

United States - The Bitter Fruit of Trump's China Bashing: Anti-Asian Racism

Sunday 24 February 2019, by [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2019).

Donald Trump's New Cold War with Beijing has caught Chinese foreign students at American universities in its crosshairs. His administration has tightened restrictions on their visas, accused them of spying for the Chinese state and its high tech giants, and in the process whipped up a climate of Anti-Asian racism.

Trump's policies have yielded bitter fruit most recently at Duke University. The chair of the graduate program in biostatistics, Megan Neely, in the wake of complaints from a couple of faculty members about Chinese grad students "speaking Chinese (in their words VERY LOUDLY)" in the student lounge and study areas, wrote an email scolding them for speaking their native language [1].

She told students to "commit to using English 100 percent of the time" while in department buildings or "any other professional setting." Even worse she warned them that if they didn't it might impact their ability to get internships and jobs. She told them "PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE keep these unintended consequences in mind when you choose to speak Chinese" [2].

This was not the first time that Neely had criticized students for speaking a language besides English in their private time. Last year she sent a message to all the biostatistics students saying, "I don't like being the language police [but] ... speaking in your native language in the department may give faculty the impression that you are not trying to improve your English skills and that you are not taking this opportunity seriously."

She also warned of "potential downstream effects" that might compromise their professional advancement in the biostatistics program and their employability [3].

These were no idle threats. The two professors whose complaints prompted her most recent email asked for and received photographs of the Chinese students from Neely with the expressed intent of discriminating against them [4].

Chinese students were shocked by this blatant racism. One PhD student in Chemistry, Chi Liu, said, "All of us are angry. We feel offended. You have this email to the Chinese students saying ... if you speak Chinese you will be remembered and identified, and that will affect your performance. That is very serious" [5].

Duke's Asian American Student Organization and International Association issued a joint statement that pointed out, "For international students, speaking in their mother tongue is a means of comfort and familiarity with a home and culture that is oftentimes suppressed within the United States. ... Within the bounds of one's personal conversations, people should wholeheartedly be able to speak any language they wish — to strip away this agency is demeaning, disrespectful, and wholly discriminatory" [6].

Neely's shocking email provoked a wave of criticism at the university. A group of "concerned

students” created a petition, which demanded the school investigate Neely and the two professors collected over 2,000 signatures from the campus community [7].

The uproar even spread to China. On the country’s equivalent of Twitter, Weibo, the hashtag “Duke University Bans Speaking Chinese” was viewed over 6.7 million times [8].

Caught in a spiraling scandal, Duke demoted Neely from her chair position and issued an apology. The dean of the medical school, Dr. Mary Klotman wrote, “To be clear: there is absolutely no restriction or limitation on the language you use to converse and communicate with each other. Your career opportunities and recommendations will not in any way be influenced by the language you use outside the classroom. And your privacy will always be protected” [9].

Duke may have resolved this crisis for now, but Trump’s New Cold War will only provoke more attacks on Chinese students. He has raised tariffs on China’s exports to the US, targeted its companies with sanctions, and has begun a military buildup to confront Beijing [10].

He is extending his economic nationalist program against China into the higher education system. Universities and colleges are what Hal Draper called knowledge factories that reproduce the ideas of the dominant class, generate scientific innovations for corporations, and also train different classes for their roles in ruling, managing, and working in American capitalism [11].

Universities and colleges are directly integrated into the American state through funding as well ties to the military industrial complex. As a result, the higher education system is tied to the interests of American capitalist class and its imperial domination of the world.

During the period of neoliberal globalization, however, the US higher education has undergone a transformation both in function and student composition. First, it became increasingly internationalized, creating connections with higher education systems of other countries.

Second, the increasing privatization of public universities has opened them to a growing number of foreign students, especially ones from China. States across the country have cut funding, universities have dramatically raised tuition, and students have gone into massive debt—now over \$1.3 trillion—to afford a degree [12].

In the wake of the Great Recession, both public and private universities have suffered declining enrollment as American students balk at the enormous debt entailed in getting a degree. Higher education bosses have made up for that drop by luring foreign students who pay full tuition, room and board to attend their undergraduate and graduate programs.

This isn’t simply lucrative for some universities, it’s essential at a time when many, including prestigious institutions like Hampshire College [13], are struggling to keep their doors open.

As a result, the total foreign students in universities has doubled in the last two decades to over 1 million today. Chinese students have grown the fastest increasing by five fold since 2000 to over 360,000, about 35% of the total.

The overall value of this trade in students is estimated at \$42.4 billion for the American economy, a sum greater than the \$21.6 billion exports in soybeans and rivalling exports of \$51 billion in pharmaceuticals and \$53 billion in automobiles [14].

Duke is an example of the overall pattern. In their master’s program in biostatistics heretofore overseen by Neely, Chinese students account for 36 out of a total of 55, and, in the whole graduate program, 1,300 out of 8,500.

