

Forschung und Lehre

Debating Academic Autonomy in the German-Speaking Field of China Studies: An Assessment

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Summary

Geopolitical tensions between China and the West, and hardening authoritarianism in China, have sparked a debate in the German-speaking field of China Studies on how individual scholars and higher education organizations ought to position themselves and how to ensure academic autonomy. Most participants agree that the Chinese government's increasing domestic repression and growing inclination to project state punishments abroad and onto foreign researchers are major problems for China scholarship. However, one side of the debate places China scholars and universities that collaborate with China under suspicion of self-censorship, while the other side fails to address how China scholars can maintain autonomy in an environment of increased Chinese assertiveness. We suggest the following paths to strengthen academic autonomy in the German-speaking China Studies field, and in the process of cooperation between other disciplines and Chinese counterparts:

- Funding for China Studies needs to be increased and existing China expertise should be more comprehensively used in academic institutions collaborating with China, as well as in government and business organizations.
- In the China field, we advocate for continued exchange with Chinese colleagues wherever possible. International cooperation with China and other countries with problematic records in academic freedom and human rights should, during all its stages, routinely be accompanied by individuals with respective country expertise. These specialists can help to assess whether the type of cooperation is in line with principles of academic freedom or whether potential issues of dual-use technology might occur.
- The issues of access (including visas) for scholars who want to do field research in China and restrictions (including sanctions) against scholars directly affects the generation of reliable and open knowledge on China. This is a public good of strategic importance and belongs on the agenda of diplomatic engagements with Chinese counterparts at the national and EU levels.
- Foreign government and private funding to public universities and research institutes must be subject to public scrutiny and therefore should be made transparent.

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Introduction

In the face of rising geopolitical tensions between China and the West, as well as hardening authoritarianism and human rights violations inside China, the field of China Studies is under increasing pressure. First, in recent years, the Chinese government has sanctioned foreign scholars, launched domestic campaigns against “foreign spies,” and discouraged domestic researchers from international academic cooperation and publications (Feng 2022). This has resulted in narrowing access for foreign scholars and an increased perception of the risk of travel to China among many (Benner 2021; China File 2021). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, access for foreign scholars to China has been de facto closed (Thorpe 2021). Second, due to these undesirable developments, political debates have ensued on how individual scholars and higher education organizations ought to position themselves vis-à-vis Chinese entities, including research cooperation on dual-use technologies and the future of Confucius Institutes.¹ Similarly, the question of how to ensure academic autonomy in the China Studies field under these conditions and to what extent it is threatened, has come to the fore with increasing ferocity.

For the China field, such debates are not entirely new. The challenges China’s political regime poses for academic integrity and the associated risks for foreign researchers, local collaborators and research subjects have long been an issue in scholarly debates (Alpermann 2009; 2022; Göbel 2014; Greitens and Truex 2020; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Shih 2015). Similar issues have also been discussed by area specialists focusing on Southeast Asia (Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018), Russia (Johnson 2009) and the Middle East (Clark 2006), and those working in hostile environments across regions (Grimm et al. 2020).

In recent years, debates about Chinese relations with academic institutions and scholars have spilled over into the public domain. For example, in 2011 it became known that thirteen American professors who had been involved in a book publication on Xinjiang had been denied visas to travel to China. This incident of Chinese political interference in US academic freedom sparked a public debate about the role of Confucius Institutes at American universities, the decision by American universities to set up branch campuses in China, and US-China relations more generally (Business Insider 2011; de Vise 2011; Gladney 2011). More recently, a similar public debate ensued in Germany when it became known that Freie Universität Berlin (FU Berlin) was establishing a professorship at its Institute for Chinese Studies that was partly funded by Hanban, affiliated with China’s Ministry of Education (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2019, 2020).² The discussion received further

1 For some recent examples from Germany, see e.g., Correctiv (2022) and Himmelrath et al. (2022).

2 While this was not the first German professorship that received funding from China, the contract between FU Berlin and Hanban was problematic as it required FU Berlin to abide by Chinese law and stipulated that any disputes must be resolved before a Chinese arbitration court. According to FU Berlin, the contract was renegotiated in 2020 after the Berlin Senate had raised concerns about several points in the original contract (Freie Universität Berlin 2021).

impetus when the Chinese government denied access to European researchers working in China, including China specialists working at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (Forschung und Lehre 2021).

