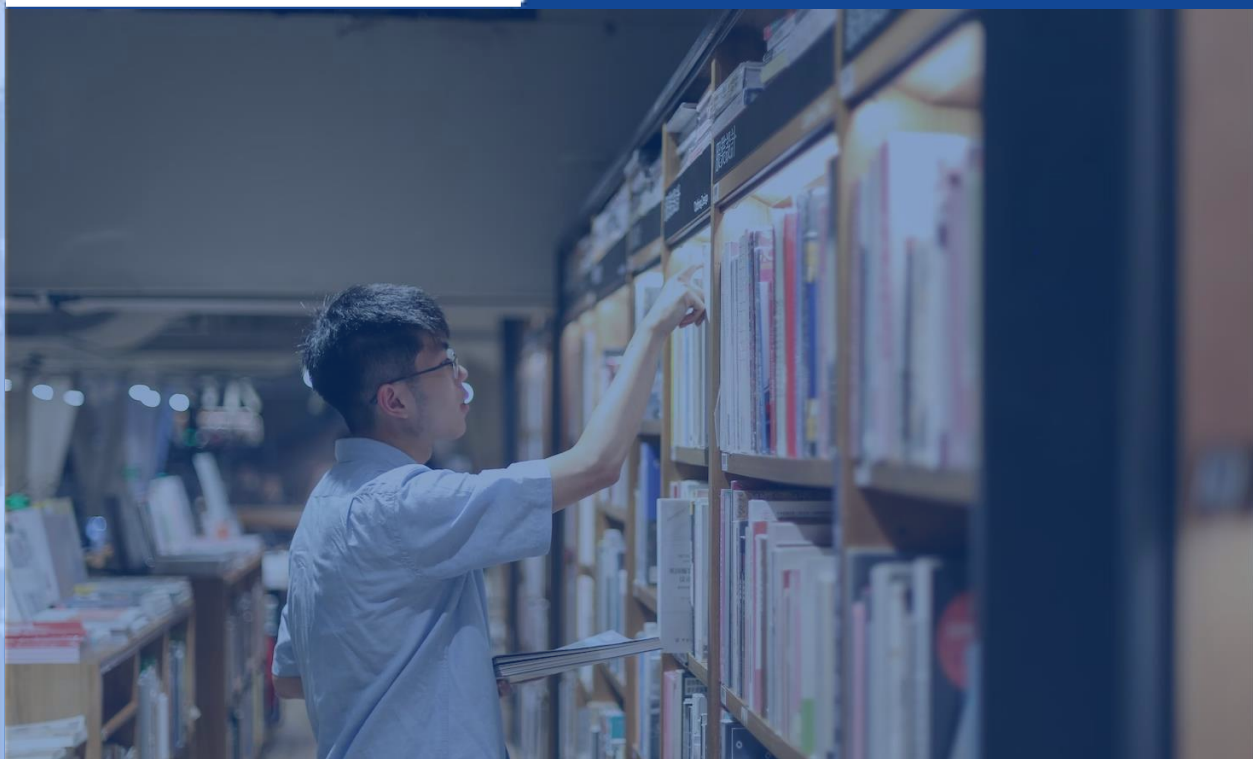


# Chinese governance of International Academic Exchanges



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## Introduction

In recent years, as political factors have become more prominent in nearly all aspects of the Chinese society, there is a growing discussion in European academic discourse on the risks and challenges of the collaboration between European and Chinese institutions. Those discussions seem to overwhelmingly focus on political concerns in Europe such as political influencing, (self-)censorship, and academic freedom.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, as LeidenAsiaCentre's 2018 report on Europe-China collaboration in Higher Education and Research points out, European institutions often lack information regarding plans and policies on the Chinese side, and are usually puzzled by the opacity of the Chinese governmental system and institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This report contributes to the existing literature on collaboration with China in Higher Education and Research (HER) by raising the awareness of the administrative practices and procedures in Chinese HER structures. It reviews the recent developments in the governance of international academic exchanges in China and the impact of those developments based on the perspectives of Chinese academics. Where it is relevant, this report also marks the differences in international exchanges across academic disciplines in terms of (1) how they are relevant to realising Chinese long-term development goals and strategic objectives, and (2) how regulations and the growing political/security concerns affect those disciplines specifically. It is worth noting that there is a plethora of formats of contacts, exchanges and collaboration between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars and institutions, such as student exchange programmes, funding schemes, or joint universities,<sup>3</sup> whereas the scope of this report is limited to 'scholar-to-scholar' exchanges - between

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. d'Hooghe, I.; Montulet, A.; de Wolff, M.; Pieke, F.N. (2018). *Assessing Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research*. LeidenAsiaCentre Report.

