

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES

China Studies in an Uncertain Age

Luce/ACLS Program in
China Studies Report

October 2023

Emily Baum

University of California, Irvine

Yingyi Ma

Syracuse University





INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), in conjunction with the Henry Luce Foundation, has been rethinking its Program in China Studies in light of the many challenges currently facing scholars of China, from lack of access to the PRC and securitization concerns to increased incidents of anti-Asian racism in the wake of COVID-19. As part of this effort, ACLS hosted a series of brainstorming sessions with academics, journalists, artists, librarians, curators, and China specialists to gauge the issues they consider most pressing and to discuss possible solutions. These sessions culminated in three multi-day, in-person workshops in which participants proposed additions and modifications to the scope and design of the Luce/ACLS Program in China Studies.

To supplement these discussions, ACLS simultaneously supported a series of research projects intended to better understand the state of China studies. In 2021, ACLS published a report on [China Studies in North America](#), in which 403 responses were received from an initial distribution of 1,300 surveys to China scholars in the field, ranging from early career applicants to the ACLS postdoctoral fellowship program to tenured scholars. Despite the richness of the data acquired, the report noted limitations. Specifically, because participants were responding to a series of set questions, there were limits to the amount of fine-grained experiential data ACLS was able to obtain.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the individual experiences of China studies scholars, ACLS recruited two faculty advisors, Emily Baum (University of California, Irvine) and Yingyi Ma (Syracuse University), to engage in a series of in-depth, one-on-one interviews. The objective of these discussions was not just to gain insight into the specific concerns and challenges facing academics specializing in China studies, but to also assess how different institutional positions and geographical settings influence scholars' research trajectories and pedagogical experiences.

Over the course of the 2022–23 academic year, Baum and Ma interviewed 14 scholars who were purposely chosen to represent a range of:

- Disciplines (humanities and social sciences)
- Ranks (assistant, associate without tenure, associate with tenure)
- Institutions (small liberal arts colleges (SLACs), R1 and R2 universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), public universities, and private universities)
- Student populations (large vs. small international student population, primarily undergraduate vs. availability of MA programs and/or PhD programs)

- Geographic regions (interviewees were located in multiple regions throughout the United States with one interviewee in Canada) and the political leanings of those regions (red states vs. blue states)

Interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions arranged into four primary themes:

- Whether they have noticed shifts in their course enrollments over the past three to five years (in terms of both the number of students enrolled and the demographics of those students), and if so, what might account for these shifts.
- What types of challenges in their research and teaching they have experienced over the past three to five years, and how they have addressed these challenges.
- Whether they feel supported in their China studies programming at their respective institutions, and if not, what types of support they would like to see implemented.
- In light of recent geopolitical developments, whether they have plans to travel to China in the near future, as well as whether they feel secure in their current institutional positions with regard to tenure and academic freedom.

RESULTS

I. Course Enrollments

As the world emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, there were concerns that enrollments in China studies courses and Chinese language classes were decreasing. The reality is more nuanced, as enrollment trends seem to depend on the institution, professor, and type of class being offered.

At colleges and universities where there has been substantial administrative and financial support for the humanities, enrollments have remained steady. An assistant professor at a SLAC noted that even though some humanities classes have experienced decreased enrollments, the college at which she is employed has been unwilling to cut resources and has even added new tenure-track lines, thereby drawing more students to China studies courses. An associate professor at an HBCU likewise noted that her course has shown consistent enrollment, as her institution has recently experienced unprecedented growth. And some interviewees further observed that many students tend to enroll in China studies classes that seem to offer a direct route to a post-college career, such as business, political science, and public health. At one private R1, the History Department purposely created a “Global Track” to boost enrollments in non-Western studies.

In other cases, institutions have either maintained or experienced significant growth in China studies enrollments as a counterintuitive result of the limited number of classes offered on such topics. Two faculty from their flagship state universities pointed out that there is an “under-supply” of courses in China studies, which leads to consistently robust enrollment trends in their classes even in the broad context of decreasing enrollments in area studies in general. The professor at the HBCU also noted that the global curriculum at her institution is extremely lacking, as she is the only faculty member teaching in the field of China studies. The limited number of such courses has led to a constant supply of students seeking to enroll in her classes.