Against this background, an increasingly heated debate about the positioning of the German-speaking field of China Studies vis-à-vis the Chinese state and other entities emerged among China scholars. The dispute reached a climax in a recent newspaper op-ed exchange that spilled over into online forums such as H-Asia (Alpermann and Schubert 2022a, 2022b; Fulda et al. 2022; H-Asia 2022). This debate is less event-driven and more concerned with fundamental questions of engagement and academic autonomy. In the following, we take stock of this discussion. We first summarize the main points raised by different participants. We then add our own thoughts on how to move forward under increasingly difficult conditions. Before we do so, a brief reminder of what we refer to when we discuss academic freedom or autonomy is in order.

According to the German Federal Constitutional Court, academic freedom protects individuals, practices, and institutions involved in academic speech, research, and publications against state influence aimed at steering, controlling, and sanctioning science. Further, neither the state nor society may decide what or who lives up to scientific standards. Instead, the responsibility to control and sanction lies with the scientific community. Anything that can be regarded as a serious attempt to determine the truth in terms of content and form is protected by freedom of science, including minority opinions, faulty research approaches, unconventional, unfruitful, erratic hypotheses, theories, and positions (BVerfG Beschluss vom 11. Januar 1994 – 1 BvR 434/87).³ With this definition in mind, is academic autonomy under threat and if so, from where?

Diverging views on the problem

Assessing this question, different parties have provided dissimilar problem descriptions, which lead to diverging solution strategies. Although we regret the one-sidedness and bitterness in tone that have come through on some occasions, we believe this debate is necessary and, overall, healthy. We assume that all participants share a common goal: a maximally autonomous, solidly financed field of China Studies in Germany and the German-speaking countries, which contributes to international scholarly discussion and effectively informs the public about a country that is of the greatest geopolitical significance. The question is how to achieve this objective.

- Most parties to the debate agree that the Chinese government's increasing domestic repression and its growing inclination to project state punishments abroad and onto foreigners (including researchers) is a major problem for

3 For relevant rulings in Austria and Switzerland, see Austrian Constitutional Court (1996) and Swiss Federal Court (2001).

China scholarship (Alpermann and Schubert 2022b; Benner 2018, 2021; Fulda 2021; Fulda and Missal 2021; Levy 2021; Tatlow 2018; Roetz 2022). Disagreement exists regarding the severity of the issue and whether this is the only problem. However, a group of senior Sinologists specializing in cultural studies and history appear to neglect these problems entirely, as they make no mention of them in their—in the editors’ words—“partly polemic” (Schaab-Hanke 2020) contributions to a special issue on the “China threat” (our translations) published in the journal *Minima Sinica* (Ptak and Mondschein 2020).

- Critics bemoan that some German-speaking China scholars rarely discuss these issues or downplay them in their communication with the public (Benner 2018; Fulda and Missal 2021; Fulda 2021).⁴ Didi Kirsten Tatlow argues that these scholars are subject to “late orientalism”—a mindset that renders them “blind to how the [Communist] party is furthering its interests” (Tatlow 2018). Andreas Fulda and co-authors further claim that many German-speaking China scholars would not “question the official narrative” in their choice of topics and methodology (Fulda et al. 2022).
- A key reason for this alleged self-restriction is, according to Andreas Fulda and David Missal, scholars’ and universities’ financial and institutional dependencies on Chinese state and business entities (Fulda and Missal 2021).
- Others highlight that the increasing pressure from the Chinese government coincides with rising pressure from its critics, which puts China scholars in a bind. Arguing along these lines, Björn Alpermann and Gunther Schubert have vocally criticized what they perceive as “moral crusaderism” (Alpermann and Schubert 2022b). The board of the German Association of Asian Studies (DGA) has issued a similar warning (German Association for Asian Studies 2020) in a statement on its website. The contributors to the above-cited “China threat” special issue single out pressure from China critics as the only problem (Ptak and Mondschein 2020).

Before we can discuss mitigation strategies, we need to look into the validity of the diagnosed problems. We take issue with the following arguments.

- It is hard to overlook that some German China scholars, curiously often those who have no expertise on contemporary Chinese politics, tend to downplay the repressive side of the Chinese government in their opinionated assessments of the problem (e.g., Kubin 2020; Leutner 2020). Critics have the right to challenge them on normative and empirical grounds. However, although Fulda and Missal sometimes admit that their examples can be selective, they repeatedly fall into language suggesting that these comments represent the bulk

⁴ Fulda and Missal also criticize that the German Association of Asian Studies (DGA) barely touched upon the issue in their public statements of 2020 and 2021, and failed to mention Chinese sanctions against European China scholars (Fulda and Missal 2021).

of the field (Fulda and Missal 2021). We are not aware of a systematic assessment of German China scholars' public statements on Chinese politics. However, according to our observations, these positions do not represent the field.