D'Hooghe, I.; Dekker, B. (2020). *China's invloed op onderwijs in Nederland*. Clingendael report.

Benner, T.; Gaspers, J.; Ohlberg, M.; Poggetti, L.; Shi-Kupfer, K. (2018). *Authoritarian Advance Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe*. Report by MERICS and GPPi.

<sup>2</sup> d'Hooghe, I.; Montulet, A.; de Wolff, M.; Pieke, F.N. (2018). *Assessing Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research*. LeidenAsiaCentre Report. p.25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Chinese and non-Chinese academic staff, such as (online) conferences, international travel, and establishing and maintaining contacts between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars.

In recent years, the HER sector in China is at the strategic level steered towards more alignment with the state's security needs and strategic vision, in which international exchanges are supposed to facilitate (1) the acquisition of knowledge crucial for China's industrialisation (for natural sciences), and (2) enhancing China's international discursive power (for social sciences and humanities). While Chinese policy planning documents designate the internationalisation of China's HER sector and international exchanges between academics as both an explicit policy goal and means to achieve a number of strategic objectives, few policy reforms are made in this area,<sup>4</sup> and some regulations have instead been tightened. Yet, interpreting tightening policies as the Chinese government discouraging international academic ties is ill-informed, as policies are tightened often because of externalities in domestic politics such as China's anti-corruption campaign. Apart from the spelled-out rules and policies, this report also points to other channels of authority and governance such as foreign affairs disciplines and information security protocols. Growing political and security concerns are institutionalised through those channels, which led to additional constraints on international academic exchanges. Particularly, it is interesting to note that many Chinese scholars (from social sciences and humanities disciplines) suggest that the current state of regulations are not conducive and sometimes counterproductive to achieving China's strategic objectives set out for its own HER sector. Chinese academics also point to a general lack of willingness to establishing ties with non-Chinese partners. A few of them called for the simplification and liberalisation of policies. Lastly, it should be stressed that politicisation is not a unilateral Chinese process, and European academics and institutions should not neglect the fact that politicisation in the West also alienates (potential) Chinese partners.

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<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that no policy reforms in the area took place.

## The relevance of international academic exchanges China's strategic vision

In China's HER sector, natural sciences, in particular the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects, are one of the pillars of the state's technonationalist development strategies. Contrary to the saying that 'science is without borders', it is the case in many states that the work of scientists is to different degrees aligned with the states' security needs and strategic vision. In China, the alignment of science and strategy became explicit in the 2000s: the "Outline of the National Medium and Long-term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology (2006–2020)" stated that China wanted to join the ranks of innovative countries, become less dependent on foreign technology, and become a world science and technology power by the middle of the 21st century. The plan identified eleven priority areas predominantly among so-called STEM subjects. Progress was to be achieved by increasing research and development expenditure, including the establishment of a number of world-class research institutes, universities, and industrial research and development centres.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the alignment of China's HER sector and its industrialisation policy is reflected in the strong connection between the 'Made in China 2025' strategy and the 'Double-First-Class Universities' plan: the plan's development list reveals a focus on natural sciences, IT, engineering and related technologies.<sup>6</sup>

In China's internationalisation of higher education, knowledge transfer seems to play prominent roles for STEM subjects, which should contribute to China's technological self-sufficiency. LeidenAsiaCentre's 2018 report on Europe-China collaboration in higher education and research points out that China's continued commitment to developing "core technologies" (i.a. cryptography, semiconductors, cybersecurity software, cloud systems, and artificial intelligence systems), is unequivocally aimed at reducing the country's dependency on foreign technology.

