Kicked Out of China, and Other Real-Life Costs of a Geopolitical Meltdown

The New York Times

July 16, 2020 Thursday 19:11 EST

Section: OPINION; sunday

Length: 1924 words

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Highlight: When countries clash, here's what happens to those of us caught in the middle.

Body

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LONDON — Soon after I was informed in mid-March that my journalist visa for China had been canceled, I faced a dilemma: what to do with my collection of wooden staffs used in a style of Chinese martial arts that I had been practicing for nearly 10 years.

Should I give them back to my master, an affable 40-year-old bus driver and inheritor of the practice, who had made it his life's work to revive the stick fighting that had once been so common in Beijing's working-class neighborhoods? Or should I have the movers ship them to London, where I would now be living?

The staffs weren't expensive and I could buy them at martial arts shops in any major city around the world. On the other hand, my teacher didn't really need them: He had a storeroom full of sticks that he used to teach anyone interested for free.

Yet mine were priceless to me. Made of white ash, many were darkened with the sweat and oil from other people's hands, especially my sparring partner, a carpenter who had spent countless hours in a park helping me learn the steps to the different fighting poses. I felt that the staffs belonged there, in Beijing. But they also were part of me and I wanted them, even if I wouldn't have anyone to practice with anymore.

In the big picture my dilemma sounds like a ridiculously petty problem: Compared with the daily circus of the Trump administration, the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, even the dispute between China and the United States seems like another one of those international spats that matter little outside the navel-gazing world of China-watchers.

If this dispute does matter beyond that, it surely is on the abstract stage of geopolitics, where people move aircraft carriers, plot sanctions and wield diplomatic ties like chits on a board game.

But the meltdown in China-United States relations has real-life implications as well. Taken individually, stories of severed friendships and strained family ties seem insignificant — certainly they do when you talk to a true believer who thinks that the United States' policy toward China is necessary to make the world safe for democracy. Yet cumulatively these small wounds change how all of us experience the world, forming a collective trauma over the

loss of an optimistic era dating back several decades, when the world seemed to be opening up, however imperfectly.

Not to sound maudlin, but people like me built our lives around a premise: that the world was interconnected and that it was a worthwhile calling to devote one's life to making other cultures a tiny bit more intelligible. And also that even if dedicating oneself to this life wasn't going to be easy or necessarily well-paid (unless one wanted to hawk dodgy Chinese securities), it would be meaningful and was in some way safe: The world wasn't about to return to old-style blocs, where people from one camp couldn't enter the other's side. This was a world of standardized visas, regular flights and some sort of career prospects, whether in business, journalism, academics or cultural exchanges.

For me, it was an invitation to study Chinese starting in my sophomore year of college and work at the school newspaper. Later, I went to Beijing and wrote a senior thesis about North American journalism in China because I wanted to understand the best way to report on the country. I got a master's degree in Chinese studies to help prepare me to become a correspondent in China, and went to Taiwan to improve my Chinese.

None of this meant I was entitled to a job as a correspondent, but along the way people almost always nodded and said that I was choosing a smart career path. China was an evermore important country in the world, business ties were increasing and we would always need to know about this growing giant.

But like many people who have devoted themselves to learning about another place, immersing myself in all things Chinese became more than a clever career choice: It became my calling. Yes, China had political oppression and air pollution and a million other problems, yet I came to love it — from the culture and the people to its can-do spirit and embrace of innovation.

My bucket list of places to visit before leaving — the expat's eternal calculation — never got shorter. In fact, it grew longer each year.

The more I stayed in China, the more I learned and the more I wanted to see: more holy mountains, more breathtaking landscapes, more places where Chinese myths had their roots, more homes of famous artists or writers, more friends in different cities.

After a while that idea came to seem idiotic: What was the point of living in a country that was just a checklist of things to be done and then abandoned? That wasn't living; that was dying.

The years added up, and one day I realized that I'd spent more of my life in China than any other place on the planet — more than the 15 years in my country of birth, Canada, the dozen in the United States, where I moved during high school and became a citizen, or the decade in Germany.

China wasn't an easy country to call home. It is the original land of genetic determinism; you cannot really become Chinese unless you look a certain way. You can be sixth-generation Chinese-American, speak only "ni hao ma" and know little more about the place than General Tso's Chicken, but to China (and to many Americans in the United States) you're Chinese.

