

The Constructive Role of Scholarship in the China-US Relationship

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The Constructive Role of Scholarship in the China-US Relationship

Jian Junbo

Scholars of international relations occupy a unique position, as their work can be used to sway public opinion or influence the ideas of foreign policy decision-makers. Many also serve directly as advisors to political decision-makers or involve themselves in diplomacy through Track II dialogues, a complement to formal diplomacy.¹ Ideally, academic research should be grounded in the exploration of truth and objectivity and not serve the interests of specific political groups. However, the position of international relations scholars between the academic and policy worlds often complicates the objectivity, neutrality, and independence of their academic research. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the study of China-US relations. It is therefore worth assessing the state of academic exchanges and how the role of scholars can influence the bilateral relationship, and to consider how scholars might work to improve the fraught ties between the two countries.

What are the challenges currently facing China-US academic exchanges?

Drastic changes in the international environment have negatively impacted academic exchanges between China and the United States. Currently, there are four main challenges: official restrictions on scholarly interaction, the influence of nationalism on research, the ideological colour of exchanges, and the long-time failure to fully make use of the Chinese language in China-US academic exchanges.

Interaction between scholars has been restricted due to the domestic policies of both China and the United States. These restrictions have narrowed channels of communication and deteriorated the atmosphere of normal exchanges. Beginning with the Trump administration, US authorities have investigated some US scholars engaged in research at Chinese academic institutions and increased scrutiny of Chinese scholars working in the United States, including those involved in joint research initiatives and exchanges with US scholars.² This has all had a chilling effect on bilateral academic exchanges. According to Kei Koizumi, a former senior adviser on science policy at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, “some US scientists now think that

1 Otto Federico von Feigenblatt, “Flexible Diplomacy: Scholars as Key Players in Track II Diplomacy”, *Espirales Revista Multidisciplinaria de investigación*, 2019, 3, 28, 32-45.

2 Emily Feng, “China tightens restrictions and bars scholars from international conferences”, *NPR*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/30/1089631713/china-tightens-restrictions-and-bars-scholars-from-international-conferences>.

collaborating with researchers in China is not worth the risk of being investigated, and [...] some Chinese scientists probably feel the same.”³ In China, regular mutual visits of scholars between both countries were blocked after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic due to China’s strict zero-COVID policy. The pandemic and disputes and contradictions at the political level between China and the United States have thus affected bilateral academic exchanges, making them increasingly rare, and communication increasingly frustrating and unpredictable, for the past five years.

Scholars are also increasingly affected by nationalistic ideas, undermining their capacity for objective and rational analysis. Differing views are both normal and desirable in academic research. However, when scholars approach international relations with nationalistic biases, their research loses the necessary objectivity and neutrality.



Peking University campus (iStock/bingdian)

3 Andrew Silver, “Scientists in China say US government crackdown is harming collaborations”, *Nature*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02015-y>.

The saying “Science has no borders, but scientists have their motherland” (科学无国界 · 科学家有祖国) is well known in Chinese academia.⁴ Chinese scholars are generally required to remain patriotic. Of course, there is no problem with people loving their motherland, but for a scholar, if they lack the requisite skills to navigate the relationship between academic neutrality and patriotism, the objectivity of their research can be affected by nationalistic ideas.

US academic tradition prides itself on its objectivity, neutrality, and rationality. But from a macro-perspective, it has served the national interests of the United States, and done so with considerable success. International relations theory is a case in point. Soft power theory (Joseph Nye), new empire theory (Walter LaFeber), and hegemonic stability theory (Robert Keohane) were all conceived by US international relations scholars and defend US hegemony by legitimising it. In mainstream US media, articles on how to “beat”, “counter” or “compete with” China are common.⁵

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with scholars serving their country as citizens, but they must still adhere to the principles of objectivity and neutrality necessary for academic research. More importantly, scholars must break free from the shackles of nationalism, which can lead them astray from the basic norms of their profession. When academia in both China and the United States is eroded by nationalistic ideas, the basis for academic exchanges between the two countries gradually becomes undermined as well.

Furthermore, the polarisation of public debate has made it difficult for scholars to freely discuss issues. Whether in China or in the United States, scholars are not fully free to discuss all topics or put forward every perspective. In the United States, the stigmatisation of Chinese policies or actions with labels like “totalitarianism”, “wolf warrior diplomacy”, “debt trap”, “aggression”, “human rights abuses”, “genocide”, and “threat” has led more and more specialists to stay silent on China to avoid public criticism. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that think tanks or experts who try to deal with China affairs in a pragmatic and flexible manner have been “marginalised” in the United States,⁶ yet it seems that US experts who are relatively neutral towards China now publish fewer commentaries

4 Sun Yahui, “Science has no borders, scientists have their motherland” (科学无国界 科学家有祖国), *Xinhuanet*, 9 June 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-06/09/c_1127544365.htm.