- As far as the alleged widespread failure to “question the official narrative” in research goes (Fulda et al. 2022), even a casual look at the topics German-speaking China scholars cover should lay this claim to rest.⁵ It should also be self-evident that researching the implementation of a government policy, which Fulda would probably call “official China” (Fulda and Missal 2021, 13), does not imply that scholars do not critically assess “the official narrative” or obfuscate power structures. As a generalizing descriptor of the field, such a claim has no basis.
- Fulda and Missal present selective evidence of financial grants from Chinese state and private entities to German universities and rightly bemoan a lack of funding transparency among universities. However, they then jump to the surprising conclusion that “many degree programmes at German universities could not be offered without funding from PRC entities” (Fulda and Missal 2021, 8). While we agree that financial flows from Chinese entities to German universities should be made public (see below), this claim cannot simply be inferred from the evidence they provide. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. Fulda and Missal’s conjecture not only sounds both dramatic and vague, but also lacks any evidence that would permit this inference to be drawn.⁶
- Fulda and co-authors paint a picture in which German China scholarship is at high risk of being subdued by a multi-pronged Chinese influence operation. We concur Benner’s observation that the so-called “late Orientalism” seems to be more widespread among a generation of China scholars in retirement or in advanced stages of their careers (Benner 2018; see also, Alpermann and Schubert 2022b).⁷ If Fulda and co-authors were right and Chinese “sharp-power” strategies which have emerged over recent years are the cause behind some scholars’ political views, we would have to assume that the young, non-tenured, often precariously employed scholars would be most affected. Why do we seem to observe the opposite? In the absence of any systematic insights,

5 The authors of this statement, for instance, study popular protests, civil society, labor conditions, involuntary resettlement and surveillance, among other topics.

6 The only support offered for this statement are unreferenced claims about two German universities having accepted “funding from PRC entities which are directly controlled by the CCP,” the above-mentioned case of a Chinese-funded professorship at Free University Berlin, and a reference to an unpublished working paper (Fulda and Missal 2021, 8–9).

7 This older generation also co-authored a position paper in support of Confucius Institutes (Clart et al. 2020), which Fulda and Missal cite as corroborating evidence for the impact of institutional dependencies (Fulda and Missal 2021), and penned the “China threat” special issue (Ptak and Mondschein 2020).

such an inconsistency between alleged cause and effect should at least caution us not to jump to conclusions.

- Both the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government and over-zealous counter-pressure by its critics are threats to academic autonomy. It is not only tiresome when China scholars speak to some journalists who seem to be interested only in the Chinese government's repressive side and fail to compute the more complex reality we discern in our research. The Covid-19 pandemic has also shown that media campaigns against scholars can have serious consequences on scientists' willingness to speak publicly (Nogrady 2021). That being said, only the Chinese government side sanctions and imprisons scholars. This deserves emphasis.

How can we move forward?

The debate highlights several solutions to preserve (or regain) academic autonomy in China Studies. We critically discuss some of these suggested solutions.

- Fulda et al. put all those who cooperate with Chinese scholars and Chinese scholarly institutions under suspicion of collaboration with the Chinese government. Drawing a line between those who cooperate with “potentially rotten compromises” and those who undertake “free scholarship in the pursuit of truth” (Fulda et al. 2022) implies that scholars with access to the field in China cannot conduct unbiased and open-ended research. We regard such polemic broadsides against peer-reviewed research as unacceptable, even in an op-ed. We believe cooperation and exchanges with Chinese colleagues are more important than ever (see also, Alpermann and Godehardt 2022; Levy 2021). In addition to continued exchange with the many Chinese social scientists who are critically observing their government despite their need to be much more careful in their public statements in recent years, we also need continued interaction with party institutions and scholars who advise the government. This provides insight into the rationalities of decision-makers. Such knowledge is important for understanding policy processes and any kind of future engagement (see also, Alpermann and Godehardt 2022).
- Fulda and Missal suggest forming a multi-agency government “task force which critically examines systematic challenges of the CCP.” It should “not only address the issue of academic freedom but also investigate the threat of industry cooptation, IP theft, cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns” (Fulda and Missal 2021, 14). While deeper research into China's international engagement is much needed, a state institution investigating academic freedom runs serious risk of restricting academic freedom as defined above.
- We share Fulda and co-authors' point that it is the task of academic organizations to take a stance against acts of repression against academics by the Chinese government (Fulda and Missal 2021). Sanctions against scholars

are undeniably attacks against academic freedom. Hence, we also hold the view that the DGA, of which we are both members, has not lived up to this task in its recent statements.