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<sup>5</sup> d'Hooghe, I.; Montulet, A.; de Wolff, M.; Pieke, F.N. (2018). *Assessing Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research*. LeidenAsiaCentre Report. p.25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.6.

As for China's Social Sciences and Humanities, a different set of strategic reasonings dictate why and how Chinese scholars should maintain contacts and cooperate with foreign partners. For those disciplines, exchanges with foreign partners are in general aimed towards enhancing China's soft power. It is noteworthy to point out that this is a new development under Xi Jinping's presidency. Academic institutions and scholars are encouraged to boost the appeal of China's culture and its political system, and enhance China's international discursive power [话语权] abroad. In this context, policy think tanks are at least equally important actors specifically in promoting Chinese narratives abroad as indicated by various Chinese policy documents reviewed by this report, where they are tasked with inserting Chinese interests, opinions, and priorities into public opinion and decision-making processes.

Around Xi's signature ideological contribution – 'the Chinese dream' – revolve the interconnected four matters of 'confidence', i.e. confidence in the chosen path [道路自信], confidence in guiding theories [理论自信], confidence in the political system [制度自信], and confidence in culture [文化自信].<sup>7</sup> Xi Jinping himself defines confidence in culture as 'full affirmation and active practice of a country and a political Party of its own cultural value, and firm confidence in its vitality'.<sup>8</sup> Apart from their apparent ideological and propagandistic value, the four confidences should also be seen as doctrinal guidelines for policy formulation. For academic institutions, their development has been put into the context of Xi's strategy for 'building a country with a strong socialist culture'<sup>9</sup>[建设社会主义

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<sup>7</sup> Official Translation by China Academy of Translation.

[http://keywords.china.org.cn/2018-10/30/content\\_69097952.htm](http://keywords.china.org.cn/2018-10/30/content_69097952.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Xinhua. (5 Aug, 2016). Cultural self-confidence-a topic of the times raised by Xi Jinping [文化自信——习近平提出的时代课题]. Retrieved from: [http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-08/05/c\\_1119330939.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-08/05/c_1119330939.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Translation by Chinalawinfo Database of Peking University.

<http://www.lawinfochina.com/Display.aspx?lib=law&Cgid=160202>

文化强国] during the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP.<sup>10</sup> Domestically, this is pursued by developing the disciplines of philosophy and social sciences [哲学社会科学] and establishing ‘think tanks with Chinese characteristics’ in order to maintain the CCP’s right of ideological leadership.

At the international level, Chinese scholars are seen as important actors of narrative promotion to ‘tell the Chinese story’ and enhance China’s international discursive power. During a 2016 seminar for Chinese philosophers and social scientists, Xi argued for the necessity of enhancing Chinese academia’s discursive presence abroad as follows:

*We are entitled to have the most say in interpreting Chinese practices and constructing theories on China, but the voice of China’s philosophy and social sciences in the world is still small, and we are still in a situation where we are unable to express ourselves and no one listens to us [有理说不出、说了传不开].<sup>11</sup>*

As many Chinese commentators point out, the recent politicisation of the discussion on China and increased perceived defamation of China by Western media and think tanks further necessitate enhancing Chinese academia’s international discursive presence. Dr. Wang Wen from Renmin University points out that China still often finds itself in a passive, defensive, and reactive position in many ongoing international debates around China, where the ‘discursive battle’ stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Central Government of the PRC. (18 Oct. 2017). Xi Jinping proposed to strengthen cultural self-confidence and promote the prosperity and prosperity of socialist culture[习近平提出，坚定文化自信，推动社会主义文化繁荣兴盛]. Retrieved from: [http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/18/content\\_5232653.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/18/content_5232653.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Wang, W. (17, May. 2021). Enhancing the international discourse power of China's philosophy and social sciences [提升我国哲学社会科学的国际话语权]. Qiushi. Retrieved from: [http://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2021-05/17/c\\_1127454344.htm, our translation](http://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2021-05/17/c_1127454344.htm, our translation).