5 See for example: Richard Fontaine, “Taking On China and Russia: To Compete, the United States Will Have to Pick Its Battles”, *Foreign Affairs*, 18 November 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/taking-china-and-russia>; H.R. McMaster and Richard Scheinmann, “U.S. Restraint Has Created an Unstable and Dangerous World: Decades of ignoring the menaces posed by Russia and China has led the West to a precipice”, *Foreign Policy*, 17 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/17/us-military-strategy-geopolitics-restraint-russia-china-ukraine-war/>; Richard D’Aveni, “The U.S. Must Learn From China’s State Capitalism to Beat It”, *The Atlantic*, 6 November 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/11/the-us-must-learn-from-chinas-state-capitalism-to-beat-it/264552/>.

6 Li Haidong, “America’s ‘China expert’ has become a huge irony”, *Global Times*, 2 August 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1272092.shtml>.

on bilateral relations in influential media. Conversely, those who maintain a hawkish attitude towards China seem to be producing more output.

Similarly in China, scholars are reluctant to discuss specific domestic issues that the United States wants to engage in because they fear criticism by Chinese nationalists. At the same time, they worry that if they express concerns, these issues may cause unnecessary disputes or misunderstandings over China's official policies. Scholars on both sides have thus been captured by what scholar Lance Gore has called a form of "political correctness" that is shaped by mainstream public opinion, and where the measure of one's correctness is the degree of hawkishness one holds toward the other side. Such an attitude not only prevents honest scholars from conducting objective and in-depth independent research, but also encourages less scrupulous academics to cater to negative public sentiments or to specific policymakers, a course of action that can raise their professional profile and prove financially lucrative. Gore has lamented how "anti-China" and "anti-America" have somehow become politically correct positions in each country, leading many scholars to self-censor their academic activities to avoid trouble.⁷

The shortage of language skills is another long-term hindrance to normal academic exchanges between China and the United States. The problem seems to be more serious on the US side, where an increasing number of scholars of China-related issues do not have a good grasp of the Chinese language. This unfortunate development stands in stark contrast to traditional US sinologists such as John King Fairbank, who had profound linguistic knowledge and could even read and understand complex texts in classical Chinese. In a sense, sinology has been eclipsed by "China studies." With China's growing influence around the globe, US experts focus more on its contemporary politics, society, and foreign policy than its language, history, and traditional culture. Although there has been a rapid development and diversification of China studies in the United States, the lack of language skills will prevent the US academic community from accessing Chinese sources directly, risking the loss of important nuances in translation. For example, the United States has greatly reduced the number of Confucius Institutes within its borders, inhibiting the cultivation of Chinese language talent. Fortunately, some US organisations like the National Bureau for Asian Research are trying to provide language study opportunities.⁸

Of course, none of the above is meant to imply that Chinese scholars of the United States – or Chinese international relations researchers in general – do not have language issues of their own. Overall, language remains a weakness within the

7 Lance Gore, "The curse of political correctness in China and the US", *Think China*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/curse-political-correctness-china-and-us>.

8 National Bureau of Asian Research, "Chinese Language Fellowship Program", 2019, https://iclp.ntu.edu.tw/tw/upload/download_files/aeabaf3d92216d7c4ba03b972a2c9e5a.pdf.

area studies departments of Chinese universities, although most scholars involved in American studies have at least mastered English. But the main problem for China's American studies scholars is that the exchange of academic publications and information between the two countries is relatively limited. Chinese scholars are not as well-informed on US issues as they should be, partly because few books and articles on the United States are translated into Chinese. Some scholars are also inclined to rely on the limited amount of translated or secondary materials, partly because Google, one of the most efficient search engines for conducting academic research, is unavailable in China. Moreover, although many Chinese university libraries have subscribed to international academic databases, the numbers of both accessible databases and universities that subscribe to them are too low. Another problem is that many Chinese scholars do not conduct field research in the United States. Which can be attributed to Chinese research practices: when the area studies discipline was introduced in the 1980s there were few funds available for field research. Although funds are more readily available now, the old research practices linger. In sum, the overall level of American studies in China is low, but unlike the situation of China studies in the United States, this has relatively little to do with language proficiency, and more to do with a lack of access to information and research practices.⁹



iStock/ BrianAJackson

9 Ma Jun, "Our American studies are too weak: Chinese scholars warn of knowledge gap with US peers", *South Morning China Post*, 23 May 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3134371/our-american-studies-are-too-weak-chinese-scholars-warn>.

