A China scholar working in China

"What do you think about the recent news on minister Yuan Guiren?", a Chinese student asked the professor after her guest lecture on the history of Chinese civic education. I had invited the professor of East China Normal University's (ECNU) Department of Politics to give a lecture for my course 'Social and Cultural Debates in Twentieth-Century China'. Before the professor could answer, the student explained for his classmates that Yuan Guiren was the Chinese education minister who had allegedly stated that universities should not use textbooks promoting Western values. "Why would the minister say that?", an American student asked. "Do you agree?", a Pakistani student followed up. Other students joined in: "Has this happened before?"; "Will this also affect us?" While listening to the professor's long and thoughtful answers followed by a vigorous discussion between the students and the professor I realized: Yes, this is why I wanted to work at NYU Shanghai, why I wanted to work in China.

Lena Scheen

MY RESEARCH EXPLORES the social and cultural impact of China's fast globalization and urbanization, focusing on Shanghai. NYU Shanghai, a Joint Venture University between the American NYU and Chinese ECNU, is itself part and parcel of this process. A global university like NYU Shanghai would not have been possible before China 'opened up' and joined the global economy. Half of our student body hail from China and half represent countries from around the world. While I sometimes jokingly tell my students, "You are my research subjects", you might argue that I have become *myself* an intrinsic part of my own research subject. As a matter of fact, my current research concentrates on the very district in which I live, and where NYU Shanghai's campus is located: the Pudong District.

Living and working in your own research area obviously has its benefits. Take as an example my latest project on a group of people protesting a development project in Pudong. Walking from home to work I noticed a group of old ladies burning incense on the broad pavement along Century Avenue. Intrigued by this unusual sight, I asked them what they were doing and a new research project was born. However, during my first interviews it also immediately became clear that I could no longer play the 'neutral' outsider's role of a visiting researcher on fieldwork. One of the informants determinedly stressed the fact that "your" campus was developed by the same investment company that was behind this redevelopment project, followed up by the argument that most projects in the Pudong District were motivated by a desire "to attract and please foreigners", and after a meaningful silence, "like you". "Like me", I replied realizing my role as an interviewer had suddenly changed. From being a researcher questioning her subject, the gaze was turned back at me and I became the object under scrutiny. I was pushed into the same role as my informants, revealing the equalizing power of being part of the society one studies, as well as the complex issue of complicity that comes with it.

Being a China scholar working in China means that in addition to following and analyzing what is happening in China, you constantly have to reflect on your own role and position in these developments. In principle there is nothing special about that: a self-evident fact for any scholar living in the place s/he studies. The difference, however, comes from the way people *outside* of China respond to people working in China. While I cannot speak for all scholars working on Dutch society, I highly doubt whether an American scholar studying urban developments in the Netherlands is confronted at home with the question how he can work in a country that consistently treats refugees in direct violation of human rights laws.
In China, one doesn't even have to be a China Scholar to be confronted with these questions on a frequent basis. The idea is that working in China in *itself* means that one approves or even legitimizes practices and policies carried out by the Chinese government. Regardless of the flaw in this reasoning, I do value the fact that working in China forces one to reflect on issues of social engagement and responsibility as an academic. Hence I do not object to these questions. On the contrary, I think we should ask more of these questions, most of all to ourselves, no matter the place or topic of our research.

Academic freedom

The most urgent question for any academic working in China is of course the issue of academic freedom. Up until today I have personally never experienced any restriction in my teaching or research. In this respect, one can compare the campus of NYU Shanghai with an American embassy: working in China under American laws. Or an even better comparison is the Special Economic Zones: an academic free zone within China. But even though one can discuss any topic considered sensitive in China, one cannot deny that it makes a difference to discuss these topics in China with the people who are part of that very society. The most valuable outcome of this is that it is simply impossible to discuss China as a faraway topic, something out there we can observe, describe, and analyze as an 'exotic' object not part of our own world. Likewise, an Orientalist approach of 'China-as-the-Other' is simply no option.

Teaching China Studies in China to students from China and other places in the world – a truly diverse class of various cultural *and* educational backgrounds – means that one has to be even more conscious of possible sensitivities, whether political, cultural or religious. It also means that one starts without shared assumptions, values or even knowledge, which to me is the most challenging and, most of all, the most valuable aspect of global education. Indeed, this often creates tension, uncomfortable situations, painful discussions, awkward silences, hurt nationalist sentiments; it is precisely in those most painful moments that we learn.