Some institutions have experienced noticeable decreases in both Chinese content courses and Chinese language courses. The reasons for these decreases are not uniform. An assistant professor at an R1 in a red state noted an obvious downward enrollment trend, particularly in language and literature courses. This professor observed that cuts to study abroad, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, have affected student interest in pursuing the study of Chinese language, with some students having instead migrated to Japanese and Korean studies. Other interviewees noted that outsize attention to American and Western studies at their respective institutions has discouraged students from enrolling in Chinese content courses. At one SLAC in a red state, our interviewee was the only faculty member in

her department to offer non-Western history, and she fears that further cuts to non-Western studies will be made in the near future. On the whole, the data gathered from our interviews aligns with a [recent article in *The Economist*](#), which noted an overall decline in students studying the Chinese language.

Student demographics played an inconsistent role in determining the size of course enrollments. In some instances, steady or increasing course enrollments were likely driven by the presence of international Chinese students; at one R1, our interviewee observed that international students have helped boost the number of course enrollments and minors, though the number of majors has stayed the same. A SLAC professor similarly estimates that about half of her enrollments are from Chinese international students. On the flip side, an assistant professor at another SLAC, whose enrollments have uniformly increased, believes that the trend might be due to the lack of a Chinese presence on his campus and the resulting curiosity about Chinese culture.

Some interviewees cautioned about extrapolating too much from their individual experiences. In many cases, decreasing enrollments in China studies classes mirrored decreasing enrollments across the board in the humanities; in other words, this is not a problem unique to the China field. Other languages and world regions, some emphasized, have taken an even bigger hit. An associate professor at a SLAC noted that while Chinese language classes have been struggling to fill, Chinese is still attracting more students than French and German. Our interviewees also pointed out the need to decouple course enrollments from the number of majors. While the number of Chinese majors has decreased almost across the board since COVID-19, enrollments in individual classes can still remain the same or even increase. One way to gain more comprehensive data, some have suggested, would be to convene a consortium of China studies centers so that these metrics can be compared more comprehensively across campuses.

II. Challenges in Research and Teaching

A point of consistency across all of our interviews was that China studies scholars have uniformly faced challenges to their research as a result of COVID-19 and the rising bilateral tensions between the United States and China. A large number have changed their research topic and/or region of focus. Two scholars of Xinjiang, one at a public R1 and the other at a SLAC, have both abandoned that field because of the inability to travel to the region and the ethics/political concerns involved in contemporary Uyghur studies. Some have decided to shift their research away from mainland topics and sources, instead focusing on Taiwan, Southeast Asia, or diasporic communities. As just one example, an historian at an HBCU has begun to pursue an archivally driven project on Chinese communities in Jamaica. Many historians have also decided to abandon more contemporary (post-1949) topics and are instead pursuing the less politically sensitive Republican era or late Qing.

It is remarkable that every social science researcher we interviewed has decided to shift their research trajectory, largely as a result of the current geopolitical situation and concerns over the securitization of academic exchanges. Some have completely changed their areas of study, citing fears about 1) their own safety as foreign scholars working in China; and 2) their participants' safety. For example, a scholar of Chinese media in a state R1 university stated that she no longer feels safe conducting fieldwork in China. She has instead decided to study US-China tech competition in a third country and now plans to conduct fieldwork in Japan. She is also considering learning new methods to extract and analyze online data. An assistant professor at a state R1 institution, who is currently turning her dissertation into a book, stated that she is very anxious about her second book project, as she is not sure whether she will be able to go back to China to conduct fieldwork. She has consequently started thinking about pursuing historical research for her new project and making use of archival sources outside of the PRC.



“It is remarkable that every social science researcher we interviewed has decided to shift their research trajectory, largely as a result of the current geopolitical situation and concerns over the securitization of academic exchanges.”

The shifting tenor of US-China relations has also infiltrated the classroom. Some faculty worry about how their PRC students will react to the inclusion of sensitive topics in their class discussions. This concern partly derives from the existence of the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL), which gives the PRC government wide latitude to accuse individuals of subversion or terrorism, even if those individuals are not currently residing within the geopolitical borders of the PRC or Hong Kong. An assistant professor at a SLAC suspects that some of her international students fear that their Chinese classmates will report them for the comments they make in class. One media studies scholar noted that some of her students from the PRC refuse to write about sensitive topics like June 4. And a tenured associate professor at an R1 institution in Canada similarly said that she is often unsure whether her Chinese students are reluctant to participate in discussions because of the politically charged nature of the topic or because of their lack of language fluency.

Nevertheless, even with the existence of the NSL, scholars concur that fears of spying, bullying, and other forms of hostility have been greatly overblown. Despite previous reports that PRC students might be spying on American professors and/or disruptive to American classrooms, our interviewees suggested that they have rarely, if ever, encountered hostility from students, who are usually quite respectful. Nobody we talked to has changed any topical aspect of their teaching, nor has anyone deliberately avoided the inclusion of politically sensitive topics. For example, a tenured associate

professor in political science continues to include a discussion of June 4 in class, which he supplements with a documentary on Tiananmen Square. Most recently, he raised the issue of the “White Paper Revolution,” a protest ignited by an apartment fire in Urumqi which killed 10 people, and a PRC student even gave a presentation on that topic.

