

Chapter 15

Decolonizing Knowledge: The Practical and Ethical Challenges of Researching “Sensitive” Topics in and about China

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Abstract: Much has been written about the need to decolonize knowledge and the western hegemony of scholarship. This is an important and continuing process that needs to take place. However, it is also the case that a similar and perhaps more restrictive hegemony exists in the People's Republic of China today in the Xi Jinping era, where any position other than the position of the Communist Party cannot be expressed. This is not just restrictive it is also extremely dangerous for scholars working on what are considered highly sensitive topics such as Xinjiang and Tibet, especially ethnic minority scholars. Based on many years of working both as a teacher and researcher in China this paper seeks to understand this “decolonization” of knowledge as a multifaceted and complex process. In doing so it seeks to find a way in which scholars working both outside and within China can find a respectful and constructive way to engage in dialogue and debate. In seeking to explore the different power factors at play it will attempt to understand this process from multiple perspectives in an era in which scholarship is becoming ever more ideologized in both East and West.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party, decolonization, securitization of knowledge, academic ethics

Much has been written about the need to decolonize knowledge and the western hegemony of scholarship. This is an important and continuing process that needs to take place. However, a similar and perhaps more restrictive hegemony exists in the People's Republic of China where any position other than the position of the Communist Party cannot be expressed. This is not just restrictive, it is also extremely dangerous for scholars working on what are considered highly sensitive topics such as Xinjiang and Tibet, especially for ethnic minority scholars.

Based on many years of working both as a teacher and researcher in China, this short paper seeks to understand “decolonization” of knowledge as a multi-faceted and complex process. In doing so it seeks to find a way in which scholars working both outside and within China can find a respectful and constructive way to engage in dialogue and debate. In seeking to explore the different power factors at play, it will attempt to understand this process from multiple perspectives in an era in which scholarship is becoming ever more ideologized in both East and West.

Deimperialization (or decolonization) is an ongoing intellectual project.¹ It is an area of sometimes fierce debate within US and American academia. As Burawoy² describes it, “every university has been obliged to examine its past for collaboration with white supremacy, whether the university was constructed on land expropriated from indigenous people or from the proceeds of slavery, whether it consecrated propagators of racism in statutes, portraits or in the names of buildings.” At times this debate has escalated into violence on campuses with statues being defaced, buildings vandalized, and speakers “deplatformed.”

If we are to understand the decolonization of education as recognizing, critiquing, and expunging the presence of colonial presuppositions in canonical texts, then we also need to ask if this should only be limited to Western colonialism.³ In taking China as an example, this short article attempts to

¹ Chen Kuan-Hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010), 257.

² Michael Burawoy, “Decolonizing Canons: A Conversation with Chinese Sociologists,” in *Interrogating the Future: Essays in Honour of David Fasenfest* (Brill, 2024), 98.

³ Michael Burawoy, “Decolonizing Canons: A Conversation with Chinese Sociologists,” in *Interrogating the Future: Essays in Honour of David Fasenfest* (Brill, 2024), 99.

explore whether this process could take place in our engagement with Chinese academia and scholars, or indeed whether such a process would lead to risks not just for academic freedom but also for the safety of researchers and students. This is a fundamental ethical issue for any of us working on topics that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) consider sensitive or indeed teaching students from the People's Republic.

McMaugh et al.⁴ argue that although there is a vast amount of discussion around “research ethics,” this is at times delimited to “research” as data generation, rather than expanded to other aspects of academic work more broadly. They see all aspects of research as involving what they term “ethical labor”: the reason why research is being done (motivation), how data is gathered (research methods), how research is represented (presentation), as well as how research is judged (review) and disseminated (impact), all entail questions of integrity. There is a vast amount of discussion on research ethics in research methods, and a fair amount on presentation (e.g., plagiarism), but seeing a far wider set of interconnected practices as likewise resting on ethical choices is uncommon but needed. Expanding the “ethics of research” beyond methods of gathering data draws attention to the ways in which numerous aspects of academic work entail complex forms of responsibility and questions of best practice.

To expand this still further, this is just as true of the academic environment of a university where teaching and research coexist. In this, university teaching is also “ethical labor,” raising questions about: the reasons why such teaching is being done (the motivations of teachers and students), how teaching is done and how topics are represented (teaching techniques and content), how learning and teaching are evaluated (assessment), and ultimately the outcomes of the encounter, for students, teachers, and others.