This is the reason I decided to remain quiet when the discussion between my guest speaker and students evolved. For a brief moment, I was no longer the instructor; I became the student of my own students gaining a deeper understanding of recent reforms in the Chinese educational system, while simultaneously questioning my own position in it. The days after the guest lecture, I worried how the Chinese professor herself had experienced the discussion of that day. Had it gone too far in her eyes? Then an email arrived in my inbox: "I want to thank you for the class the other day. I have learned so much from your very different teaching style and from the interaction with your students. Would you like to give a guest lecture on critical thinking for a large group of Chinese law students?" "Of course", I answered, "This is why I work at NYU Shanghai, why I work in China."

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IN TRYING TO BE SUCCESSFUL the New Asia Scholar (NAS) must be highly motivated, mobile and flexible. NAS struggles with unfavorable employment conditions such as a low salary and short-term contracts. NAS has to be reachable at all times and will seize every opportunity to apply for a grant. How do young NAS juggle the demands of work, mobility and private life and to what extent are they successful? I argue that casual employment and uncertain working contracts add to the stress of young NAS. If they want to be successful, they do not only have to be excellent scholars but they must also be skilful networkers, managers and grant writers.

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AM I REALLY STUDYING Asia just because my research is based in India? Is a social scientist in The Netherlands doing 'European Studies'?

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THE MAIN DIFFERENCES between Asian Studies research in the second decade of the twentieth century and when I first began research in the 1970s are as follows:
1. The trend now is towards disciplinary studies, rather than area studies. Disciplinary studies is often comparative, so that scholars will study topics like "population issues" or particular economic questions in various countries, not just one. The emphasis is on the knowledge of the discipline, not of the country or countries concerned. It is a perfectly reasonable approach, and it has produced very good scholarship, but it does have one problem for me, which is that language studies often take a back place to disciplinary studies. For China, the country I know best in Asia, the result is that many people use research assistants who are themselves Chinese and don't bother to master the language or to do so to the extent that intensive research requires.
2.Research tends to be more money-based, because there are now far more grants available than was the case in the past. Moreover, judgments on how good a scholar is tend to be based more on how much research money they have been able to gain.
3. Within the universities, tenure has become both more important and more difficult. Publishing has become more important all over the world, and it is not as easy to get tenure, let alone promotions, without extensive publications. Of course, the volume of these publications have expanded enormously over the period. Many of these publications are of very high standard, but I'm not sure that the standard overall has risen.
4. In China it is much easier to undertake research work than it used to be in the 1970s. It is of course true that many still complain a great deal that government authorities place obstacles in the way of scholars, especially those who are very critical of government and for topics considered sensitive. But it is still MUCH easier than it was. The number of places scholars can go and live has expanded and the range of work that can be undertaken has gone up.
5. The range of scholars who undertake scholarship in Asian studies has increased. There are now far more women than there used to be, and one of the results is that gender studies has increased as a field of study. Of course, it is possible for men to undertake gender studies, but the reality is that most of the work on China gender studies, which I know best, is done by women.
6. There is nothing new about Chinese scholars moving overseas, including to Western countries. The older generation of scholars included Chinese who had left mainland China due to the communist victory. But after the opening up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many more went to the West and were able to do PhDs in China studies and take up jobs, never going back to China.

I think I was lucky in getting into some fields that were not fashionable at the time, but have become much more so since. For instance, at the time I began my work on Chinese theatre, most scholars did not regard it as a central issue worth extensive research. Similarly, when I started my work on ethnic minorities, it was still an unusual field that most people regarded as either too difficult or not central enough to China studies to be worth the trouble it required. Of course, there were exceptions. However, I think taking up a relatively new field was lucky. In particular, ethnic studies have now become very fashionable and important, fitting into the politics of our era. Overall, I think the New Asia Scholar has it more difficult than the old. This is because competition is far fiercer and, although opportunities are also much greater, the rate of expansion is slowing. I admire many of the younger scholars greatly and think they deserve better o pportunities. Have I witnessed tensions between "old" and "new" scholars? Yes, I have, because frequently younger people adopt different and even hostile attitudes and have different experiences to those of former generations. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as tension can be productive. People, whatever their generation, can and should learn from each other.

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