More Exchange At Eye-Level: European Research Cooperation With the People's Republic of China

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China does not currently enjoy a positive image in Europe[1]. This is primarily due to the country's rise to global power status and the associated domestic and foreign policy tensions, as well as its robust and rather challenging assertion of its interests. Since 2014, there has been increasing reporting regarding how political developments in the People's Republic under Xi Jinping are becoming more repressive. This increased centralization and control is primarily due to the implementation of a rigorous roadmap to the purported 'comprehensive modernization' of the nation by 2050. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has outlined these objectives in various plans and documents. For example, poverty eradication is targeted by 2021; by 2035, China should have become the world's largest economic power and is to achieve leadership in ten high technologies; by 2050, the country is supposed to be an all-out modernized nation and a world power on par with the United States.[2] According to the official understanding in the People's Republic of China (PRC), achieving this goal requires a stable and orderly polity and a strong and competent political leadership.

The increasing conflict between China and the US is also casting its shadow and triggers a discussion on how the European Union (EU) and its member states should position themselves: a stronger rapprochement and alignment with the United States under President Biden or a middle course between the two world powers (cf. Heberer 2021). Recently, there has been a serious escalation in the relationship between the EU and the PRC with direct consequences for research and academic exchanges. After the EU adopted punitive measures against four senior politicians and a government entity in the PRC for human rights violations in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in March 2021,[3] the Chinese government reacted promptly and sanctioned not only the relevant EU parliamentary subcommittee on human rights and other individual European politicians, but also a think tank and individual researchers (Global Times 2021).[4] What further consequences this diplomatic escalation will have is not yet foreseeable.

Thus, the observable urge to reshape actions toward China is now coming to a head in a field that until now seemed largely untouched by political disputes: the field of scientific cooperation. On the one hand, European-Chinese scientific cooperation is flourishing and growing (e.g., Střelcová 2021). On the other hand, representatives of the natural sciences and engineering in particular have been complaining for some time about a 'one-sided' transfer with regard to cooperation projects, with the German side willingly providing its know-how, but Chinese researchers not providing theirs in return. At the same time, increasing restrictions on academic freedom in China have been observed, especially with regard to the social sciences and humanities; scholars are being more closely controlled and constrained in regards to content. The role of Party bodies and ideological control have increased significantly. In addition, there is sus-

[1] This is the abridged and revised version of a German-language essay that will appear in a special issue of *Berliner China-Hefte*.

[2] See Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th CPC Party Congress in 2017: http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm (accessed 14 April 2021).

[3] See https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:099I:FULL&from=EN (accessed 12 April 2021).

[4] 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces Sanctions on Relevant EU Entities and Personnel,' https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1863106.shtml (accessed 12 April 2021).

Prof. Yu Keping (Peking University) and Thomas Heberer present a jointly edited Chinese scientific book on governance to an academic audience in Beijing (2015).

picion that Chinese authorities are exerting influence on research and teaching at universities abroad, for example through Confucius Institutes. There are even accusations of espionage.

Commonalities and differences in expectations

Over the course of these increasingly intense debates, it is becoming clear how little insight there is in general into the procedure of the Chinese science system and with regard to the differences and similarities in the expectations of the cooperating partners. Basically, 'academic freedom' in our European understanding has not existed and does not exist at Chinese universities. The state expects research projects to contribute to solving practical issues; scientists and scholars are considered an important part of the nation, who have to contribute to the development and welfare of the country. This did not simply start with the founding of the PRC in 1949 or the inauguration of Xi Jinping, but is rooted in China's political culture. For example, this culture was no different in the Republic of China in the 1930s and 1940s. The then ruling party *Guomindang* introduced 'party curricula' at schools and universities, and educational guidelines stipulated that the interests of the nation were to take precedence over everything else (Culp 2002: 51-55; Oldstone-Moore 2002: 163ff). In the 1930s, the writer and philosopher Lin Yutang described the contradiction between Western logic and Chinese practical thinking: while the latter grasps the object of research 'as a living whole,' Western logic breaks it down into 'various manifestations' (Lin 2015 [1935]: 148-150). Not least because of these observable normative differences, European cooperation partners have to deal with the criticism that research cooperation and outcomes tend to serve the Chinese state and would be of little use to scholars and the advancement of science in general.

