, to urge gatherings around China to press for change.

His actions angered the Chinese authorities, who ordered him back to China in January 2013. He was told in June that there would be a vote on his employment at the university, and in October he was dismissed.

Peking University has partnerships with many American universities, and as word spread that he would most likely be fired, Professor Xia became a symbol of Chinese scholars’ limited academic freedom.

At Wellesley, which had recently signed a partnership with Peking University, more than 130 professors declared in an open letter in September that they would seek to have the agreement reconsidered if Professor Xia was fired for political reasons. After the dismissal, Peking University said the reason was poor teaching.

Professor Xia said the dean of economics, Sun Qixiang, had told him that the foreign support hurt him. “She said, ‘You were exploited by them,’ ” he said. “She formally told me, ‘You think we all have to listen to American professors, but you’re wrong. If they didn’t do this, you wouldn’t be in this position.’ ”

Wellesley’s partnership with Peking University is continuing, and Professor Xia will be a visiting associate at Wellesley’s Freedom Project, headed by Thomas Cushman, who organized the letter.

Professor Cushman said many of his colleagues did not understand the centrality of Communist Party officials in China’s universities, and were too quick to believe that Professor Xia had been fired for bad teaching.

“I can’t say we’re headed toward another Tiananmen Square, but there’s definitely a crackdown on dissidents,” Professor Cushman said.

While both Professors Xia and Cushman stressed that American universities should be careful, Professor Xia said he supported Wellesley's ties with Peking University. "I think Wellesley did the right thing," he said. "Ever since Charter 08, I knew I would be fired one day, but I never realized they would use an excuse like poor teaching."

Professor Xia was targeted in three editorials in The Global Times, a party newspaper, along the lines of "Peking University Fires Bad Teacher," but he said most people in China would not take them at face value.

"How would firing a bad teacher be so important for three editorials?" he said. "No one would know exactly what happened, but they would see that the atmosphere is tightening."

Last month, another dissident, Xu Zhiyong, was [sentenced to four years in prison](#). In the summer, Professor Xia said, he received an email from his department's new party secretary criticizing his support for Mr. Xu and asking what he had been thinking when he signed a petition on his behalf.

Some relatives have urged Professor Xia to abandon his activism. When news of his situation reached his parents, he said, his mother called in tears.

"She said, 'Can't you go to the leaders and tell them you were wrong?' " he said. "I told her, 'Mom, you know your son better than that.' "