Unsurprisingly, the Chinese ruling class and state have used this opening to advance their interests. The Chinese elite are now sending students to undergraduate and graduate programs [15].

These students overwhelmingly enter undergraduate and graduate programs in sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (the so-called STEM disciplines) as well business administration [16].

After graduation, some stay and staff key sectors of American big business particularly in high tech while others return to China to bolster the competitiveness of the country's corporations [17].

The Chinese state has encouraged their high tech national champions like Huawei to establish contracts with American research institutions to bolster their standing as world leaders in research and development.

At the same time, the Beijing is worried that their students might be influenced by liberal and radical ideas that might encourage them to challenge the Communist Party's autocratic rule back home.

Therefore, Beijing has established about 150 chapters of the Chinese Students and Scholar Associations on campuses throughout the US. These both organize social activities for students as well as keep tabs on them [18].

China has established Confucian Institutes on over 100 campuses to promote Chinese language and culture, provide services for Chinese nationals teaching in the US, and facilitate cultural exchanges. They also use the institutes to influence American the universities, registering protest against speakers the state considers anti-Chinese like the exiled religious leader of Tibet, the Dalai Lama.

The Communist Party also attempts to influence American academics portrayals of China by threatening to deny them visas to visit and conduct research in the country. For example, Andrew Nathan and Perry Link, editors of *The Tiananmen Papers* about the Communist Party's massacre student and workers to quell the uprising in 1989, have been denied visas ever since the publication of their book.

In response, Trump has initiated a campaign against the Chinese state and its corporations influence over universities as well as against Chinese foreign students, their rights and their organizations. Trump aims to discipline the nation's higher education system to serve "America First."

Trump's lapdog Mike Pence's announced this offensive against "the enemy within" American universities in his speech at the Hudson Institute [19]. He warned, "The Chinese Communist Party is rewarding or coercing American businesses, movie studios, universities, think tanks, scholars, journalists, and local, state, and federal officials."

He charged China with creating a "culture of censorship" in universities. He complained that "Beijing provides generous funding to universities, think tanks, and scholars, with the understanding that they will avoid ideas that the Communist Party finds dangerous or offensive. China experts in particular know that their visas will be delayed or denied if their research contradicts Beijing's talking points."

Then in formulations worthy of the poster "Is Your Washroom's Breeding Bolsheviks?" [20] he denounced "the Chinese Students and Scholars Association" for alerting "Chinese consulates and embassies when Chinese students, and American schools, stray from the Communist Party line."

Of course, all of this reeks of hypocrisy. Trump and the right are enemies of academic freedom and

scientific thought. They are conducting McCarthyite attacks against progressive academics as advocates of “cultural Marxism,” policing students and academics who are advocates of Palestinian liberation, waging war on the humanities, and are aiming to reduce the function of every level of education to the narrow interests of the American state and corporations in dominating the world system.

Double talk aside, Trump has already begun implementing his plan. He has issued an order instructing public universities to terminate all contracts with Huawei or federal funding would be cut.

And the schools have all obeyed. For example, the University of California at Berkeley has banned any further research projects with Huawei, which has donated \$7.8 million to the school over the last two years [21].

Trump has extended the attack on corporation to Chinese students. The US intelligence agencies are warning universities that they are spying for Beijing and stealing intellectual property for its state corporations and national champions [22].

To put a stop to this supposed threat, he has denied and delayed issuing visas to Chinese students and threatened to reduce visas for those studying robotics, aviation, and high tech [23].

Trump’s racist advisor, Stephen Miller, almost convinced the administration to impose a total ban on Chinese nationals studying in the US [24].

Far from standing up against Trump’s China bashing and protectionism, the Democratic Party including its progressive and even socialist wing has joined his chorus. Elizabeth Warren, for example, has denounced against the neoliberal establishment for promising that open markets would bring about democracy in China.

She states, “Policymakers promised that open markets would lead to open societies. Instead, efforts to bring capitalism to the global stage unwittingly helped create the conditions for competitors to rise up and lash out. Russia became belligerent and resurgent. China weaponized its economy without ever loosening its domestic political constraints.” [25].

Similarly, Bernie Sanders, who has become a spokesperson for progressive internationalism [26], has in fact long advocated an economic nationalist program against China.

In 2011, for example, he denounced the Smithsonian Museum for selling busts of American presidents made in China. He complained “that a museum owned by the people of the United States, celebrating the history of the United States, cannot find companies in this country employing American workers that are able to manufacture statues of our founding fathers, or our current president” [27].

More recently he supported Trump’s tariff war with China, writing “I strongly support imposing stiff penalties on countries like China, Russia, South Korea and Vietnam to prevent them from illegally dumping steel and aluminum into the U.S. and throughout the world” [28].

Such nationalism can only breed anti-Chinese and more generally anti-Asian racism. Barbara Ehrenreich plumbed the depths of such bigotry recently when she tweeted “I will be convinced that America is not in decline only when our de-cluttering Marie Kondo learns to speak English” [29].

