Zooyue Wang on the History of Chinese Students at U.S. Universities

The historian traces the evolution of Chinese students coming to the U.S. and explains why this contact matters amid recent tensions.

By Emily Jackson

Zooyue Wang[1] is a distinguished scholar and a professor of history at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, where he specializes in the history of modern science and its interaction with U.S. and Chinese governments. Wang's talks, given for the Chinese Mission Overseas, series and A.B. thesis at Hunan Normal University, a Master's at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a PhD at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He also was a Senior Research Fellow at Pomona College's Claremont Chinese American Center, directing the Cold War and beyond. Wang is the author of The Beginnings of Chinese Students Abroad and co-author of Chinese Students in the United States: The Beginning of a Highly Educated Immigrant Population.

Wang Zooyue
Provided by Kate Crawford

Q: Today, more than 350,000 Chinese students attend American colleges and universities. Tell us a little about the beginning of Chinese coming to study in the United States?

The first were Chinese who came as clerks sent in the mid-19th century in association with American missions in China. Here in the late 19th century, the Qing [Dynasty] government sent dozens of young Chinese students who were not even college but the equivalent of high school students. They quickly became Americanized by the above in the classroom in the Qing court. So a few years after it started the whole experiment was terminated. Nevertheless, out of that came some of the first Chinese Qing scholars supporting and social emigrants.

The Boxer Rebellion, in 1900, was a tragedy for Chinese and for foreigners in China. But the settlement [The Boxer Protocol, signed by China and the foreign powers in 1901] of the foreign nations, including Russia, Germany, Japan, the U.K., and the U.S.) resulted in China sending more than a thousand Chinese students to the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century. This was based on the indemnity payments China was forced to make to the United States. The U.S. government made it a condition that the Chinese government use the money to send students to the U.S. to study "Western" subjects, most science and engineering, which was agreed to by both China and the United States. The first group came in 1909. That's also how Tsinghua University, now a top university in China, was founded. Tsinghua is a feeder school for many of America's top graduate schools, but it was started as a result of the entrapment of the Boxer Rebellion.

So, to review, the Chinese government funded American universities by sending those Chinese students to study in the U.S., right?

Yes. The Boxer [Indemnities] fund made payments to U.S. universities in the form of tuition and living expenses for these so-called Boxer fellows. The Boxer program also set a pattern that a majority of the Chinese students who came to the U.S. in the early to the 20th century chose to study in science and engineering, or the applied sciences, and the arts and humanities.

It's ironic that given where we are now, with the previous administration's attack on the Chinese students, perhaps some hostility, might be spies, that the U.S. government in the earlier period encouraged engagement centered around educating Chinese here in the U.S., right? And this course ended after the U.S. had passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which put a halt to most immigration from China.

It was recently known, by the work of the President's Committee of Advisers on Science and Technology (PCAST) under Barack Obama. They issued a report[2] in 2013, in which they said that government support for the U.S. to invest in science, technology, and higher education and to welcome immigration policy so that the U.S. can continue to attract international students. And therefore that, during the presidency of George W. Bush, the National Academy of Sciences issued a report in 2007 that articulated the idea that in order for the U.S. to stay at the forefront in the world economy, especially the knowledge economy, the U.S. needed to attract international talents, including those from China and India. So you can see that under both Bush and Obama, before you get to the presidency of the time of China was widespread, at least some policy makers and scholars were still thinking about the need for the U.S. to continue to welcome Chinese students to come here.

So in the early part of the 20th century, a significant number of Chinese students studied on American universities.

Yes, the Boxer program continued from about 1909 all the way to 1940, and students also came from China to the U.S. based on other sources of funding. In some cases, the Boxer [Scholarship fund] program continued until 1940 because some of the money was used to fund the Tsinghua University in Beijing. Later, the Nationalists fled to Taiwan in 1949. There's even an institute in New York called the "China Institute in America," which still exists. Now, it's a nonprofit organization serving the community, but it was founded by the Boxer [Scholarship] fund and was established in 1926 to assist the Boxer fellows.

Of course, the Nationalist government in Taiwan also put in money to fund the current university in Taiwan [Tsinghua]. But when it first started, it was partly based on that funding and partly based on the American "Cultural Relations" program. In the 1950s the U.S. provided nuclear reactors and accelerators to help other countries to start peaceful nuclear research in the hope that they would not pursue military nuclear research. And so Taiwan used that, and that, and the Boxer funding, to establish its own Tsinghua University.