The fact that authoritarian states such as China are not capable of cutting-edge research and innovation has already been sufficiently refuted. E.g., China's rapid rise to the top ranks in international publication and citation indices within less than two decades is worth noting. As already indicated, the Chinese government has announced that China will be a leader in ten high technology fields by 2035 and the world's No. 1 power in science and research by 2050. Ambitious goals, no doubt. Nevertheless, President Xi has repeatedly emphasized that technological and scientific innovation requires transnational cooperation (Xi 2020). This is a statement that should be taken seriously and, at the same time, can be harnessed to call for cooperation and dialog at eye-level. Even the Chinese government does not deny that scientific progress is ultimately

only possible through transnational cooperation. At the same time, the European and the Chinese side obviously agree that cooperation is essential for the solution of global problems in the 21st century (such as, climate change, ecological and environmental problems, pandemics, etc.).

Accordingly, European research and higher education organisations have expressed a clear interest in maintaining and expanding academic cooperation with Chinese partners in their statements to date.[5] Nevertheless, greater sensitivity and caution, as well as more systematic guidelines for dealing with the Chinese side are now being called for. This applies in particular when contractual agreements on scientific cooperation are on the table. Concerns about a lack of transparency in the design and management of partnerships and joint projects, a potential discrepancy in perceptions of 'good scientific practice', especially in terms of research ethics, integrity and the possible deviance from related rules, and risks of *dual use* and inadequate protection of intellectual property are at the forefront.

Moreover, it is becoming apparent that the EU – and, with varying degrees of intensity, the governments of the individual European states – would like to get China to accept European standards for research cooperation and technological exchange – it even declares them to be a prerequisite for cooperation. Joy Zhang, a professor of sociology at Kent University criticizes this way of imposing requirements on Chinese scientists. It would make more sense to learn to understand each other in this respect, instead of insisting on one's own values without debate, she says. Moreover, she describes how Chinese scientists are alienated by the fact that Western colleagues are beginning to withhold research data unilaterally (Kelly 2021). Indeed, a dialogue between scientists and scholars from both sides on issues of quality assurance, normative practice and research ethics seems to be more meaningful than the attempt of political authorities to unilaterally set standards.

Staying aware of essentializing bias: Unproductive neglect, simplification, and prejudice

In the current, increasingly polarized debate, a few things are particularly striking: first, the European debate often fails to distinguish between the Chinese state on the one hand *and* scholars *and* universities on the other. Western logic often argues that since 'everything' in China is under the control of the Party state; ultimately all Chinese, including universities, scholars and students, should be regarded as 'propagandists' or even potential 'spies' of the Communist Party. Sociologist Zhang, quoted above, has pointed to some effects of this 'racial profiling'. She describes the experience of Chinese academics and students who are quite critical of Chinese politics, but who are increasingly distrusted in Europe precisely because they are Chinese (Zhang 2021). Publicly questioning the integrity of Chinese academics and dismissing them wholesale as "spies" is ultimately counterproductive, Zhang explains. The world needs the Chinese academic community, and the latter needs cooperation with the West.

Not least, the publicly staged conflict between the West and China today is repeatedly ignited by questions around the role and function of the Confucius Institutes (CIs), whereas public knowledge about their functioning is often sweeping and imprecise. For example, most of these institutes in Germany are independent associations within the German law that – unlike the cases of Chinese-funded professorships in German universities – are not involved in research or substantive teaching. The accusations that the Chinese government would exert influence on class content and research on a broad front through these institutes can empirically – at least as far as Germany is concerned – not be corroborated.[6] In this context, a recently published paper by the U.S. think tank *Brookings* (Horsley 2021) is interesting. The paper states that especially in times of a significant decline in the number of students learning Chinese or choosing China-related courses of study, there is a need for additional offerings in the areas of China studies and Chinese language skills. Various investigations, including those by the U.S. Senate, have not found any evidence of influence by CIs or even of espionage promoted by them at U.S. universities. Therefore, according to the report, the U.S. government should welcome these institutes.

[5] See also the overviews in d'Hooghe et al. 2018, Střelcová 2021.