How to restore the vitality of China-US academic exchanges?

It is self-evident that more communication between scholars will be conducive to improving China-US relations. Even if scholars disagree, dialogue still provides a chance for communication and sharing of opinions, and can help scholars identify where misunderstandings occur, and allow them to bring that insight to their own academic communities. For these reasons, Chinese and US scholars must reach some consensus on how to resume normal academic exchanges. Reaching consensus entails abandoning narrow nationalistic ideas, maintaining a neutral and objective stance, and maintaining a high degree of rigor in their respective fact-finding efforts. However, given the poor political bilateral relationship, it is very difficult for scholars to completely give up nationalistic ideas and rid themselves of political correctness because, as individual academics, they must also survive in their professional environments. However, there are a few things that those taking part in China-US academic exchanges can do to improve the quality of those exchanges.

Firstly, scholars should communicate with each other based on principles of conflict resolution. If scholars from either side believe that conflict can be avoided, they could work towards promoting peace between China and the United States. They should be focusing on mutual reconciliation rather than intentionally exacerbating bilateral tensions by catering to domestic upsurges of nationalism in order to boost their own personal reputations or to obtain funding. For example, scholars from both countries should not focus on opposing stances on issues or antagonistic policies, nor on discussing how one country should beat, compete with, or counter the other. Scholars should instead focus on how to ease tensions and maintain the stability of the relationship.

If the majority of scholars follows this advice, their academic research could instead be used by Chinese and US foreign policy makers to resolve disputes. Joint research, authored by both US and Chinese scholars, could contribute to an atmosphere that is conducive to reconciliation.

Secondly, academic exchanges should seek common ground while reserving differences when they cannot be eliminated, with the main purpose of reaching consensus. Obviously, China and the United States have serious differences on many issues at the strategic level, but continued emphasis on them will only lead to more differences on other levels. Therefore, if academia is to play a role in promoting reconciliation between the two sides, exchanges should focus on eliminating rather than magnifying differences. One might argue that directly facing a contradiction is the first step to resolving it. While this sentiment might be correct in principle, if there are so many contradictions that facing them directly only leads to further contradictions, then it is better to first ignore them entirely and start from seeking consensus on other issues to promote improved relations. In other words, even if the time is not right for resolving conflicts, there is still a chance to maintain stability.

For instance, scholars from the two sides are unlikely to reach significant consensus in resolving their differences on issues related to Taiwan or the South China Sea, but they can conduct joint studies or hold joint international conferences to discuss the resolution of bilateral problems which are easier to resolve, such as lifting travel restrictions or resolving investment issues, or more complicated issues where there is a clear common interest, such as combatting climate change or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The method of “seeking common ground while reserving differences” adopted in academic exchanges may provide some inspiration for the establishment of mutual political trust between the two countries. China and the United States remain indispensable partners in solving many global problems and must help each other in solving their own internal economic difficulties. When scholars focus on common interests and seek consensus on relevant issues, even a weak consensus will create a cooperative atmosphere that transcends the sensitivity of conflict. Mutual trust between the two countries’ academics can gradually transfer to their respective societies and governments, thus contributing to the improvement of bilateral relations.

Thirdly, it is necessary that more scholars in the Asia-Pacific engage in academic exchanges. The improvement of China-US relations matters for the peace and security of the entire Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, regional scholars should not stand idly by but participate actively in academic exchanges about China-US relations and should avoid expressing biased views on China-US relations and regional affairs. Perhaps to some extent, regional scholars do not discuss the bilateral relationship because they fear it would stimulate more disputes between China and the United States. However, if more regional scholars were to actively participate in academic exchanges this would be beneficial for the promotion of mutual understanding between China, the United States, and the region. It might also contribute to resolving conflicts between China and the United States, particularly as the regional political situation becomes more complicated and dangerous. As scholars from third-party countries, they have not just the ability but also the responsibility to express their views on regional security and prosperity.

However, as with academic exchanges between China and the United States, scholars from third-party countries in the region should also aim to promote consensus and regional peace. In public academic forums and in the media, they should not dredge up disputes over historical and sovereignty issues but should make suggestions on potential regional cooperation. In short, Asia-Pacific scholars can seek consensus among countries, find common challenges, and seek common solutions and ways of cooperation, upon which a sense of “community” or “family” could emerge. This all would benefit the process of Asia-Pacific regional integration and improve overall regional relations.