I suggest that actively thinking about these aspects of one's teaching and research practice as ethical choices is a key means to bring the ethical labor of such work to the surface. This should be collaborative—these should be

⁴ Anne McMaugh, Jennifer Sumsion, Colin Symes and David Saltmarsh, “From Ethics in Research to Ethics in Writing: Not Entirely Separate Matters,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 34, no. 1 (2007): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13598660500481603>.

things that are discussed among colleagues, even possibly in class. In this, I argue that such collaborative reflection should be a core part of “scholarly habitus,”⁵ the norms of academic work that, ideally, become taken for granted. The ethical nature of both research and teaching is heightened in an authoritarian context where one must navigate one’s responsibilities to students, colleagues, others, and oneself, where the stakes may be higher.

The idea that education is an ethical endeavor would in fact be familiar in China. In the Confucian tradition, education is regularly framed as the main means of “self-cultivation” through which one becomes a moral jun-zi (君子), “gentleman,” or more gender-neutrally “ideal person.”⁶ This can also be seen as “citizen-making,” “training so citizens fit a particular social, economic, and political order.”⁷ But the idea that education is a means of “becoming moral” for learners, or that education systems promote social norms, is not my point here. Instead, I am focusing upon the choices faced by researchers and teachers in such contexts, and the processes of reflection this entails for them.

A lot of academic debate around ethics in different cultural contexts is concerned with questions of the “universality” of ethical principles. While it is important to respect different cultural contexts, too much of this simplistically turns this into a debate between “Western” ethics focusing on “individuals” versus all others emphasizing “communities” or “family.”⁸ While growing out of valid postcolonial critique calling for the need to incorporate diverse viewpoints, the problem with such debates is that they accept and perpetuate binaries between “the West” and “the Rest,” and often conflate

⁵ Megan Watkins, “Discipline, Consciousness and the Formation of a Scholarly Habitus,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2005): 545–557, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310500322834>.

⁶ Jin Lin, “Rediscover Lasting Values: Confucian Cultural Learning Models in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Re-envisioning Chinese Education: The Meaning of Person-making in a New Age* (Routledge, 2016), 130–147.

⁷ David O’Brien and Melissa Shani Brown, *People, Place, Race and Nation in Xinjiang China: Territories of Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

⁸ Bridget Pratt, Cassandra Van, Cong Yali, Harun Rashid, Nandini Kumar, Aasim Ahmed, Ross Upshur and Bebe Loff, “Perspectives from South and East Asia on Clinical and Research Ethics: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 9, no. 2 (2004): 52–67, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2014.9.2.52>.

rather than differentiate universal principles versus universal practices, or, as Czymoniewicz-Klippel, Brijnath, and Crockett⁹ put it, the difference between “strategies and strictures.” Most would agree that ethical paths are aimed at the avoidance of harm, but many disagree how this is best achieved.

In my own experience, the argument that China offers a “unique” or “exceptional” context where “Western values” are less applicable is often not a way of engaging in meaningful discussions about different cultures or different visions of ethical practice. Often, it was a way of using an assertion of cultural distinction to preclude discussion which was critical of Chinese politics in some way. The provision of a “Western education experience” which precludes “Western perspectives” is a logical impossibility, although it must also always consider context.

The hybrid space that is an intercultural classroom (and research environment) is made more dangerous when the repercussions of one’s decisions could have a greater impact on those involved. When a class discussion could lead to one student reporting upon another, or presenting one’s research could endanger the teacher/researcher or their collaborators, there are serious questions about when, or how, or even if, certain topics are broached. And yet, to pass over sensitive topics is also problematic: it contributes to students’ ignorance of the world which is complicit in xenophobia and polarization.

Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, China has become even more authoritarian. “Ideological and political education,” or sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu (思想政治教育), often shortened as sizheng (思政), is a subject taught in high schools and universities in China as part of the country’s Patriotic Education Campaign (爱国主义教育) since the early 1990s.¹⁰ Although training in ideology and correct political thinking have always been a part of the political culture of the CCP. According to Mao Zedong, “[G]etting to grips with the leadership of thought control is the first priority in maintaining overall leadership.” In the words of Deng Xiaoping, “[D]uring the last ten years, our

⁹ Melina Czymoniewicz-Klippel, Bianca Brijnath and Belina Crockett, “Ethics and the Promotion of Inclusiveness Within Qualitative Research: Case Examples From Asia and the Pacific,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 5 (2010): 332–341, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800409358872>.