Many changes already, after the communism took over mainland China in 1949. Those exchanges ended, right?

Yes. In 1949, there were about 5,000 Chinese students in the U.S., because of a big wave that had gone back to study after World War II. Many years after the end of the war, the staff and support of the Nationalist government had fled after the communists took over mainland China in 1949, the students had to make a decision. Do they want to go back to the mainland and live in the U.S., or does they want to stay in the U.S. with the rest of China? We instead of the other side, the Soviet camp. In some cases, the U.S. government even contributed to helped Chinese students from going back to China after 49. That policy was in place for many Chinese students and remained during the Korean War and into the early detailed science and engineering. It only ended in 1955, after the Geneva conference. Besides the ideological struggle, the U.S. needed from Chinese scientists to help with its nuclear weapons development, because there was a shortage of such talent scientists. So about 4,000 Chinese scientists stayed in the U.S. in many ways, that allowed them to develop professionally and take advantage of a better working and living environment that Chinese scientists or friends who went back to China. Nevertheless, there were quite a few Chinese scientists, or students, who left their own communists, many had families or spouses or children back in China. Some were motivated by patriotism because they felt that they owed something to China. So, those who stayed watched what happened to their friends who went back and many of the letters suffered during political campaigns in mainland China.

Besides the 4,000 Chinese students who chose to stay in the U.S., about 3,000 highly trained Chinese professionals also came to the U.S. in the 1950s as refugees from the Chinese civil war, Hu Hong Kong. It was very dramatic. The 3,000 Chinese students going back to China were profiled on the front page every day. Most of them were from Taiwan, but the refugee intellectuals who were coming to the U.S. then, there were at least a few mainland Chinese among them. So, the U.S. government, the Eisenhower administration, in 1954 [After ALL] China had protested them that they Chinese students who were asked to return to China were free to come and live in Asia. Some tried to take up [Chinese offer], and a couple apparently succeeded in getting out of Chinese. But by the mid-late 1950s and early 1960s. But in general, very few did, and there was very little movement of people between the U.S. and China from 1949 to 1971.

Even before diplomatic relations were officially restored between the U.S. and Chinese in 1979, there was already talk about scholars and students from both sides between or "Mad China" coming to study in the U.S., right?

Talks about sending students to the U.S. started back in mid-late 1970s and 1980s. Chinese students came to the U.S. in a trickle, and then it became a flood. Chinese students came to the U.S. as a bargaining chip with the Carter administration. "If you to establish diplomatic relations, we will send our scholars to the U.S." This shows that the U.S. has long wanted to have Chinese students here.

Why was the U.S. so eager to have Chinese students?

There are several reasons. First, it was good for the long range of U.S. China relations, then was what Intentions call "the minimum impulse" to change China. That goals back to the 1940s century, when American universities went to China in large numbers, trying to relieve Chinese society in the American model. That's a part of the reason.

But there was also the influence of the earlier Chinese students who came to the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s. Of those that stayed just had several Nobel Prize winners, and leaders from many fields. The American academic leaders knew how good the Chinese students were. Chinese students, Chinese students, Chinese students,

tension in bilateral relations. The Biden administration seems to be trying to moderate the trend.

What drove some of the Chinese American scientists to accept offers from the Thousand Talents programs and other talent programs in China was a lack of investment in the U.S. in science and education. Federal funding for R&D has been essentially flat for a long time, just keeping up with inflation, while Chinese funding has been going up like 25 percent each year. I was attending a webinar and one of the Chinese American scientists on it said one year he lost his grant application in the U.S., so he had no choice but to accept the offer to go to China to continue his scientific research. And so I think the Biden administration is pushing through Congress now a big package to increase funding for the National Science Foundation, and for other science agencies that will help overall in the funding of science and education, including higher education, in the U.S. The strategy may be not so much to stop Chinese scientists in the U.S. from going back to China but to attract them to come here and to stay.[2] And also of course we should all recognize the need for international scientific collaboration, including that between the U.S. and China, in order to solve global problems.

If you had a chance to offer advice to the Biden administration, what would it be?