Shanghai, China - 30 November 2022: People queue for a swab test for the Covid-19 at permanent PCR testing at Hongqiao Railway Station after new Covid restrictions. Most restrictions have been lifted in China since December 2023. (Credit: iStock/ anilbolukbas)

How to improve China-US relations and promote stability in the Asia-Pacific region through academic exchanges?

Some specific policies and measures should be introduced to facilitate the resumption of normal academic exchanges between China and the United States.

Firstly, make visa applications easier and more convenient and lift travel restrictions.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, flights between China and the United States have become rare and expensive. In addition, each country is granting fewer visas to the other. These are unnecessary obstacles to the exchange of academic personnel and invaluable face-to-face exchanges between the two sides. Such obstacles are not conducive to normal academic dialogue between China and the United States, and thus hinder opportunities for scholars from both sides to promote the development of friendly relations. Virtual conversations and digital meetings can never replace face-to-face encounters. Active encouragement of travel by both sides will effectively open the door to academic exchanges. Considering that the risks of a deteriorating China-US relationship are greater than those of the pandemic, and also that the latter risks are decreasing over time, the Chinese and US governments should negotiate to create more expedient visa application processes and increase the number of long-term visas issued to support academia in the post-pandemic era and prepare for the gradual restoration of normal flights. At the time of writing, China's lifting of overseas travel restrictions was a welcome development in this regard.

Secondly, allow more scholars and students from the two sides to communicate, and do not impose additional restrictions.

The opening of travel is the first step. The next is to lift the restrictions on academic exchanges. In the field of science and technology, the US government's suppression of exchanges with China has damaged normal academic work. As one American professor of educational policy studies and practice said, "many US-based researchers had given up ties with China out of fear of being

prosecuted by the US Justice Department's 'China Initiative'.¹⁰ Fortunately, this initiative, started in 2018, was terminated in 2022, but the lingering effects remain and should not be ignored. For example, one US author of a report for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace suggested that "U.S. policymakers must have a firm grasp of the many different tools used to curb bilateral technology interdependence."¹¹ The good news is that, so far, cutting off social science exchanges between the two countries is not a formal part of US policy on China. Scholars of international relations and social science from both sides should put forward views on how to ensure regional stability and promote cooperation, which will help create an atmosphere for improving China-US relations. The achievements of academics and scholars should not be used by politicians as tools to browbeat each other but to stabilise bilateral relations and enhance regional stability.

Thirdly, scholars, think tanks, research institutions, and universities in the two countries should commit to discussing global issues and seek space for China-US cooperation.

Scholarly discussions on bilateral cooperation on global issues should be published in both countries since pragmatic approaches that are jointly raised in this manner could inspire policymakers to find practical opportunities for US-China cooperation. Thus, to promote the improvement of bilateral relations, as mentioned above, bilateral academic exchanges could start from a discussion of cooperation in global governance. Given that scholars are more likely to be sympathetic to their peers on the other side, joint research can reduce misunderstandings about red-lines and policy intent. Organising joint research initiatives that pair up Chinese and US scholars and have them work on the same topic might be a viable option. Topics of discussion could include climate change, energy shortages, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional peacekeeping, biodiversity, marine environment governance, and poverty reduction. Discussing these topics could more easily lead to the formation of consensus between scholars of the two countries. Researchers and their affiliated institutions also need to carefully craft media outreach strategies so that the outcomes of their joint efforts can become known to the wider public and policymakers. Raising awareness in this way helps create a friendly atmosphere for China-US relations, and it could perhaps inspire policymakers to find ways to further improve ties. In any case, it is better to discuss the resolution of global issues rather than controversial topics such as the Taiwan Strait, the Xinjiang issue, or US hegemonic behaviour on the world stage.

10 Holly Chik, "US scientists keep ties with Chinese peers despite crackdown: researcher", *South China Morning Post*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3186122/us-scientists-keep-ties-chinese-peers-despite-crackdown>.

11 Jon Bateman, "U.S.-China Technological 'Decoupling': A Strategy and Policy Framework", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 April 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Bateman_US-China_Decoupling_final.pdf.

In other words, discussing cooperation is not primarily intended as a way to solve bilateral problems, but rather to create an atmosphere amenable to reconciliation and lay a foundation for true reconciliation and cooperation in the future. Furthermore, with determined efforts to reach policy makers and the broader public, these academic exchanges might yield feasible suggestions for cooperation that both countries' governments could be interested in.

Fourthly, scholars from both countries should provide ideas for a peaceful vision of the regional and international order.