¹⁰ Stella Chen, “Ideological and Political Education,” *The China Media Project*, December 17, 2001, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/ideological-and-political-education/.

biggest mistake was made in the field of education, primarily in ideological and political education—not just of students but of the people in general.” Jiang Zemin said that “the first thing for strengthening the party is to grasp ideological and political work, because solving ideological and political problems is the premise and foundation for other works.” Hu Jintao argues that “ideology is an important front that we fiercely fight against hostile forces; if this front has some problems, it might lead to social turmoil and even the fall of our regime.”¹¹

Education then for the Communist Party is a part of the revolutionary war and students are the vanguard of this force. Almost all Chinese students are members of the Chinese Youth League, and many will go on to become full members of the Chinese Communist Party during their time as undergraduates. In 2016, 1.8 million students were Party members.¹² All Chinese students are required to undertake compulsory military training usually in their first year. Ideological and political education in China is aimed at “building a great socialist country and promoting relevant moral values in the conditions of the modern global world.”¹³

In 2013, a list of topics on which teaching is specifically prohibited was issued, the so called “Seven Nos” of civil society, civil rights, universal values, legal independence, press freedom, the bourgeois class, and the historical wrongs of the Party.¹⁴ So if none of this can even be discussed in the classroom how can we even engage with ideas of decolonization in our own classrooms with Chinese students. Can we discuss the situation of the Uyghur people or Tibetans without putting them at risk that their fellow Chinese students

¹¹ All quotations are taken from: Zeng Jinghan, “Ideological and Political Education in China,” in *The Chinese Communist Party's Capacity to Rule. Critical Studies of the Asia-Pacific* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹² Xu Liu, Zhao Xiantong and Hugh Starkey, “Ideological and Political Education in Chinese Universities: Structures and Practices,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 43, no. 2 (2023): 596–598, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1960484>.

¹³ Kequan Lin, “Chinese Ideology in the Political Education of Students: How Does Ideology-Based Teaching Impact Students' Consciousness?” *Journal of Knowledge Economy* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-024-02164-9>.

¹⁴ Tim Pringle and Sophia Woodman, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Academic Freedom in Globalising Chinese Universities,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 26, no. 10 (2022): 1782–1802, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2074979>.

may report them (as has been documented)?¹⁵ Might we need to reevaluate our syllabi? Publishers have been facing increasing demands to block content from publication “bundles” for sale in China. Such censorship is made possible by the “oligopoly” in academic publishing under which a handful of large global companies control the majority of publishing outlets, and these companies are becoming more complicit in censoring academic content.¹⁶

There is, of course, no easy solution here. As researchers and educators, we are tasked with not just exploring, analyzing, and seeking truth, we are also tasked with problematizing that very notion of what truth means. It is a difficult and fraught process, but it is one that we must endure. If in our increasing reliance on Chinese overseas students, we seek to exceptionalize these students to such an extent that we do not discuss certain topics, then we have a severe problem. However, if we limit our classrooms and our research collaboration only to those we agree with, we are guilty of another egregious form of censorship or indeed racism in our treatment of those we consider other. As researchers we have many ethical responsibilities, to our subject, to our students, and our collaborators and interlocuters, these ethical issues are not just theoretical, they are fraught with risk. There is a potential in the future that we will be required to only teach and research that which is not sensitive, the danger of this should be obvious to anyone concerned for education and the role of the university. All we can do is seek to find a balance whereby the presence of international students is seen for the positive it is while challenging those same students to reflect on the decolonializing of knowledge that has happened in their own countries. It is a fundamental ethical discussion, and ethics is essential to security in all cases.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for Academics

Do not self-censor on what might be considered sensitive topics. There has never been a greater need to challenge this silencing of discussion. Seek all

¹⁵ Pringle and Woodman, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Academic Freedom in Globalising Chinese Universities,” 1782–1802.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

opportunities to engage in respectful discussion with Chinese academics, one in which all ideas are challenged and questioned in a constructive and supportive manner.

Recommendations for Universities

Do not allow the Chinese Communist Party to dictate what is taught or discussed in our universities for the sake of economics. Collaboration with Chinese academics and the presence of Chinese students in our universities greatly enriches us, but also, we should not view China as a source of income over true partnership.

Recommendations for Governments

It has never been more important to engage with Chinese academics, and governments should be very careful to avoid prejudice and paranoia when engaging with Chinese colleagues. However, it must also be realistic when it comes to organizations such as the Confucious Institutes which are branches of the Chinese government and which seek to influence how we discuss and research China.

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