This xenophobia is only the latest expression of the toxic history of anti-Asian prejudices and laws that began with the Chinese exclusion act and continued through the internment of Japanese

Americans during World War II, the racist demonization of the Vietnamese during the US war on their country, and the recent bigoted caricatures of Koreans during Trump's stand-off with Kim Jung-un [30].

Unsurprisingly, the American political class's China bashing has triggered a sharp increase in anti-Asian hate crimes and discrimination. NPR reports that "hate crimes against Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders are rising exponentially. A report from the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations found that crimes targeting Asian-Americans tripled in that county between 2014 and 2015" [31].

And since the Trump administration's rise to power, they increased ever more. There was a 20 percent increase in hate crimes against Asian-Pacific Americans in 2017 [32].

Trump's Islamophobia, immigrant bashing, and hostility to foreign students and specifically Chinese students drove down international enrollment by 3.3 percent in 2016 and by 6.6 percent in 2017 [33].

Indian graduate school applications dropped by 12% in 2017 [34]. While Chinese student enrollment is still increasing it has begun to slow from an increase of 8.1 percent in 2014-15 to 6.8 percent in 2015-16 and 3.1 in 2017-2018 [35].

Those that remain have soured on the US. One study by Purdue University found that the percentage of foreign students holding negative views of the US jumped from 29 percent in 2016 to 42 percent in 2018 [36].

One anonymous student told the *South China Post*, "More students, including myself, have even considered returning to China as a plan B if we can't find a job in the US, and some of them are searching for jobs in China simultaneously" [37].

But, as the *Post* notes, "the job market for new graduates on the other side of the globe is not much better, as Trump's trade war begins to cause sweeping lay-offs and hiring freezes in China's tech industry." These students are thus caught between two powers struggling for dominance in a crisis ridden system.

With Trump tearing at the internationalized structure of American higher education and trying to push out Chinese students, some universities and high tech businesses have begun to worry about a possible drop in the pool of Chinese students they can recruit from.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign went so far as take out a \$60 million insurance policy to protect against any sudden drop in Chinese enrollment [38].

The conflict between the US and China is also spilling into other countries with educational systems with large Chinese student populations. For example, when Trump forced Canada to detain Huawei's the chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, on charges that the company violated sanctions on Iran, China responded by threatening to withdraw all its 77,000 students, if Ottawa sent Meng to the US to stand trial.

Chinese students account for a large share of the 40 percent increase in foreign students since 2013. These pay an average of \$27, 159 a year in tuition—4 times what Canadian residents pay—and spend over \$15 billion a year in Canada. Thus, they are an important part not just of the country's big business in higher education but also the broader economy.

Moody's Investors Services went so far as to warn "that the intensification of political tensions

between the Government of Canada and the government of China poses credit risks for Canadian universities” [39].

Back in the US, university presidents became so concerned that 65 of them penned a letter supporting a legal challenge to Trump’s threat to ban international students for overstaying their visas [40].

Some high tech bosses have similarly protested about the loss of access to foreign students in American universities. They point to the fact that about a quarter of new companies worth a billion dollars were started by moguls who first came to the US as students [41].

Thomas Harnisch from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities “International graduate students are pivotal to our economic system, these students go on, many of them earn master’s degrees and PhDs in many highly-needed fields. They’re incredibly important not only to our universities, but our economy as well” [42].

But the logic of the spiraling inter-imperial rivalry between the US and China will likely continue to pry apart the inter-penetration of their educational systems. The US is already trying to retool its own education system to yield more American talent in the STEM fields and China may redirect its students to its own rapidly improving higher education institutions and those of countries less hostile to it.

Amidst this intensifying conflict, socialists must take a clear stand against the political class’s China bashing no matter whether it comes from right wing Republicans like Trump or progressives like Warren and Sanders; it is rank American nationalism that binds workers to their exploiters against their fellow workers in China.

Instead we must unite just like the Duke students did against the racist attacks on Chinese students, defend their right to speak their language of choice, agitate against any restrictions on their visas, and build a movement among both native and foreign students and workers for our common interests against the university bosses, their capitalist masters, and their state overseers.

Such organizing will also open up opportunities to build the international workers movement. Some of these students are part of the developing new left on universities in China that has suffered government repression for organizing solidarity with workers on strike [43]. They should be considered part of our emerging new socialist movement.

We should build this common struggle without in any way supporting the Chinese state, which is a rising imperialist power in the world system that oversees the exploitation of its own population, the oppression of subject nations like Tibet and national minorities like the Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, and increasingly exploits third world countries in pursuit of raw materials and outlets for its surplus capital.

The slogan for our solidarity movement must therefore be “Neither Washington, Nor Beijing, But International Socialism.”

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P.S.

- <https://socialistworker.org/2019/02/24/the-bitter-fruit-of-trumps-china-bashing>

Footnotes

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