[6] In the Federal Government's answer to a corresponding question by the FDP at the end of 2019, it stated with regard to the influence on research and teaching at universities: "The Federal Government has no knowledge of any indirect influence of the Confucius Institutes on the work of researchers, teachers and students at German universities" (p. 7). Answer of the Federal Government to the Small Question of the Members of Parliament Dr. Jens Brandenburg (Rhine-Neckar), Katja Suding, Mario Brandenburg (Southern Palatinate), other Members of Parliament and the FDP parliamentary group - Printed Matter 19/15009 - http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/155/1915560.pdf (accessed on 14 April 2021).

International conference on Chinese Governance in Global Context at Zhejiang University (2019)

Need for differentiation, eye-level, and dialogue

If we look at the Chinese academic landscape, differentiation is necessary. For example, there are clear differences in the treatment of the social sciences and humanities (SSH), which are subject to greater ideological scrutiny than the natural and technical sciences. In the latter, China is working its way to the top of the world. As for the former, there is the expectation that SSH should focus primarily on improving national welfare and solving domestic problems (e.g., Delman 2019; Greenhalgh and Zhang 2020). An interesting example of this practical orientation is the construction of 'intelligent administration,' the establishment of 'emergency management agencies,' and the introduction of an 'emergency management' degree program following from the impact of the corona crisis, which were proposed by a leading administration researcher at Zhejiang University. By now, the Chinese Ministry of Education has already decided to establish such a degree program at 20 universities across the country. However, there are also controversial debates in the Chinese scientific landscape. This is illustrated – to name just one example – by a statement from the renowned political scientist Yu Keping of Peking University, who, in an interview published in January 2021, criticized the overemphasis on 'Chinese characteristics' on the part of Chinese social scientists. In his view, this negates the idea of science as universal knowledge production. Moreover, he advocates 'freedom of thought and a free academic environment for scholars.' Instead of reasoning about 'Chinese peculiarities,' Chinese scholars should think more internationally, he says (Yu 2021).

Furthermore, significant differences exist between individual universities in China. This is related, among other things, to the political culture in different regions, with those provinces and universities with extensive external cooperative relationships usually proving to be more open than those in central or western China. Long-standing and close cooperative relationships with Chinese universities and with individual scientists, through which trust has been built and which are therefore more stable, prove to be productive. It should also be understood that many Chinese academics are proud of the achievements of their country in recent decades, including in the fields of science and technology, and are making this known. Not to take this seriously, or to deny through general suspicion or a boycott that Chinese colleagues can also have an intrinsic interest in research and knowledge creation and are capable of asserting this against resistances would be presumptuous and detrimental to cooperation opportunities.

Overall, it is to be welcomed that academic institutions and public authorities in Europe are currently reflecting on their cooperation with China on the basis of experiences made and new signals from China. Ultimately, we can only influence developments in, with, and through cooperation. We consider dialogues to be central to this, which undoubtedly also requires cooperation at eye-level. Special bi- or multilateral academic dialogues not only at the level of science policy, but also at the level of scientific and scholarly associations or between partner universities could be helpful here. Nevertheless, cooperation at the individual level should be particularly encouraged. While larger institutions are more likely to facilitate a dialogue on general political and legal principles – and, if necessary, ensure their protection – scientific values are ultimately realized in concrete work and in intercultural negotiation processes among researchers, and finally evaluated by the global science community.

What is also missing is an in-depth and systematic assessment of the forms and effects of existing scientific cooperation with China, i.e. qualitative *research on research* in cooperative structures. Studies that

go beyond economic analyses of China's technical innovation capacity, or classical research on higher education that only covers the training sector but not research. This would fill the knowledge gap that still exists between anecdotal descriptions of problems and the abstract normative blanket call for or rejection of cooperation. At the same time, it seems sensible to promote general China-competence in all branches of science and scholarship, not only with regard to China-related fields of study, but in all disciplines. It is quite disturbing that the number of students choosing to pursue a China-related major or to learn Chinese has declined significantly, precisely at a time when more knowledge, curiosity, and China literacy are needed. In addition, we should build new China-competence networks at the European level and ultimately strengthen the transfer of knowledge of China into society. Only in this way is informed and productive exchange possible. Dismantling academic cooperation would not only make European access to China more difficult, but also hinder a better understanding of this complicated and complex country.

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