To a large extent, the China-US friction stems from the two countries' respective views of the future international order. US scholars pay too much attention to the maintenance and expansion of the liberal international order, while Chinese scholars overemphasise multi-polarity and the fairness of the international order. Therefore, scholars from both sides should try to reach a consensus on the future international order through academic exchanges. Such a consensus could not only accommodate the rise of China, but also retain the US vision of a rules-based liberal order, and thus avoid aggravating conflicts due to diverging ideas of the way the world should be.

Of course, reaching consensus on the nature of the international world order is an aspirational goal; the international orders that the two countries want are at odds, and Chinese scholars are required to serve their "motherland" while US scholars consciously (and sometimes unconsciously) serve the interests of the United States. However, despite their differences, both countries share at least some common ideas on the nature of the international world order. As two founding members of the United Nations and longstanding members of its Security Council, the United States and China are joint initiators of the UN Charter and other significant documents critical for constructing the modern world order after the Second World War. Both countries agree on the need to promote global stability, economic prosperity, equality of sovereignty in principle, and human rights in economic and social fields. The scope of ideas on the international order that the two share in common is much broader than often imagined. Given that, scholars from both countries should be able to find a way to discuss a better world order and suggest ways for China-US cooperation to realise it.

Fifthly, a stable and cooperative network of scholars, policymakers, and observers should be established in the Asia-Pacific region.

Discussions that focus on the interests of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole rather than the interests of individual countries could also provide a promising future for regional peace. Scholars in the region should come to regard it as a community rather than a fragmented zone of conflict. To better promote academic exchanges, efforts should be made to connect academic groups, policymakers, and observers committed to regional governance, peace, and stability, which together would form a broader Asia-Pacific academic network. This network should encourage regional scholars to participate in discussions on Asia-Pacific affairs and provide broader ideas and ways to promote China-US reconciliation

and cooperation, as well as regional stability and prosperity through consensus declarations, statements, or academic research. Fortunately, some networks, like the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), are already bringing academic groups, policymakers, and observers together to discuss the regional and global order, as well as governance. The role of these networks should be strengthened to allow scholars to play greater roles in stabilising international relations in the Asia-Pacific. When these networks hold academic webinars or workshops, they should focus on continuity so that participants can get to know each other and gradually build trust. Gradual trust-building will facilitate more in-depth and constructive discussions.

Conclusion

Whether in the United States or China, the impact of scholarly work on improving the overall relationship between the two countries should, of course, not be overstated. The key tone of China-US relations is determined by leaders and makers of foreign policy. It should also be noted that due to differences in political and social systems, the role of scholars in China is different to that of their US counterparts, and the same is true for the professional and social roles that scholars play in other countries in the Asia-Pacific. It follows that the ways in which they can influence the China-US relationship differ as well. Therefore, it will be a challenge for Asia-Pacific scholars from different societal systems to play their roles in jointly promoting the reconciliation of China-US relations and regional stability.

Apart from engaging in academic exchanges between China and the United States, scholars have a responsibility to contribute to helping their own governments conduct a robust, reasonable, and peace-oriented domestic policy discussion.

The evolution of the US-China relationship will influence scholars' roles in promoting relations between these two countries. Fortunately, both governments have claimed that they aspire to manage their competition and prevent it from sliding into confrontation. This is beneficial for building mutual trust and, in turn, will improve the prospects for bilateral academic exchanges and allow academia to play a greater role, ideally leading to a virtuous circle of improving exchanges.

In any context, the role of scholarship in improving China-US relations must be strengthened, especially when official communication remains at a stalemate. Scholars must play a key role in promoting reconciliation among people of different countries at this crucial moment, especially when too many seem inclined towards mutual hatred. Scholars from China, the United States, and other Asia-Pacific countries must actively find opportunities for engaging in communication with their counterparts and with their own politicians, to reduce hostility and promote cooperation between the United States and China, the world's two superpowers.

Apart from engaging in academic exchanges between China and the United States, scholars have a responsibility to contribute to helping their own governments conduct a robust, reasonable, and peace-oriented domestic policy discussion.

The APLN China-US-Asia Dialogue

The relationship between China and the United States has deteriorated significantly with the potential to worsen still. The security dilemma that this generates is fuelling fear, mistrust, and arms racing, impacting countries across the Asia-Pacific and globally. Potential repercussions include military confrontation and the possibility of nuclear escalation while undermining attempts at global cooperation on a range of 21st-century challenges.

Through a series of scholarly exchanges and publications, APLN's project China-US-Asia Dialogue evaluates what steps are necessary to improve understanding, reduce misperceptions, de-escalate risks and tensions, and build trust. The project is aimed at devising pragmatic policy recommendations for decision-makers and policy communities across the Asia-Pacific, and Washington and Beijing in particular.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapons of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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