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*Entretien avec Robert Quinn, directeur exécutif et fondateur du réseau mondial Scholars at Risk*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/1591>

ISSN: 2105-2549

**Publisher**

Gregory B. Lee

**Electronic reference**

Vanessa Frangville, Gwennaël Gaffric and Robert Quinn, "An Interview with Robert Quinn, Founding Executive Director of the Global Network Scholars at Risk", *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* [Online], 16 | 2021, Online since 31 December 2021, connection on 11 March 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/1591>

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## Introduction

- 1 In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as knowledge production became increasingly globalized, the two world wars and other international conflicts led to the creation of several institutions whose mission was to facilitate the mobility and integration of scholars persecuted and forced to flee their country. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie corporation, for instance, contributed to accommodate researchers from all over the world, as fascism, Nazism or Stalinism were on the rise in the 1930s. In Europe, the Academic Assistance Council was created in London in 1933, and many others emerged after the second world war. The Cold war initiated new programs to welcome scientists from eastern Europe, the Balkan peninsula, but also South America, including Chilian academics feeling Pinochet's dictatorship, and South Africa under the apartheid regime.
- 2 The category of "scholar at risk", however, emerged only in the early twenty-first century. This very term emphasizes risks incurred by individuals because of their research, and therefore highlights their specific needs among other refugees. Scholars at Risk thus was created in 1999 to support scholars facing threats. Initiated by the University of Chicago, it was launched as an international network in 2000, and developed into a benchmark organization to monitor and defend academic freedom. It has since relocated its headquarters in New York and opened several branches in Europe.

- 3 The Scholar Rescue Fund, established in 2002, granted scholarships to threatened and displaced scholars, hosted in partner universities across the world. Such initiative inspired several States and individual universities to create their own funds, such as, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative<sup>1</sup> established in Germany in 2015, the French PAUSE program<sup>2</sup> launched in 2017 or the Solidarity Fund in the Belgian Université libre de Bruxelles from 2016.<sup>3</sup> Besides, Scholars at Risk plays a major role in developing a deep understanding of the attacks on academics and academic freedom, through its Academic Freedom Monitoring Project that reports all identified incidents in every country. It produces an annual Free to Think report since 2015 that accumulates an impressive amount of data on the nature of threats on academic freedom globally.

## Interview

Vanessa Frangville & Gwennaél Gaffric: Academic freedom is often considered as a tool to measure the democratic pulse of a nation. However, there are also several instances of threats on academic freedom in democratic countries. Is academic freedom increasingly threatened in democratic countries too and how is it different from non-democratic countries?

Robert Quinn: As I noted in a recent essay, the philosopher Michael Polanyi noted in his 1947 essay “The Foundations of Academic Freedom” that academic freedom ‘can only exist in a free society.’<sup>4</sup> The inverse is also true: a free society cannot exist without academic freedom. As Polanyi noted, “[T]he principles underlying [academic freedom] are the same as those on which the most essential liberties of society as a whole are founded.” So, we are not surprised to see threats to academic freedom parallel threats to democracy, and the reverse. The manifestations may differ – there may be more violence or more imprisonments in authoritarian states, whereas democratic countries may use loss of position or privileges to control, but in both cases, there are attempts to control the space.

VF & GG: We often hear that academic freedom, like other “universal values”, is a western-centric concept and that specific cultural contexts should be considered in non-western countries when it comes to academic freedom. Is academic freedom universal? Why does academic freedom matter?

RQ: Academic freedom is first and foremost about the pursuit of excellence in research, teaching, and discourse. It is about the pursuit of truth. It matters because without that freedom state and non-state actors with political or other agendas will distort the content of research, teaching, and discourse on and off campus. I reject any suggestion that academic freedom is a “western” concept principally because I reject the suggestion that truth is a foreign or western concept. If the pursuit of truth (however imperfect) is universal, which I believe it is, then so is academic freedom. Secondly, our project at Scholars at Risk is not about conversion, about convincing people around the world to import the concept of academic freedom. Rather, we believe that there are people in higher education communities that already understand academic freedom and its importance, and are working to promote it. Our role is to link these people, and to offer support as they navigate whatever local challenges there may be.

VF & GG: Attacks on academic freedom can be very insidious and sometimes difficult to detect. How do we know when academic freedom is at risk? How can we assess risk? Just

the opposite, when do you decide that a scholar is in a secure environment, and that she/he is not at risk?

