



Social Science in China: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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Social Science in China: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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Although heavily investing in research and development, China keeps the Party line straight. University research is acquiring a level that compares to the world with high-end universities, but the state's political interests influence academic work. In this analysis, University of Copenhagen professor Jørgen Delman investigates the state of social science and the academic freedom of scholars in China. By analysing recent policy initiatives and research developments, Delman paints a picture of a well-developed academic landscape in China that, however, within specific sensitive political areas, is under great pressure due to the Chinese censorship. This goes for foreign researchers publishing in China, and possibly also Chinese researchers publishing internationally.

Key takeaways:

- China has a highly qualified cadre of social scientists publishing good social science research, in China and abroad.
- The Chinese academic censorship extends to foreign publishers in China to prevent Chinese scholars from accessing international scholarly articles on sensitive subjects.
- We do not know if there is an effective censorship mechanism to block Chinese researchers from publishing internationally if their research is considered sensitive.
- Xi Jinping has consistently called for more Party and ideological control within the universities, and academic freedom seems to become constantly narrower.

Keywords: *China, social science, research and development, R&D, politics, academic freedom*

Social Science in China: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

By Jørgen Delman, University of Copenhagen.

China goes for a high-end innovative economy

China's government and business sector share the vision of transforming the Chinese economy into a high-end innovative economy and make China a science and technology superpower. Investments in research and development (R&D) grow rapidly. In 2016, China ranked 13th in the world with regard to R&D spending as share of GDP (2.21%). This share had increased from 0.725% in 1991 when China ranked 26th ⁱ. The People's Republic has also made its way up the international rankings with regard to most highly cited researchers in the world, and China overtook Germany to reach the third spot on the top 10 country/region list in 2018ⁱⁱ.

However, recent research indicates that the higher education research environments in China face challenges that could hamper the grand ambitions. A survey of faculty members from STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) showed that the top four challenges were the following:

1. Promotion of short-term thinking and instant success based on an unfair evaluation system.
2. The research funding process is partial and non-transparent; research funding is low and funding is in the hands of a few; finally, too many resources are wasted in acquiring and even spending of research funding.

3. An excessive level of bureaucratic and governmental intervention. There is too much control by official bodies and university administrators (many of whom are Communist Party of China (CPC) officials); there is a strong pressure to follow official ideology and standards, and those in power often have little expertise, i.e. they do not know what basic research is.
4. There is too much focus on quantitative measurements of research and it places heavy administrative burdens on the researchers. The system is not effective in measuring research quality and there is an over-reliance on powerful connections to get ahead in the scientific system and to acquire fundingⁱⁱⁱ.

Apparently, while China is doing well in international scientific and university rankings, the authorities seem to increasingly favor specific researchers/research groups, whether intentionally or unintentionally, while also wanting to infuse ideological regimentation that constrains academic freedom.

Some personal anecdotes on social sciences

Nowhere is this pressure felt as much as in the social sciences, since they often deal with issues that are considered politically sensitive and that may even challenge the power monopoly and legitimacy of the Chinese Party-state. A few personal anecdotes may illustrate how.

Some time ago, I gave a lecture in China and was kindly invited for dinner afterwards. At the dinner, one of the Chinese colleagues

argued that China had never been an aggressive power. I asked how he could defend that argument when looking at the expansion of China's territory over the last 3,000 years and the internal wars that lead to the dissolution of dynasties and the establishment of new ones. It was an articulate debate, with each of us trying to provide evidence for our respective arguments. Eventually the debate subsided, but after dinner, another Chinese colleague commented: "You know! We cannot debate this publicly in China."

Another example: A young overseas Chinese researcher with a PhD degree from a prestigious foreign university came to my office to discuss collaboration on political discourse analysis in China. At the end, the visitor agreed that it could be interesting to collaborate as long as we did not deal with sensitive political issues. I was not that surprised, of course, but I am concerned that Chinese researchers in Denmark harness such apprehensions. Obviously, I insisted that we could not be subject to official Chinese ideology and control in our research in Denmark.

A final example: A few years ago, a Chinese colleague, who had been educated abroad and worked successfully at a UK university for some years, was recruited back to China to manage an economic and business studies faculty at a relatively prestigious provincial university. He had been promised full authority over all decisions, but quickly found out that in the office next door was the Faculty Party Secretary. The Secretary had occupied his position for many years and built his own power network within the faculty based on

his vantage position. In fact, formally he had more leadership and budgetary authority than my homecoming colleague, whose only political capital was scientific excellence.

Follow the Party line

These anecdotes tell us that Chinese social science researchers, like researchers from other fields in China, can be under pressure not to trespass on official ideological and organizational power boundaries. They must be ready to submit to the will and power of the CPC in the universities and even outside their own country. While the Party has always asked the universities and their researchers for ideological compliance, there have also been experiments with degrees of academic and managerial freedom in the past.