<sup>12</sup> Wang. Enhancing the international discourse power of China's philosophy and social sciences; Wang, W. (31 Mar. 2021). [Think Tank Research] Mobilizing the ‘Army of a Million’ — On the Progress, Difficulties and Policy Recommendations of Chinese Think Tanks' External Communication. [【智库研究】调动“百万大军”——论中国智库对外传播的进展、困境与政策建议]. Think Tank China. Retrieved from: [http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/think/2021-03/31/content\\_77363479.htm?f=pad&a=true](http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/think/2021-03/31/content_77363479.htm?f=pad&a=true)



Several Chinese commentators also argue that platforms of international academic exchanges, including conferences and forums, are an important battleground of narratives.<sup>13</sup>

The Chinese government has also issued several policy planning documents in the HER sector: First, the ‘Double First-class University Plan’ aims to make China the leading nation in many academic disciplines and to have dozens of universities ranked as “world-class” universities before 2050. Apart from describing how selected universities will be financially supported by central and provincial authorities,<sup>14</sup> Article 13 of the plan also explicitly calls for international exchange and cooperation with world-class universities abroad, although more focus has been put on facilitating institution-level co-operation (such as mutual credit recognition, joint scientific research programmes), instead of scholar-to-scholar exchanges.<sup>15</sup> More recently in 2020, the Ministry of Education issued another planning document on the further opening up of China’s HER sector - *Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening of Education in the New Era* [加快和扩大新时代教育对外开放的意见].<sup>16</sup> Apart from re-iterating the policy directions already laid out in 2015, a new policy development in the document further calls for reforms and decentralisation (from government authorities to academic institutions) of regulations on international academic exchanges and cooperation.<sup>17</sup>

For China’s policy think tanks, the State Council has issued a separate planning document on their development - *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of*

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<sup>13</sup> Long, G. (2020). Build a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics and promote the modernization of the national governance system [建设中国特色新型智库,促进国家治理体系现代化]. *China Development Watch*: 2020(5).

<sup>14</sup> d’Hooghe et al. Assessing Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research.

<sup>15</sup> State Council of China. (2015). Notice of the State Council on Printing and Distributing the Overall Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines[国务院关于印发统筹推进世界一流大学和一流学科建设总体方案的通知].

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Education of China. (2020). *Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening of Education in the New Era* [加快和扩大新时代教育对外开放的意见]. Retrieved from: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s5147/202006/t20200623\\_467784.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/202006/t20200623_467784.html).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

*Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* [关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见] (hereinafter the 2015 Opinions on Think Tanks).<sup>18</sup> The policy goals set out in this document, apart from establishing think tank's universal role of providing national government with informed policy advice, seems to include enhancing China's discursive power and the international influence of Chinese narratives. In particular, the 2015 Opinions on Think Tanks explicitly calls for Chinese think tanks to engage more extensively in international debates on China and designates think tanks as actors of public diplomacy, as its Article 3 points out:

*Think tanks are an important carrier of a country's soft power and increasingly become an important factor in international competitiveness, playing an irreplaceable role in foreign exchanges... For establishing a good image of socialist China, promoting Chinese culture and contemporary Chinese values to the world,..., there is an urgent need for new think tanks with Chinese characteristics to play a role in public diplomacy... to continuously strengthen China's ... international voice<sup>19</sup>*

The 2015 Opinions on Think Tanks, in order to enhance the competitiveness and international influence of Chinese think tanks, also plans to reform the co-operation mechanism in several aspects between Chinese think tanks and their foreign partners. It first calls for employing more foreign experts and sinologists in Chinese think tanks, and the establishment of overseas extensions of Chinese think tanks. More importantly, the document indicates a few areas where regulations should be simplified: (1) the management of activities involving foreign partners, (2) the exchange between Chinese and non-Chinese experts, and (3) hosting and participating in international conferences.

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<sup>18</sup> English translation available at: <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/ccp-general-office-and-state-council-general-office-opinions-concerning-strengthening-the-construction-of-new-types-of-think-tanks-with-chinese-characteristics/>

<sup>19</sup> State Council of China. (2015). Opinions concerning Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics [关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见], our translation.