RQ: We certainly need a lot more research and awareness. Scholars at Risk's monitoring project, and our annual *Free to Think* reporting, is an attempt to fill this void by reporting at least on the most severe incidents.<sup>5</sup> But we know this is only the tip of the iceberg, only a symbolic cross-section and not the full scope of issues. Similarly, the SAR-Al-Fanar project on self-censorship in the Arab region<sup>6</sup> was a step toward examining that phenomenon, and ultimately more studies on this topic are needed to get a clear picture of how secure scholars feel in different settings. Most recently, the Academic Freedom Index (AFI)<sup>7</sup> is the first global measure of academic freedom, offering time and location comparisons to fuel research, understanding, and ultimately policy. The latter includes future monitoring systems being explored in the European Higher Education Area and beyond. But there is no question we need more research and more attention to the issue from states and from the higher education and human rights communities.

VF & GG: In the past decades, have the actors who threaten academic freedom, and the types of threat changed over time and how?

RQ: Actually, the *types* of actors and *types* of threats have hardly changed. They are largely consistent across time and geography but vary in severity or manifestation based on local history and cultures. This typology of attacks in part of SAR's monitoring project methodology. The only exception would be that technology has created new ways for those threatening academic freedom to deploy these old methods – new forms of surveillance, and new vehicles for delivering threats. But the underlying dynamics are the same, because at root the issue is the tension between power and ideas, and what steps the powerful go to when they feel threatened. And these are remarkably consistent over time and space.

VF & GG: Censorship and self-censorship are an increasingly concerning reality in China studies, especially in terms of spreading research. How does SAR tackle the issue of academic freedom in terms of publication, when academics themselves are not so much at risk, but academic knowledge is?

RQ: We don't distinguish between the academic and their work. When an academic is not free to publish, they are at risk. As to China, in addition to annual coverage in our *Free to Think* reporting, we did a report summarizing the issues there.<sup>8</sup>

VF & GG: Are women scholars affected differently than their men counterparts when academic freedom is under threat, and how? Are any academic disciplines more impacted than others?

RQ: Threats to academic freedom impact all disciplines, depending on the location and what the particular power considers to be sensitive. In some cases, authorities may feel more threatened by social sciences and humanities, which focus on human interactions and structures (e.g., politics, religion), while in others the concerns may be raised in the physical or "hard" sciences (e.g., climate change, public health). Women are definitely impacted as much as, and in some ways differently. It is harder in many places for women to even enter higher education, let alone academia. A lot more research is needed on the implications of gender and academic freedom, as well as the intersectional issues of gender, race, and academic freedom.

VF & GG: Students can also be the target of attacks as we have observed recently in Ukraine, Brazil or China. How does SAR include students under threat in its programs?

**RQ: Attacks on student academic freedom and expression are included in our annual *Free to Think* reporting, and also featured in our advocacy work.**

VF & GG: Scholars in exile often live on short-term scholarships and many have difficulties to stabilize their situation on the longer term. What can SAR and its affiliated university do for them? What kind of initiatives have been taken to help them settle durably as scholars?

**RQ: Our network was created to establish a solidarity community that can not only help people escape danger and arrive in a safe place, but also keep working and restore, to the extent possible, their career pathways. It is not easy, but it is much better for scholars and institutions to have a network, a community to lean on as we help people find follow-on opportunities. In our history, many scholars have secured second or third opportunities within the network, before ultimately “graduating” into more stable roles on their own. But they are always considered “alumni” and welcome to stay in touch.**

VF & GG: For some scholars, a SAR scholarship gives a profitable temporary break when their situation at home puts them at risk. But for other scholars, it can be risky to accept a SAR scholarship: their home institutions might report them to the national authorities. This means many endangered scholars are unreachable: what can we do about this?

**RQ: Actually, we have never heard of a scholar getting in trouble with their home institution for accepting a position through our network. Certainly, we must be discrete in our communication with candidates, including sometimes communicating indirectly. But risk is not created by the program. The risk is imposed by the misbehaving authority. We must take it seriously and act responsibly, but we cannot allow that risk to dissuade us from offering help where we can.**

VF & GG: Finally, has the global pandemic impacted your activities and how?