- Alpermann and Schubert (2022b) advocate field research in China and suggest framing cooperative scholarship in a way that allows Chinese colleagues to communicate it to their institutions. This has been an established practice since the 1990s. However, as field research is becoming increasingly difficult and restrictions on Chinese scholars increase, we fear the time for relying on this as a key research strategy may be over. Instead, the scholarly community may need to consider alternative practices for gaining first-hand evidence from China. This can include inviting Chinese scholars and activists to Europe, undertaking interviews with emigres, analyzing leaked internal documents from China—research strategies used by China scholars during the Mao period (Baum 2010). It also includes field research by Chinese doctoral students and post-docs who are able to access China and remote research through online means. These methods entail their own practical and ethical challenges and require a reorientation of graduate training. The scholarly community must reflect on these issues.⁸

We would like to propose the following alternative paths that, in our understanding, would serve to strengthen the academic autonomy of the China field and other scholarly disciplines collaborating with Chinese entities.

- Funding for China Studies needs to be increased and existing China expertise better used in academic institutions collaborating with China. Despite the importance of China in global politics and economics, China Studies are still heavily under-financed. Our own academic environments are cases in point. Research and teaching on contemporary China in universities in Austria is limited to four professorships at the University of Vienna. This compares to thirteen professorships in American Studies at five public universities.⁹ At FU Berlin, only five professors of China Studies cover the same fields (culture, politics, literature, history, sociology, economics) that seventeen professors at the John F. Kennedy Institute of North American Studies cover. In addition to that, knowledge on the United States is diffused throughout government and society, whereas knowledge on China is not broadly accessible (Rudyak 2021). As a result, China competency in Germany and even more so in Austria, remains feeble and does not reflect the importance of China to the German-speaking world. Beyond scarce financing for university professorships, funding for secondary schools to extend their teaching on China, including classes on language, politics, culture and society, is insufficient (see also,

⁸ The Arbeitskreis Sozialwissenschaftliche Chinaforschung (ASC, Work Group on Social Scientific China Research) under the DGA ran two workshops on such new challenges in 2021 and 2022.

⁹ Including tenure track and a.o. (extraordinary) professors. Data collected by Steinhardt.

Godehardt and Frenzel 2021). At the same time, graduates of China Studies need better appreciation on the job market, especially in political and business consulting. For instance, the international offices of universities and research institutes that collaborate with China should have at least one staff member with a background in China Studies. Our graduates would be highly qualified for such positions.

- The issues of field access (including visas) for scholars who want to do field research in China and restrictions against scholars (including sanctions) belong on the agenda of diplomatic engagements with Chinese counterparts at the national and EU levels. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, field research (if at all possible) seems to be granted only in those rare cases in which international university presidents directly reach out to their peers in Chinese partner universities, who then request that their administrations issue the invitation letters needed for visa applications. The generation of reliable and open knowledge on China is a public good of strategic importance that should not be left unattended by governments.
- The public has a right to know who funds what kinds of academic activities and the sums involved in a university financed by the taxpayer. The debate on Confucius Institutes is a complicated one. There have been problematic interference attempts and their presence on campuses is delicate (Hughes 2014). We share Fulda and Missal's (2021) critique of a lack of transparency of funding to universities from China. We believe that any foreign government and private funding to public universities must be subject to public scrutiny.
- With regards to institutional cooperation with universities in China more broadly, we believe these should not be blindly cut out of the fear of potentially negative influence from China or negative media attention. Instead, international cooperation with China and other countries with problematic records in academic freedom and human rights should, during all its stages, routinely be accompanied by individuals with respective country expertise who can help assess whether the type of cooperation is in line with principles of academic freedom or whether potential issues of dual-use technology might occur. Graduates of China Studies institutes are well-equipped for such tasks.
- As an example of an attempt to govern academic cooperation, in 2021 FU Berlin established a China commission (in German: China Beirat) filled with China experts and other stakeholders at the university engaged with China, to discuss and recommend strategies regarding the university's current and future cooperation with Chinese entities. Such structures, if successfully implemented, are arguably close to the German Federal Court's definition of academic freedom that requires state institutions to stay away from steering science and leave that task to academic institutions.

Conclusion

In an increasingly tense political climate, potential and manifest threats to academic autonomy have emerged from both ends of the spectrum. A scholarly and public debate on these issues is important. However, emphasizing threats from one side while pretending that threats from the other do not exist does not help. It is important to remain vigilant against both. It is equally necessary to rely on solid evidence when assessing the size of the threat. In this spirit, we are looking forward to empirically grounded assessments of the German-speaking field of China Studies that are currently underway. We hope to have brought further nuance and workable solutions to the problem of academic autonomy in times of tense political relations with China.

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