Conversely, even though I had lived there for so long, learned the language and so on, I would never become Chinese. On a practical level, it's almost legally impossible to settle down and become a citizen: There is no real equivalent to a green card nor, therefore, a real immigrant culture. And yet it was a place that I had loved from my first visit in 1984 and that I still loved when I left earlier this year.

The yearning to belong works the other way around, too. Many Chinese people went to the United States to study and came to love that country. Many built their lives around settling in America while also being able to jet back to China for family holidays. They started to pay attention to American politics, they put up with discrimination, and one day they realized that their children hadn't just been born in the United States but had grown up there. In some way, they were American, even if they still had Chinese passports.

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For all of us, the Covid-19 pandemic has made transcontinental living more difficult. But the real damage is longer term: The worsening of ties between countries means that today people are viewed suspiciously for things that previously were lauded.

Chinese who went to the United States to study — once seen as a great boon to America — are now often treated as saboteurs or spies. The Trump administration has visited petty humiliations and slights upon many foreigners, insisting on calling the new coronavirus the “Chinese virus” or suspending the work visas of hundreds of thousands of non-Americans in the name of controlling the pandemic.

I cannot excuse China’s behavior in recent years — the internment camps for Uighurs, the incessantcrackdown on free speech, the territorial grabs in the South China Sea — but the Chinese Communist Party has always made its ambitions and methods clear. What it is doing isn’t shocking if you’ve paid attention to the way it obtained power and has held it over the past seven decades.

What has changed are the strategies and tactics that the United States now deploys to deal with China. Starting in the 1970s, a bipartisan policy of engagement was pursued, with the idea that it would help bind China to the international order.

Some critics of China claim that engagement was always a naïve dream and, as evidence, point to the fact that China hasn’t become more liberal. But most realists knew that democratization was at best a distant objective; the main idea was that pragmatic engagement would be more productive than blind confrontation.

Yet blind confrontation is now the order of the day. And just as people who understood China had predicted, the result has been zero. America’s trade dispute has yielded no change in China’s behavior and no grand deal benefiting American producers. No Uighurs have been let out of camps. Hong Kong is less free. And Western reporters’ access to information about China has been kneecapped, thanks to the expulsion of foreign reporters.

These expulsions were the direct result of American policy. In March, the Trump administration in effect expelled some 60 Chinese journalists from the United States, arguing — disingenuously, I think — that the move was retaliation for the mistreatment of foreign reporters in China.

The numbers might seem small. In addition to myself, only about a dozen other journalists were kicked out of China then. The expulsion order concerned holders of American passports whose visas were due to be renewed in 2020 and were sponsored by The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.

But in practice it gutted the American press corps in China. That’s because only these media organizations, especially the Times and the Journal, had the staff and the budget to mount ambitious investigative reporting on sensitive issues there, such as the treatment of the Uighurs, the finances of senior leaders or the rise of digital surveillance.

The few reporters who remain will hardly have the resources for such projects, meaning that outsiders’ understanding of China will be increasingly limited to daily news.

For the ideologues in the White House this outcome doesn’t matter: Taking a hard-line approach against China today is just unavoidable realpolitik.

The main goal, however, has nothing to do with standing up to China; it’s about turning China into a tool to help President Trump get re-elected in the fall. And if his tough talk hurts the Times, the Journal and the Post, then so much the better. Mr. Trump’s real objective is to dupe American voters into thinking that China is responsible for the coronavirus and, by extension, for the economic depression the pandemic has caused.

That’s why my agony over being expelled from China is so acute. I could accept leaving if China really were 1930s Germany and the world were heading toward a necessary showdown. But China is not Nazi Germany, despite what some have claimed.

Yes, many of its policies are antithetical to the values of open societies, yet the country still has many people with whom outsiders can engage: independent filmmakers, writers, intellectuals, even government officials. Some form of engagement will continue, but it's hard to see most of the study-abroad programs, academic exchanges, tourism or, of course, investigative journalism returning in the near future.

For months I couldn't decide what to do with my fighting sticks. Finally, last week I wrote to my teacher asking for his advice.

He told me to keep them, saying we shared something called "yuan" — fate, or an affinity.

"Please take them to a park in London and practice with them there," he said. "And think of us."

Ian Johnson (@iandenisjohnson) is the author most recently of "The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao."

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Load-Date: July 18, 2020