## Developments of regulation on international academic exchanges under Xi's presidency

As discussed in the previous chapter of this report, Chinese planning documents state that the regulation on various aspects of international academic exchanges should be liberalised or decentralised. While this report does find policy reforms that are ostensibly aimed at encouraging international academic exchanges by removing bureaucratic obstacles, various Chinese secondary-literature sources conversely suggest that it is highly questionable to what extent those planned policy reforms and liberalisation actually took place.<sup>20</sup> Two Chinese sources claim that regulations on certain areas have instead been tightened in recent years.<sup>21</sup> However, the contrast between what is stated in planning documents and the assessment of Chinese scholars should not be simplistically interpreted as Chinese policy documents being deceitful, or that the Chinese government in fact does not encourage international academic exchanges. This report argues that strategic goals set for China's HER sector, such as boosting China's prowess in science and technology, or enhancing China's soft power, are not the only factor that has an influence on practical-level policy-making of international academic exchanges; regulations are also shaped by trends, phenomena, and events in China's domestic politics.

One noteworthy reform that aims to assure the policy liberalisation laid out in earlier Chinese strategy documents, as claimed by Chinese official sources, took place around 2019: the Ministry of Education has granted all 75 'Double-First-Class' universities partial 'foreign affairs shenpi power' [外事审批权]. Before going further in discussing the 2019 reform, it is necessary to clarify what 'foreign affairs shenpi' [外事审批] is. The term shenpi in Chinese stands for 'to review and approve'; 'foreign affairs shenpi' refers to a common practice in

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<sup>20</sup> Jia, Q. (2021). Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts [关于改进对专家学者对外交流管理工作的提案]. The Charhar Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts.

Fan, C. (2021). The innovation of thoughts and the internationalisation of think tanks [思想创新与智库国际化]. Think tank theory & Practice, 6(2) 8-14.

Chinese institutions (academic and other) that employees or the institution as a whole need to apply to the institution's International Co-operation Office or sometimes to government authorities for an ad hoc approval that the planned activity involving foreign partners can indeed go ahead.

China's Ministry of Education (MoE) claims that the reform is carried out in order to implement China's strategy of 'accelerating and expanding the opening-up of education,<sup>22</sup> wherein one of the focuses is to remove institutional barriers in the opening of education' with reforms.<sup>23</sup> In this context, decentralisation of foreign affairs shenpi is aimed at cutting bureaucracies and shortening the time and effort required from Chinese scholars to plan their contacts, thereby alleviating the problem of 'difficulties in travelling abroad [出国难]'.<sup>24</sup> For the 75 'Double-First-Class' universities to which the reform applies, the reform entails that foreign affairs shenpi applied by their employees for a number of activities do not have to go through governmental authorities anymore, but can instead be approved by the universities' International Co-operation Office. On a side note, at least some of China's top-tier think tanks, for example the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS),<sup>25</sup> seem to be able to exert foreign affairs shenpi power from their employees as well. Meanwhile, it is

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<sup>22</sup> '为落实习近平总书记关于加快和扩大教育对外开放的指示要求，服务高校“双一流”建设发展需要，进一步激发高校对外交往活力，提升国际合作交流水平'

Ministry of Education. (2 November, 2019). 49 universities directly under the supervision of the Ministry of Education have been granted with certain foreign affairs shenpi power[49 所教育部直属高校获批一定外事审批权]. Retrieved from: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s5147/201911/t20191104\\_406761.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201911/t20191104_406761.html)

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education. (18 June, 2020). Press conference: Accelerate and expand the opening of education to the outside world and vigorously enhance the international influence of China's education[加快和扩大教育对外开放 大力提升我国教育的国际影响力]. Retrieved from: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s271/202006/t20200617\\_466545.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s271/202006/t20200617_466545.html)

<sup>24</sup> Wen, C.; Wang, Z.; Yuan, Y.; Han, T.; Xu, Y. (13 November, 2019). A prescription for 'difficulties in going abroad' [一张开给“出国难”的“病历单”]. ScienceNet. Retrieved from: <https://news.sciencenet.cn/sbhtmlnews/2019/11/351049.shtml>

<sup>25</sup> National Institute Of International Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (n.d.). Foreign Affairs Management[外事管理]. Retrieved from: <http://niis.cass.cn/kygl/wsgl/>

worth noting that the coverage of the decentralisation reform is limited: it only applied to international travels – inviting non-Chinese scholars and visiting foreign institutions – but not to other forms of exchanges such as attending and organising international conferences. Parenthetically, six top universities in China used to be able to organise international conference without ‘shenpi’ in the early 2000s, but the Ministry of Education started to require them to apply for approvals from 2007.<sup>26</sup> This shows that, in a wider timeframe, those reforms possibly have more resemblance to the process of going back and forth than a one-way street of gradually cutting bureaucracies and granting universities more autonomy.