Only one professor we interviewed, who teaches at a private R1, suspects that a Chinese national might have been surveilling her class on Maoist China. The vast majority have experienced no such incidents. To the contrary, several interviewees reported that any minor examples of hostility they might have experienced in the classroom derived from American—rather than Chinese—citizens, who felt that their professors were being too “soft” on China. One associate professor at a public R1, while teaching a class on US-China relations, received pushback from a student (and self-disclosed Trump supporter) who thought that “decoupling was good policy.” An assistant professor at an R1 located in a red state also noted that while her students don’t tend to have strong opinions about China, they do challenge her when she discusses the existence of anti-Asian racism and Orientalist attitudes among Americans.

The identity of the individual professor might play a role in shaping student interactions. At one Hispanic-serving institution, an associate professor of Chinese ethnicity noted that many of his students assume he is pro-China, and they therefore avoid saying anything that might “offend” him. A similar sentiment was expressed by another associate professor at a private R1, who suspects that some students might avoid challenging her in the classroom because of her Chinese ethnicity. On the reverse side, a professor at a public R1 suspects that his international students might “cut him slack” because he is not Chinese, while his ethnically Chinese teaching assistants might have to handle more overt hostility in classroom discussions.

To mitigate misunderstandings and create a welcoming environment for students to exchange ideas, almost all of our interviewees have purposely gone out of their way to address these sensitive dynamics directly. Several professors we spoke to do not allow recording devices in their classes. Others spend a fair amount of time at the beginning of the course letting students know about the sensitivities and political risks involved in the study of contemporary China. One professor gives students the choice to opt out of participating in politically sensitive discussions or to skip class on days when sensitive topics will be discussed. And an assistant professor at a SLAC encourages her students to discuss politically charged subjects with her on an individual basis during office hours in lieu of engaging in public class discussions. Several of our interviewees mentioned a document on [how to teach China](#), published by the online platform [China File](#), which they have found helpful in guiding this aspect of their teaching.

One issue that many of our interviewees have had to address is the increasingly negative attitude that the American media has adopted toward China, and the ways that this attitude has infiltrated

classroom discussions. An associate professor at a private R2 stated that one of his primary goals in the classroom is to defuse “hawkish” ways of thinking about the PRC and to open the conversation to more nuanced discussion. Since so much of the American news coverage on China is negative, he noted, his students have a tendency toward “China-bashing” that he attempts to address head-on. Another tenured political science professor from a state he described as “light blue” also noted the increasingly negative coverage of China in the news. To help empower his Chinese students and encourage a more balanced view, he allows his students to use both Chinese- and English-language sources when they are assigned to introduce a news segment related to the PRC.

III. Support


When asked about the level of support that the field of China studies receives at their respective institutions, our respondents gave different answers but indicated some overarching trends. Most feel that the administrations at their institutions have never considered China studies a matter of priority, instead placing an emphasis on business, economics, and the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. While this tendency might not be unique to China studies specifically, instead characterizing the situation across most humanities disciplines, scholars specializing in China studies nevertheless believe that hiring and funding priorities have moved away from non-Western area studies fields in the past few years.

An associate professor at a Hispanic-serving institution noted that Asian studies has recently been marginalized, since the field does not align with the university’s goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Instead, Native American and Indigenous studies have been prioritized. At a public R1, an associate professor observed that hiring priorities have shifted almost exclusively toward American and African American studies. One of his China studies colleagues, he continues, left his institution several years ago and was never replaced; instead, the past four hires have all been in American and European history. One associate professor at a SLAC in a red state went so far as to hypothesize that “all non-Western fields will be cut” in the coming years due to budget restrictions and institutional/state priorities. And at a northeast SLAC, an interviewee stated that interest in “anything international has plummeted.” The institutional focus has instead shifted to “justice and equity through an American lens.”

The situation is somewhat less dire at certain well-funded, private institutions. At one private R2, an interviewee stated that China studies “hasn’t been prioritized, but it hasn’t been deprioritized either.” While there is no hope for expanding the field beyond the existing China studies faculty, he continues, those who have taken positions at other institutions have all been quickly replaced. Similar dynamics

were also observed at a private R1 with a long legacy of being a leader in China studies. Not only have recent retirees all been replaced, but there is talk of future hiring in the field, including a possible endowed chair in Global China.

