

# WELLESLEY

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WELLESLEY

## Wellesley College faculty propose cutting ties with university in China if professor there is fired for advocating for democracy, freedom

Posted by Matt Rocheleau September 17, 2013 04:25 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

More than 130 faculty members at Wellesley College have signed a petition saying leaders of their institution should "reconsider" a newly-formed partnership with a university in China if officials there move forward with plans to fire a professor for speaking out in favor of democracy and individual freedom.

Professor David Xia Yeliang of the school of economics at Peking University "is facing dismissal for exercising his right of free speech on issues related to democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedom," the "open letter" from Wellesley College faculty said.

"We believe that dismissing Prof. Xia for political reasons is such a fundamental violation of academic freedom that we, as individuals, would find it very difficult to engage in scholarly exchanges with Peking University," the letter said. "If he is dismissed, we will encourage Wellesley College to reconsider our institutional partnership."

Xia's fellow faculty in China were scheduled to vote this month on whether to fire him. But, one of the letter's lead signatories, Wellesley professor Susan Reverby, said: "As far as we know, there hasn't yet been a vote, and we don't know what's going to happen yet."

The letter's signatures account for about 37 percent of the Wellesley's entire faculty. Reverby said the signatures were collected during August, which is often the toughest month to track down people, particularly college professors who often try to relax and disconnect during the final month before classes resume.

"I was really struck that we got the response we did," she said. "I think the principles are so important and people recognize that."

The letter was sent this month to the president of Peking University Wang Enge, the university's economics school dean Sun Qixiang and the university council's chair Zhu Shanlu.

"We are sensitive to the differences between Chinese and American society and our approaches to higher education," the letter said. "Yet, the principle of academic freedom is the very foundation of our liberal arts institution, Wellesley College."

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In June, the two schools [forged a partnership](#) “dedicated to educating women for global leadership” through faculty and student exchanges, joint research, virtual collaborations and other means, according to a memorandum of understanding signed by Wang and Wellesley President H. Kim Bottomly.

The partnership launched when 20 Wellesley students traveled to the partner school in Beijing to meet with 20 Peking students for a 10-day academic program that featured a master class taught by former Secretary of State and Wellesley alumna Madeleine Albright.

In 2014, 20 Peking students are scheduled to travel to Wellesley for another joint academic program.

In a statement, Wellesley College said that: “The goal of Wellesley’s new initiative is engagement with other countries and cultures, including China, notwithstanding their social, legal and political systems, which are different from our own ... The exchange of diverse ideals, perspectives and views, we believe, is essential to the liberal arts and to helping to solve the biggest problems of the day.”

“At the same time, as we participate on an international level, we do not—and must not—sacrifice our own core principles and ideas, which include among them human rights, constitutional democracy, and the rule of law,” the statement continued. “We engage—led by our world-renowned faculty—with openness and dignity and always grounded in our core beliefs.”

The letter from Wellesley faculty said they are “very enthusiastic” about working the new partnership with Peking, which they called “one of the most important initiatives that our college has undertaken in more than a century of academic connections with China.”

“We fully support the idea of exchanges and collaborations that are of mutual benefit to students and faculty at both institutions and that build upon our shared dedication to excellence in higher education and scholarly inquiry,” the letter added.

But, “We ... are writing to you to affirm our commitment to the principle of academic freedom, which holds that scholars must be able to pursue their research and teaching free from ideological pressure, and that their jobs should never be in jeopardy because of their political views.”

Reverby said Peking had begun taking steps to fire Xia before the partnership with Wellesley was established. But, faculty at Wellesley did not learn of Peking’s ongoing attempt to fire Xia until after the partnership was established.

“Once we signed this agreement, he became our colleague,” Reverby said.

Two of the faculty who signed the letter, Reverby and Thomas Cushman, hosted Xia and [taped a lengthy interview](#) with him when he visited Wellesley College this summer after they and several other faculty invited him.

In the interview, Xia talks about a wide range of topics including “his involvement in human rights advocacy in China, and repercussions of his outspokenness,” says a description of a video of the interview, which was posted to online by the Wellesley College YouTube account.

Cushman described Xia as “a leading classical liberal economist in China, and an active advocate for constitutional democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedom,” according to the [Wellesley College website](#).

Cushman said Xia has been threatened with expulsion from his university “because of his outspoken critiques of China’s government,” the Wellesley website says.

"He's been an activist," said Reverby. "There's been an increasing pattern of pushback [in China] against people who are advocating for human rights."

Xia has taught at Peking since 2000 and has taught and studied at two other US schools in recent years, [Stanford University](#) and the University of California, Berkeley .

Xia has said he is interested in returning to Wellesley this October for a conference on human rights that Cushman is planning.

In their letter, the Wellesley faculty said they are "pleased" by a [statement](#) from Wang on Peking's website that says: "With our democratic administration laying great emphasis on academic freedom and scientific research, we have proudly produced a great number of scholars in various areas of concentration and specialty."

The faculty also said in the letter they "greatly appreciate" a [statement](#) from Sun on the Peking economics school's website that says: "independence, democracy, freedom, skepticism, and criticism are regarded as the essence of a university and the beauty of the university spirit. There is no doubt that such a spirit is a necessary element for one's personality as well as an engine for innovation and creation."

The letter said that: "As fellow scholars, we ask you not to hold the vote on Professor Xia's status at Peking University and to uphold the noble principles and aspirations expressed so eloquently by President Wang and Dean Sun," the letter said.

Reverby said faculty and campus leaders at other colleges and universities are beginning to face similar dilemmas.

"I think faculty everywhere really are concerned about what are the nature of these [international] arrangements [and partnerships] and what do we do about this," she said. "It's an interesting problem. I don't think there's an easy answer."

"There's a bottom line of inalienable rights that shouldn't be violated," she added. "How do we teach our students and how do we go about our daily lives if we don't stand up for basic human rights? That's the question."

*This story was originally posted on Sept. 16 and updated on Sept. 17 to include comments from an interview with Wellesley College professor Susan Reverby.*

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