However, Article 39 of China's Higher Education Law from 1998 stipulates unmistakably that the Presidents of Chinese universities are subject to the leadership of "grass-roots committees of the Chinese Communist Party" in their institution. A Party Secretary leads these committees to exercise unified leadership over the work of the leaderships at all levels of the university and to ensure that they abide by CPC policies. In principle, the university's Party Committee and its Secretary must support the President of the university in discharging his/her academic and managerial duties, but they must also exercise ideological and political leadership and make decisions about organizational development and appointment of leaders^{iv}.

Research indicates that the Party Secretary is the most important leader of a university, and that this position entails four distinct key roles: (1) decision maker, (2) administrator, (3) coordinator, and (4) representative of political power. A study from 2011 showed that the Party Secretaries often lacked the competences to lead an academic institution since, *inter alia*, their degree levels tended to be quite low, they were mostly outsiders, and their academic careers were not research-oriented^v.

This tendency is still prevalent, even at China's most prestigious universities. In January 2019, the Party Secretary of Peking University (PKU), Hao Ping, an academic in his own right, although not one of 'excellence', was demoted (as it is) to become President of PKU (i.e. no. 2 in the leadership hierarchy) while Qiu Shiping, a career administrator politician became the new Party Secretary. He came from recent positions as Head of the People's Court in Shaanxi Province, and prior to that, he had been standing Deputy Party Secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Committee in Beijing and Party Secretary of the city government's National Security Department. This was a clear indication that the central authorities wish to focus on ideological and security aspects of university management, even at elite institutions. Former economics professor at Peking University, Xia Yeliang, commented on the appointment: "This is the secret police in China so people consider it to be direct control of the university by the security police". Xia is one of many professors sacked in recent years for being critical of the Chinese regime^{vi}.

Xi Jinping's fear of Western ideas and criticism

Since Xi Jinping assumed power, he has consistently called for more Party and ideological control within the universities. In a general directive from 2013, called "Document no. 9", the Party leadership enumerated a series of harmful ideological tendencies that must be restricted, if not banned. The CPC would not allow the promotion of Western constitutional democracy any more, as it could undermine the CPC leadership and China's "socialist system of governance with Chinese characteristics".

The same was the case with the promotion of the so-called "universal values". These values could weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party's leadership. Civil society ideas were disallowed as they could contribute to dismantling the social foundation of the Party. "Neo-liberalism" was rejected as an attempt to change China's basic economic system. The same was the case with Western ideas about free or investigative journalism, since they could challenge the Party's "discipline" within the media and the publishing industry. Finally, criticism of China's "Reform and Opening" and the "socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics" were banned as well^{vii}.

While the directive was aimed at the media, civil society, and the universities in general, it could be seen as eminently damaging to the pursuit of academically free social sciences. And it did not stop there. The question of which theories to use and develop and how to apply them is another issue that has attracted Xi Jinping's interest. In a speech to

social science and philosophy practitioners in 2016, he insisted that Marxism is still valid as a foundational theory of social science, and that it must direct the field. He castigated scientists who claimed that Marxism is past its expiration date and that Chinese Marxism is not real Marxism. He also criticized those holding that Marxism is an ideology and not a science, and who argue that it is informed by neither scientific principles nor scientific systematics. He then warned that Marxism suffers from aphasia in some disciplines and deplored that Marxism is often missing from teaching materials. Finally, he criticized those who bemoaned that Marxism had lost its voice.

Xi's cure for these maladies was to counsel social scientists to let them be guided themselves by a "correct world outlook", presumably the world outlook of the CPC leadership. Otherwise, they would be unable to understand the world and the laws that govern it, a classical proposition of the CPC. He further proposed that only when a scientist has fully grasped Marxism, will s/he understand the laws that guide the Party's leading role in China, socialist development, the development of human societies, and also be able to recognize the dangers of idealism and nihilism^{viii}.