All in all, it is not yet possible to evaluate the outcome of the reform in terms of whether it did facilitate scholars’ international travels, as the COVID-19 pandemic has effectively halted almost all travels to and from mainland China. Nonetheless, this report emphasises that decentralisation should not be equated with liberalisation, and whether the reform can bring out its stated policy goal of facilitating international academic exchanges to a large extent depends on how administrations of China’s ‘Double-First-Class’ universities are going to use their newly attained power. One should not assume that university administrations are less stringent in scrutinising various forms of international academic exchanges. As one article on the Chinese Academy of Science’s newspaper points out, the reform may fail to result in more convenience for Chinese scholars because the administration of some universities see bureaucracies as a necessity to avoid risks.<sup>27</sup> For European institutions and academics, one often-neglected aspect of Chinese governance of international academic exchanges is that it involves public money. While deregulation would provide scholars with greater convenience and flexibility, it would also mean that university administration would have less control on how the funding is spent.<sup>28</sup> Amidst the national crackdown on corruption, it remains to be seen how university administrations will approach this issue when international travels are again feasible.

As mentioned above, the general perception of various Chinese scholars is that regulations on international academic exchanges, contrary to what is stated in policy

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<sup>26</sup> Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts.

<sup>27</sup> Wen, et al. A prescription for ‘difficulties in going abroad’.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

planning documents, have not been effectively liberalised in recent years.<sup>29</sup> The former dean of Peking University's School of International Relations Jia Qingguo submitted a proposal during the 2021 two-sessions on easing the regulations on international academic exchanges. He remarked that:

*the current regulation of scholars' international exchanges is beyond a reasonable degree, which is not conducive to the realisation of China's opening-up policy, foreign policy-making, or telling the Chinese story.*<sup>30</sup>

Policy documents and commentaries of Chinese scholars also indicate that the regulations have been tightened in several regards, based on 'political or security concerns' in recent years.

First, although it has been an established practice that Chinese institutions are obliged to apply for shenpi for various activities involving foreign partners, the extent and scope of 'shenpi' has been expanded in recent years. Chinese scholars and institutions now have to apply for shenpi for several previously unregulated activities, including being interviewed by foreign media and attending events in China that are organised by foreign institutions and individuals. A case in point is the regulation of hosting and attending webinars: unlike hosting or participating in in-person events, online events involving foreign partners used to be unregulated,<sup>31</sup> but scholars are required to apply for shenpi for webinars since 2020,<sup>32</sup> while online events became the 'new normal' during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report has not found policy documents from the Chinese governmental sources that confirm this is an official requirement, but it does find webinar regulations in

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<sup>29</sup> Fan, C. (2021). Thought Innovations and Think Tank Internationalisation [思想创新与智库国际化]. Think tank: Theory & Practice, 6(2): 8-14.

<sup>30</sup> '现行对专家学者对外交往的管理超出了合理范围, 不利于新时期我国实现更高水平对外开放, 不利于国家制定合理的对外政策, 不利于讲好中国故事。' in Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts, our translation.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Peking University equates attending webinars to travelling abroad, inviting foreign webinar speakers to hosting foreign scholars, and organising webinars to organising international conference.

almost identical languages issued by many universities<sup>33</sup> in 2020 from different parts of China, which suggests that the restrictions imposed on webinars probably are indeed coordinated by governmental authorities. In brief, the new regulation on webinars imposes the same timeframes of shenpi for in-person activities on webinars: scholars need to apply for shenpi fifteen days in advance for attending a webinar and three months in advance if they are organising a webinar.<sup>34</sup> In addition to creating discouraging bureaucratic hurdles, the timeframe required by regulations can also complicate Chinese scholars organising and participating in transnational online events. For example, the registration for some online events may only be open quite shortly before the planned date, in which case Chinese scholars would not be able to meet the requirement of applying for shenpi two weeks in advance. Also, it is worth noting that the regulation also requires institutions to ‘scrutinise online conferences hosted by foreign parties’ and requires scholars and students to ‘strictly abide by relevant rules on preserving secrets’.<sup>35</sup> This suggests rising political and security concerns in how Chinese policy-makers approach international academic exchanges.