Regardless of hiring and budgeting priorities, most of our interviewees noted that their colleagues and administrators do not fully understand the extent of the challenges facing China studies scholars in their research, publishing, and teaching. One tenured scholar studying Chinese media in a public flagship R1 mentioned that a particular challenge for her is determining how to effectively communicate with the central administration on matters related to teaching and engaging with Chinese students and student organizations. An untenured professor at a private R1 felt similarly,



“Regardless of hiring and budgeting priorities, most of our interviewees noted that their colleagues and administrators do not fully understand the extent of the challenges facing China studies scholars in their research, publishing, and teaching.”

stating that it’s been difficult to fully convey the complexities of contemporary China studies to the university leadership. One of her students’ parents, a journalist in the PRC, was disappeared and later charged with espionage. And the professor herself also experienced an episode of Zoom bombing. When she reported both of these incidents to her chair, the latter “did not understand the weight of it” and was unable to offer practical advice.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that many of our interviewees are the only China scholar in their department or program and are therefore expected to shoulder a larger advising and service load than many of their colleagues. For example, one assistant professor of sociology, who studies gender and labor in China, is never given the opportunity to teach China-specific courses. Instead, she is routinely assigned to teach the sociology of gender, but is then expected to advise students in other departments who wish to do China-focused research. These additional advising expectations do not count toward her tenure or promotion, and she has therefore felt stretched thin. She has ultimately decided to protect her time by declining to take on this additional advisory work.

In addition to asking our interviewees about the support they currently receive at their respective institutions, we also asked about the types of support they would ideally like to receive through a separate funding source like ACLS. While there were certain points of consensus in response to this question—several faculty mentioned the need for seed grants to help jump-start a second project, for instance—institutional differences also shaped our respondents’ views.

Many of our SLAC interviewees prioritized the need for increased access to China studies databases, particularly in light of an inability to travel to China and lack of sufficient sabbatical leave to take lengthy research trips away from their universities. At teaching-heavy institutions, interviewees requested money for course releases or flexible grants that would enable them to take short research trips without requiring full leave. Some requested funding for pedagogical purposes, such as support for innovative teaching projects (e.g., taking students to libraries and museums, training in digital humanities) and increasing the availability of language study. Two interviewees, one at a SLAC and the other at an R2 without a PhD program, additionally suggested providing funding for hiring graduate research assistants from nearby universities.

At R1 institutions with more flexible sabbatical policies, better access to databases, and the availability of graduate research assistants, our interviewees prioritized the need for graduate research funding (especially for international students who may not be eligible for certain grants like Fulbright) and funding for long-term collaborative projects.

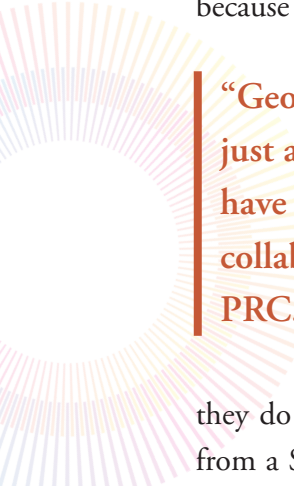
Regardless of their institution, however, a significant number of our interviewees signaled the need for funding to support cohort-building. Emerging from the pandemic, many China studies scholars have felt isolated from professional communities of like-minded scholars. This type of funding could take multiple forms, such as a conference or workshop, a networking event, meetings with directors of China studies centers across the United States and Canada, or the creation of a database that could facilitate communication between different scholars working on similar topics, both domestically and abroad.

IV. Recent Geopolitical Developments

When we began our interviews, the PRC had not yet reopened to international visitors and the high cost of air travel had prevented many PRC citizens living in the United States from returning. By the end of our interview process, many travel restrictions had been relaxed and some archival sites had begun to reopen. We asked our interviewees whether they had plans to travel to the PRC in the near future, and if so, if they planned to take any precautions (such as bringing a burner phone or a different laptop than they normally use).

Results were mixed. Some had no plans to travel to China, citing fears of surveillance, questioning from authorities, and/or an inability to pursue their research unimpeded. One tenured political scientist specializing in labor feels that her risk level is too high, as some of her informants (underground labor activists) have recently been jailed. She wants to wait until “the atmosphere is better,” which, to her,

means that Chinese civil society will be given more freedom to operate. A tenured historian working at an HBCU noted that, prior to the pandemic, she felt safer in China than in the United States. Now, however, her comfort level is lower than before and she fears that her access to archives will be limited. One interviewee, a PRC citizen who had last traveled to China in 2019, stated that her previous experience in the country had caused her to approach a potential future trip with extreme caution. During her last visit to the PRC, she was scheduled to give two talks at a prominent university in the south of China but was not able to proceed as planned. One of her talks was unexpectedly canceled because of the inclusion of the word “modernity” in her abstract, a word which was deemed too



“Geopolitical tensions have not just affected US-based scholars but have also had a chilling effect on collaboration with scholars in the PRC.”

