



Free Speech for Whom?

The arrest and sentencing of a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota for tweets he posted while studying in the U.S. raise concerns about restrictions on Chinese students' speech.

By [Elizabeth Redden](#)

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News that a University of Minnesota student was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in China for tweets he posted while studying at Minnesota renewed concerns about whether Chinese students studying in the U.S. enjoy the same freedom as their non-Chinese classmates and signaled a seeming escalation of pressures on Chinese students' and scholars' speech.

“This case is extremely disturbing,” said Kevin Carrico, a senior lecturer in Chinese studies at Monash University in Australia. “It demonstrates all too clearly that the [People's Republic of China] government is not only monitoring students' speech abroad, but also actively investigating and prosecuting students for exercising free speech. The Chinese state is basically telling citizens who live abroad, ‘We own you.’”

Axios reported on the arrest of the student, 20-year-old Luo Daiqing, upon his return to his hometown in China last July. *Axios* cited a Chinese court document that accused Luo of having “used his Twitter account to post more than 40 comments denigrating a national leader's image and indecent pictures” in the fall of 2018, “while he was studying at the University of Minnesota.”

The tweets featured cartoon images of Winnie the Pooh -- a character censored in China since Web users began posting satirical images likening the bear to President Xi Jinping -- as well as images of a cartoon villain that bears a resemblance to Xi.

Luo was sentenced in November to six months' imprisonment for “provocation,” with credit toward that six months for the time already spent in detention.

Luo did not return a message from *Inside Higher Ed* sent to an email address under his name found in the University of Minnesota's directory. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* reported on Friday that it received an email from Luo's university email address confirming the prison sentence and saying he has been released and is staying in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

U.S. lawmakers have grown increasingly concerned about Chinese government efforts to exert influence over U.S. campus life or export state censorship. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, the co-chairman of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, was among the lawmakers who weighed in on Luo's arrest: “#China has sentenced a student to 6 months in prison for tweets he wrote while he was in the U.S. as a student,” Rubio said on Twitter. “Let that sink in ...”

Faculty have raised concerns in the past about Chinese students' seeming reluctance to speak openly in the classroom about issues that might be considered sensitive in China. [A 2018 report](#) on Chinese interference and influence in American higher education from the Wilson Center described several cases in which faculty “said they believe many of their students from the PRC do not enjoy academic freedom in the classroom because they are afraid someone will report them to the authorities if they are seen to engage in sensitive academic activities.”

[A report on academic freedom and China](#) from the academic freedom protection group Scholars at Risk released last fall raised similar concerns about efforts by Chinese authorities to punish speech they find displeasing, both within and outside China's borders. SAR [previously reported](#) on a postdoctoral researcher at a Finnish university, Zhan Wang, who was detained last fall upon his entry to China on a personal visit, allegedly for his online expression.

“China has significant ambitions when it comes to higher education, and those ambitions necessitate international exchange, so China is seeking ways to maintain control of information in a global context,” said Clare Robinson, SAR’s director of advocacy. “We’ve been seeing surveillance efforts like student informants and threats to families still in China as a means of punishing those who speak critically, whether it be in an academic context or not.”

Robinson said that in the case of Luo's tweets she doesn't think the content of the speech -- whether it was in an academic or extramural context -- is what is most important. “I think what’s important is that other scholars and students in and from China will take note of this detention and they’ll think twice maybe before tweeting, but also before publishing a paper, before raising their hands in class, before singing up a class in Politics in East Asia,” she said. “It will impact academic expression or inquiry that could be potentially displeasing to the [Chinese Communist] Party.”

The campus free speech group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education also raised concerns about Luo’s reported imprisonment and the damaging effect it could have on academic environments. “FIRE is deeply concerned by Luo's imprisonment for political comments he posted on Twitter while studying here in the United States,” said Sarah McLaughlin, the director of targeted advocacy at FIRE. “Academic communities flourish when all students, including international students, may speak freely without the threat of surveillance or punishment. No matter where they call home, students should not be forced to choose between peacefully expressing their beliefs and staying out of jail.”

Kris Olds, a professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an expert on the globalization of higher education, said on Twitter that the case raises a number of questions for international universities hosting Chinese students. Among them: “How much do the hard working staff in our International Student Services (& equivalent) units understand about the rise of global reach & ‘network sovereignty’ agendas associated with countries like China and Saudi Arabia?” he asked. “What obligations do our senior leaders ... and those overseeing int'l student services have to working with int'l students from countries like China to understand and strategize about this phenomenon[?]”

“How can universities better understand when their int'l students are arrested in their countries of citizenship (for dubious reasons like this case)? Should they share accurate information about the arrests quickly & broadly? If so, who decides when & how[?]” Olds asked. “What obligations do our universities have to provide our arrested students & their families, in cases like this, with resources for legal support & broader political support in relevant contexts here & around the world? ... What is the role of formal and informal associations of universities in responding to this phenomenon, recognizing that many universities do not have the scale of legal and area studies resources that the University of Minnesota does[?]”

Finally, he wrote, “Many int'l students have faced political challenges when ‘returning home’ -- this is not a completely new phenomenon. But digital platforms & associated surveillance agendas associated w ‘network sovereignty’ are new(ish). Do we have the capacity & expertise to act wisely[?]”

Carrico, the Monash senior lecturer, said he thinks Minnesota “needs to make a statement condemning this travesty of justice. And universities need to

stand their ground and clarify that any intimidation of anyone for discussing China-related issues openly, honestly, even critically will not be accepted.”

A University of Minnesota spokesman, Jake Ricker, confirmed that a student by the name Luo Daiqing was enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts in 2018-19. Ricker said the university only learned of the situation last week after being contacted by media.

"This has been a difficult situation to monitor due to the lack of available, timely or complete information, but we were pleased to hear reports that the individual has been released from prison and returned home," Ricker said.

Read more by [Elizabeth Redden](#)

https://insidehighered.com/news/2020/01/31/prosecution-china-student-tweets-he-posted-while-studying-us-raises-free-speech?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=fc943a2327-DNU_2019_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-fc943a2327-198467257&mc_cid=fc943a2327&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2