Besides, the regulations on the scale of international conferences and international travels have been tightened in recent years. However, it appears that the tightening policies are not caused by any reasonings directly related to academic exchanges but are a by-product of China’s national campaign of cracking down on corruption and the abuse of

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<sup>33</sup> Peking University, China University of Geosciences, University of Science and Technology of China, Guangdong University of Technology, etc.

<sup>34</sup> International Cooperation Department and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Office of Peking University. (21 Aug., 2020). Announcement on Regulating the Application and Approval of Participation in Online International Conferences Sponsored by Foreign Partners [关于规范参加外方主办的线上国际会议申报审批的通知]. Retrieved from: <https://eecs.pku.edu.cn/info/1046/2971.htm> ;

International Cooperation Department and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Office of Chinese University of Geosciences. (27 September, 2021). Notice on the shenpi of organising (participating in) international online conferences [关于举办（参加）线上国际会议申报审批的通知]. Retrieved from: <https://gjhzc.cug.edu.cn/info/1087/3691.htm>

<sup>35</sup> ‘各单位应对参加外方主办的在线国际会议进行严格审核把关，师生在参加外方主办的国际会议时应严格遵守相关保密规定。’ Ibid.

public funds. Those new restrictions are mainly imposed by a series of policy documents and directives issued between 2013 and 2015.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of international travels, *MoE document [2015] No.1 – Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Further Strengthening the Administration of Temporary Travelling Abroad for Work* imposes restrictions on three aspects:

(1) regarding the duration of stays abroad, it forbids scholars from staying for more than five days if they are visiting one country, no more than eight days if visiting two, and no more than ten if they are visiting three. There are limited exceptions granted on the basis of practicalities (e.g. lack of direct flights from China, visiting multiple cities in large countries), while scholars are in principle forbidden to visit more than three countries on a single work trip.

(2) Regarding the group size of international travel: a group visiting a foreign country should consist of no more than six scholars.

(3) As to what kind of invitations can be accepted: European partners of Chinese institution should also be aware that Chinese institutions are not allowed to accept invitations from foreign missions to China and Chinese diaspora organisations.<sup>37</sup> In terms of international conferences, *MoE document [2013] No.63 – MoE opinions on further strengthening of the management of educational foreign affairs*<sup>38</sup> vaguely stipulates that international conferences need to cater to the ‘important necessities of the institutions or China’s diplomacy’, and otherwise ought not to be approved, while it provides that international conferences held by foreign NGOs should be strictly limited.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Education of China. (7 December, 2015). Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on Further Strengthening the Administration of Temporary Travelling Abroad for Work [教育部办公厅关于进一步加强因公临时出国（境）管理的通知]. Ministry of Education [2015] No. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Education of China. (2013). Ministry of Education Opinion on Further Strengthening the Management of Educational Foreign Affairs [教育部关于进一步加强教育外事管理的意见]. Ministry of Education [2013] No.63.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



However, it would be misguided to assume that those restrictions are imposed because the Chinese government has in recent years turned to discouraging international academic exchanges as a whole. Many imposed restrictions from those two MoE documents in fact originate from the CCP Central Committee's 'Eight-point Regulation' [中央八项规定], which is a set of regulations made by Xi Jinping personally in December 2012 at a Politburo meeting aiming at bringing the Party 'closer to the people'[密切联系群众] by promoting discipline and frugality, and cracking down corruption within the Party.<sup>40</sup> In its preamble, the MoE's document [2015] No.1 explicitly refers to implementing the 'Eight-point Regulation' [中央八项规定] as the policy goal.<sup>41</sup> Also, specific restrictions on foreign visitations and hosting international conferences can also be traced to the 'Eight-point regulations': Article 2 of the 'Eight-point regulations' requires the Party to streamline conference activities [要精简会议活动], and it discourages Party-members from attending a variety of conferences including seminars and forums.<sup>42</sup> Article 4 requires the Party to 'arrange visiting activities based on the necessity of the big picture of diplomatic work',<sup>43</sup> and to strictly control the accompanying personnel of foreign visitations. Besides, many seemingly out-of-context requirements spelled-out in MoE's document [2015] No.1 also suggest that the purpose of the restrictions is to curb the abuse of public funds. It mentions, for example, that it is forbidden to bring spouses along for international work-travels,<sup>44</sup> or to use invitation letters issued by third-party agencies.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> CCP News. (5 June, 2013). Eight-point regulation [八项规定]. Retrieved from: <http://qzlx.people.com.cn/n/2013/0605/c364582-21744009.html>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> '未经中央批准一律不出席各类剪彩、奠基活动和庆祝会、纪念会、表彰会、博览会、研讨会及各类论坛' in CCP News. Eight-point regulation.