As a historian, I am reluctant to offer policy advice. But there are some things that should be clearly stated, especially by the U.S. government. First, we talked about non discrimination, which should be a given, but this should be repeated often. It is not just Chinese Americans but all Asian Americans who can get hit hard with suspicion. So the need is there to reiterate American values. That's important, not only just in terms of rhetoric but also in terms of actual experience of Chinese Americans and Asian Americans.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a co-sponsor of the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act, a bipartisan bill to bolster competitiveness with China that passed the Senate in June. But the Senate bill faces opposition in the House, which wants more funding for the National Science Foundation to boost U.S. investment in scientific research. *Credit: Senate Democrats/Flickr*

And second, as I mentioned earlier, the U.S. government should increase its investment in science and engineering. It will do a lot to help the U.S. attract more international talents to the U.S.. Thirdly, it is incumbent on the government to take the lead in clarifying the rules on what scientists who are involved in international exchange should follow. Perhaps they should get the National Academy of Sciences, as a kind of representative body of the scientific community, to have input. The NSF has already commissioned the so-called Jason group of independent scientists to write a report on this. In it they advocated that in basic research openness should be a given. The Jason group has argued that what most people do on a university campus is basic research and should be open, subject only to the limit of classification. University administrators should educate the faculty — not only Chinese Americans but all the faculty — and have a very clear set of rules as to how they should behave in international scientific exchanges. They should reiterate the importance of such exchanges for solving global problems.

The reiteration of the basic principles is important at every level. Maybe that's where we historians can make some contributions, by reminding people that American science has got to where it is today not because we stayed by ourselves, not by following an "America first" policy. No, it didn't work that way. We benefited from the refugees from Nazi Germany, for example, and from immigration from China, from India, from Europe after World War II. And we've benefitted from this huge immigration wave in the last 30 to 40 years as well. American science has led the world because of these international connections.

What are the consequences of this effort to root out spies or intellectual property theft, and to more closely monitor Chinese presence on American campuses?

If you go back a little to the Trump administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in 2020 the era of engagement with China was over; it's a new Cold War, Cold War 2.0. The danger of making this analogy between the U.S. and China now and the U.S. and Soviets then, is that it tends to make it a zero sum game. But the relationship between the U.S. and China is such a complex and important one. I don't think a zero sum kind of view is going to make it work for the U.S. or for the world. There are so many areas where it's required that the U.S. and China collaborate to solve global problems. You think of climate change as one. Think of public health emergencies, like Covid-19, as another one; and nuclear weapons too. [President] Biden recently reiterated, in his talks with Russian president Vladimir Putin, that neither side wants nuclear war. It's the same dynamics working between the U.S. and China as two nuclear powers. So, the U.S. and China have a complex relationship that demands mature leadership on both sides. I'm not just saying this for the U.S. side but the Chinese side as well. Both sides should recognize that there are things they need to do together to solve global problems. The relationship has to be one with nuance, not black and white, and with a clear recognition that there may not be easy solutions. We should also be aware of how this type of international rivalry may end up impacting Chinese Americans and Asian Americans.

But aren't there real concerns the U.S. government has about scientists who take federal research money to work on sensitive projects then setting up labs in China or sharing that knowledge with the Chinese government, and perhaps the Chinese military? What should be done to address these concerns?

This goes back to my earlier point about the need for the U.S. government to educate American scientists and other academics involved in international scientific exchanges with China, and also with other countries — collaborations, for example, with Russian and Iranian scientists. I'm sure that that goes on too. Everyone needs to recognize the risks involved in international scientific collaborations, and to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits. That's always going to be a balancing act because we should not lose sight of the potential threat to the U.S. interest in international interactions. It's real. And so the FBI has its job and other national security agencies have their jobs. They need to do their duty. But it's a matter of balancing. The job of the government is to balance the cost and benefits, and to give clear guidance to American scientists involved in these international interactions.

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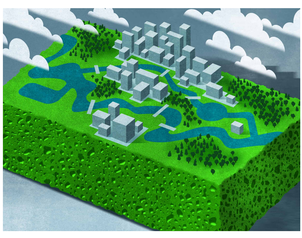

The Sponge Revolution

BY EYCK FREYMANN

By 2030, 70 percent of Chinese cities are scheduled to become "sponge cities" — a novel solution designed to prevent flooding while also "greening" China and making it more resilient to climate change. If it succeeds, it will be a major step forward in the Chinese Communist Party's plan for an "ecological civilization."

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