Publishing abroad

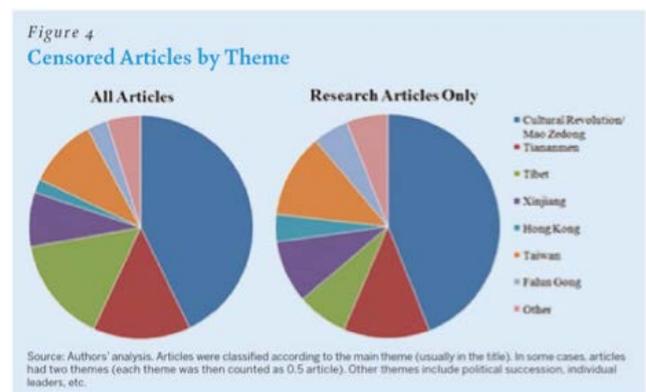
Many Chinese scientists have chosen to circumvent such restrictions on their academic freedom at home by publishing internationally. Interestingly, their institutions have been eager to support them in this endeavour and have often paid them handsomely to publish in top international

journals or with top international publishing houses. The universities have done so in order to do well in the rigid evaluation and ranking system discussed earlier. Not surprisingly, authors of articles published in journals like *Science* and *Nature* are paid the most, like in many universities around the world. But Chinese researchers seem to be paid the most in relative terms^{ix}.

Prohibited readings

Xi's campaign against Western ideas has made Chinese scientific publishers and database vendors wary that they must censure Western social science literature that promotes controversial research, especially on China. The consequence is that the Chinese academic censorship now extends to foreign publishers in China to prevent Chinese scholars from accessing international scholarly articles on subjects that are considered sensitive by the CPC. The journals known to have been censored initially were: *The China Quarterly*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, *American Political Science Review*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, *International Politics*.

Figure 1: Topics that are subject of censorship in China



Source: Wong and Kwong 2019.

The figure above shows the topics at the centre of the censorship of *The China Quarterly*, a top journal within China Studies^x.

However, the censorship focuses not only on China-related topics. In December 2018, Taylor & Francis made a statement saying that starting in September “Chinese import agencies opted not to include 83 of the 1,466 journals in the [social sciences and humanities] Library in the package available to purchase by Chinese libraries.” The statement further said: “This change was discussed with a number of our society publishing partners earlier this year. We have been open and transparent with them and taken feedback and soundings on this. Our view has always been that everyone should be able to read the research we publish via their usual access routes. We will continue to work towards being able to sell the complete SSH Library in China, and to be open and frank with our publishing partners on the selling options available to us”^{xi}.

Clearly, all international scientific publishers and database providers are facing increasing pressure for censorship from China. While most try to hide behind market access arguments to continue selling what they can in China – i.e. the Chinese purveyors decide what they want for the Chinese market, they have come under hefty criticism for dancing to the tune of the Chinese censors and not defending academic freedom.

So what about social science in China?

There seems to be no way around a normative and Party-directed approach in Chinese social science research. Scientists have to

serve the Party-state and help it solve its many challenges. Foreign publishers are being blocked partially for ideological reasons, and the overseas route to publishing back into China is thus being closed to Chinese researchers who publish on sensitive topics.

While Chinese researchers are still rewarded for publishing internationally, we do not know if there is an effective censorship mechanism to block them from publishing internationally if their research is considered sensitive by the Chinese scientific censorship authorities. This being said, China has a highly qualified cadre of social scientists and they are still able to publish good social science research, in China and abroad, as long as it addresses topics that are of interest to the Party-state and official political processes. They will still be handsomely rewarded for it.

In the future, these rewards will presumably also be given based on national rankings. While there is no unified national ranking system for journals as yet, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) has established a widely used ranking list based on impact factor.

However, the scope for academic freedom seems to become constantly narrower, and the prospects of critical and path-breaking social science in China are quite bleak. Add to this that Chinese scientists and students are now under increased scrutiny in countries like the US for their Party-state affiliations, for ideological campaigning, and for potential espionage. For the upright social scientist, it thus seems that academic freedom is

squeezed between a rock and a very hard place no matter where s/he goes.

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[The original article can be found here.](#)

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ⁱⁱⁱ Han, Xueying, and Richard P. Appelbaum. 2018. "China's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Research Environment: A Snapshot." Edited by Joshua L. Rosenbloom. *PLOS ONE* 13 (4): e0195347. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0195347>.

^{iv} Higher Education Law. 1998. "Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China." ASIAN LII. <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/helotproc422/>.

^v Luo, Y., and Z. Sun. 2011. "我国'985工程'大学党委书记素质现状调查——基于34位大学党委书记的分析 [A Study of 34 Party Secretaries in Chinese '985 Project' Universities: Their Personal Qualities]." *Chinese Higher Education Research*, no. 5: 32–34.

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^x Wong, Matthew.Y.H., and Ying-Ho Kwong. 2019. "Academic Censorship in China: The Case of The China Quarterly." *Political Science & Politics* 52 (2): 287–29. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518002093>.

^{xi} Taylor&Francis. 2018. "Taylor & Francis Social Sciences and Humanities Library | Statement – Taylor & Francis Newsroom." December 20, 2018. <https://newsroom.taylorandfrancisgroup.com/taylor-francis-social-sciences-and-humanities-library/>.

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