**RQ: We are grateful that so many institutions continued to support his work, including creating positions for new scholars, throughout the pandemic. That said, it certainly did make travel more difficult, and increased the threats of surveillance, intimidation and isolation, as university operations and classes moved online. We are managing these challenges, but certainly look forward to returning to more in-person activities and easier travel, as the pandemic conditions eventually improve.**

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## NOTES

1. See the Humboldt Foundation’s webpage dedicated to the Philipp Schwartz Initiative: <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/bewerben/foerderprogramme/philipp-schwartz-initiative>, accessed 30 November 2021.
2. See more details on the website of the College de France: <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/programme-pause/index.htm>, accessed 30 November 2021.
3. See the ULB’s dedicated webpage: <https://www.ulb.be/fr/actions-solidaires/solidarity-fund-for-researchers-in-need>, accessed 30 November 2021.

4. See Robert Quinn's essay here: <https://charleskochfoundation.org/stories/openness-on-american-campuses-is-under-threat-heres-how-we-preserve-it/>, accessed 30 November 2021.
  5. See 2021 report here: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2021/>, accessed 30 November 2021.
  6. See <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2021/04/self-censorship-in-arab-higher-education-an-untold-problem/>, accessed 30 November 2021.
  7. See the Global Public Policy Institute's report here: <https://www.gppi.net/2021/03/11/free-universities>, accessed 30 November 2021.
  8. See <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/obstacles-to-excellence-academic-freedom-chinas-quest-for-world-class-universities/>, accessed 30 November 2021.
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## AUTHORS

### VANESSA FRANGVILLE

Vanessa Frangville is Senior Lecturer in China Studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB); director of EAST, ULB's research centre on East Asia; and co-director of Routledge's "Contemporary Asian Societies" series. Her research deals with discourses on ethnicity and nation building in modern and contemporary China, with a special focus on cinema and "ethnic minority" film. Her current projects deal with cultural and artistic expressions of trauma and nostalgia in the Uyghur diaspora since 2018, with a focus on performative and audio-visual arts.

Vanessa Frangville est professeure en études chinoises à l'Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), directrice du centre de recherche sur l'Asie de l'est à l'ULB, EAST, et co-directrice de la collection "Contemporary Asian Society chez Routledge". Ses recherches portent sur les rapports entre politique culturelle et production audiovisuelle en République populaire de Chine. Elle a publié de nombreux articles sur le cinéma en lien avec les ethnies « minoritaires » ou « non-Han », notamment sur le cinéma tibétain. Ses projets actuels portent sur le cinéma ouïghour et les productions artistiques, en particulier audiovisuelles, qui témoignent de la crise ouïghoure depuis 2016.

### GWENNAËL GAFFRIC

Gwennaël Gaffric is Assistant Professor in Chinese language and literature at Jean Moulin University Lyon 3. His current research focuses on environmental issues in contemporary literature in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, particularly in science fiction. He has recently published a book entitled *La littérature à l'ère de l'Anthropocène : Une étude écocritique autour des œuvres de l'écrivain taïwanais Wu Ming-Yi* (Literature in the Anthropocene Era: an Ecocritical Study of Taiwanese Writer Wu Ming-Yi's Works) (coll. "Études formosanes", L'Asiathèque, 2019) and co-edited with Vanessa Frangville *China's Youth Cultures and Collective Spaces: Creativity, Sociality, Identity and Resistance* (Routledge, 2019).

Gwennaël Gaffric est Maître de conférences en langues et littératures chinoises à l'Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3. Ses recherches actuelles portent sur les questions environnementales dans la littérature sinophone (Chine, Hong Kong, Taïwan), et en particulier la science-fiction. Il a

récemment publié *La littérature à l'ère de l'Anthropocène : Une étude écocritique autour des œuvres de l'écrivain taiwanais Wu Ming-Yi* (L'Asiathèque, 2019) et co-dirigé avec Vanessa Frangville *China's Youth Cultures and Collective Spaces: Creativity, Sociality, Identity and Resistance* (Routledge, 2019).

#### ROBERT QUINN

Robert Quinn is the founding executive director of the Scholars at Risk network and worked as a member of the Council of the Magna Charta Observatory, as well as other committees on academic freedom. He is also the host of the Free to Think Podcasts.

Robert Quinn est le directeur exécutif fondateur du réseau Scholars at Risk et a été membre du conseil de l'Observatoire de la Magna Charta, ainsi que d'autres comités sur la liberté académique. Il anime aussi les podcasts Free to Think.