“Western.” She was asked to submit a script of her second talk in advance and was forced to cut half of it. She was also interrupted during the Q&A for mentioning Taiwan. As a result of this experience, she currently feels “too scared” to return to China for the time being.

Others were less concerned about these issues, since they do not believe that their research topics are particularly sensitive. Two tenured historians, one from a SLAC and the other from an R2, both purposely chose their second book projects so as not to be dependent on access to archives and to avert possible inquiries from local authorities. And although several participants have family in China and planned to visit in the summer of 2023, most have decided to take certain precautions, such as not bringing school computers with research data on them.

Only one of our interviewees, an associate professor at a private R1, had returned to China prior to our discussion. She had traveled there as part of a group and did not attempt any research. She left her laptop at home and took a burner phone but was not able to connect to WeChat. She noted that she felt “uncomfortable” and “surveilled” while there. When interacting with Chinese interlocutors, she purposely avoided sensitive topics (like the Cultural Revolution), but she still found that she was not able to speak openly without being cut off by her hosts.

Geopolitical tensions have not just affected US-based scholars but have also had a chilling effect on collaboration with scholars in the PRC. Our participants concur that the key to collaboration is trust, and that recent geopolitical developments have put that trust in peril. One tenured political scientist in Canada noted that many scholars in China have emailed her for potential visiting scholar opportunities, but she usually does not respond to their inquiries as she does not know the scholars personally. Another participant noted that, while she would love to collaborate with scholars in China

who have better access to data, she is concerned about the potential risks that a collaboration would entail, as “everything is weaponized nowadays.”

While recent geopolitical developments in the PRC have shaped the research trajectories of China studies scholars, policies in the United States have also affected their career choices. For scholars in red states, particularly those where academic freedom and tenure have come under attack, the stability and security of their positions are increasingly unsure. One interviewee, who would not even use her institutional email to respond to my request for a conversation, fears that her position will be cut even though she has already secured tenure. Another interviewee, who has not yet gone up for tenure, stated that she feels very supported by her colleagues and department but is already preparing to be denied tenure when she submits her materials next year.

TAKEAWAYS

- Intellectual isolation is palpable and consistent among China studies scholars across different institutions, from HBCUs to SLACs to major R1 universities. Because China studies scholars are often the sole scholars in their department or school to focus on Asia, they feel that their colleagues do not always understand the challenges they face in their research and teaching. Many express a desire to forge connections with China scholars at other institutions.
- A majority of China studies scholars we interviewed have had to shift their research interests in the aftermath of COVID-19 and escalating geopolitical tensions. This shift has been driven largely out of fear for both their own safety and the safety of their interlocutors, informants, and research subjects. Many have tried to adjust to this new environment by adopting historical methods and archival research, learning technical skills such as online data scraping, studying Chinese topics and communities outside of the geopolitical borders of the PRC, and/or pursuing less politically “sensitive” topics and time periods.
- The souring US-China relationship has had a chilling effect on academic exchanges. Many China studies scholars in the United States are reluctant to visit the PRC, although individual comfort levels differ. Some of our interviewees also noted an increased hesitancy to collaborate with scholars in China due to security concerns, for both themselves and their collaborators. These reservations do not negate their recognition that such collaborations could be very beneficial on both intellectual and interpersonal levels.
- Scholars concur that fears of spying, bullying, and other forms of hostility in the classroom have been greatly overblown. None of our participants has experienced hostility from international students, and none has avoided the inclusion of politically sensitive topics in classroom discussions. However, many worry about how their students from the PRC will respond to or be affected by these discussions. To address these concerns, our interviewees have all adopted various strategies for risk mitigation in the classroom, including banning recording devices, allowing students to sit out of sensitive discussions, inviting students to have private conversations outside of the classroom, and/or providing opportunities for students to cite and discuss sources from both Western and Chinese media.
- As a function of their institution and position, the scholars we interviewed tended to seek different forms of support from granting agencies like ACLS: from course buyouts and graduate student support to pedagogical grants and flexible research funding. Nevertheless, many—regardless of institution—noted a desire for seed funding to support new research areas; opportunities for cohort-building, networking, or the creation of a consortium of China studies centers; and support for collaborative projects.





633 3rd Ave
New York, NY 10017
acls.org