<sup>43</sup> '要规范出访活动，从外交工作大局需要出发合理安排出访活动' in CCP News. Eight-point regulation.

<sup>44</sup> '不得携带配偶和子女同行' in Ministry of Education [2015] No. 1.

<sup>45</sup> '严禁通过中介机构联系或出具邀请函' in Ministry of Education [2015] No. 1.

Professor Jia Qingguo also gave examples of practices of certain Chinese institutions enforcing stricter, additional regulations on its employees. Although those examples are anecdotal in nature and should not be used to conclude that those practices are systematic in China, it does suggest that political and security concerns dominate some Chinese institutions' approaches to international academic exchanges. Those examples include: (1) some Chinese institutions require that their employees obtain approvals before meeting foreigners for any purpose, (2) some require that their employees make sure at least two Chinese colleagues are present when meeting foreign partners, and to submit a report in writing on issues discussed.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, this report also stresses that Jia is a scholar in international relations, and it is likely that he was speaking based on his own experience and that of his peers from the same, or related, discipline(s). Those practices and concerns might be much less relevant to other disciplines. For example, as LeidenAsiaCentre's 2018 report on Europe-China collaboration on higher education likewise points out, Chinese scholars in the natural sciences are much less likely to experience political interference in their work.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> '有的单位规定见外国人不仅需要审批，而且要求见面必须得两个人以上同行，事后要提交一个见面交谈的详细记录，同一个外国人一年见面不得超过两次等' in Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts.

Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts.

<sup>47</sup> d'Hooghe, et al. p.29.

## Rising political security concerns on international academic exchanges

Apart from the aforementioned policies explicitly dictating what Chinese scholars are allowed and not allowed to do regarding international academic exchanges, European partners of Chinese scholars and institutions should also pay attention to other more subtle factors that can influence international academic exchanges, as there are different layers of governance, authority, and informal routes of control and managerial practices within the Chinese party-state. It is also likely that many of those factors have been exacerbated during times of high geopolitical tension between China and ‘the collective West’.

First, how Party members ought to behave when they encounter foreign institutions and individuals is an integral part of the CCP’s Party discipline. Most notably, the Foreign Affairs Personnel Code of Conduct in Foreign Affairs [涉外人员守则] is a set of rules initially made in 1981 and is gradually incorporated into the Party Constitutions and Party regulations on disciplinary actions. Most of those rules were made at the beginning of the Reform and Opening policy in order to prevent corruption, prohibit individuals from voicing opinions that might be detrimental to China’s image, and prevent domestic actors from revealing state secrets to foreign partners.<sup>48</sup> However, any assertion about constraints that the Party’s foreign affairs disciplines exercised on international academic exchanges in practice should also be taken with a grain of salt, since their exact workings are highly fluid and contextual. For example, Article 6 of the CCP’s Code of Conduct in Foreign Affairs explicitly forbids building personal relations with foreigners.<sup>49</sup> Yet, many formal cooperative relations between Chinese and foreign institutions are indeed made possible by existing personal contacts. Had these regulations been literally put to practice, the majority of international academic exchanges with China in the last four decades would not have been possible.

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<sup>48</sup> CCP News. (n.d.). [Entry of Dictionary of Party Building] The Party’s Discipline of Foreign Affairs. [【《党的建设辞典》辞条】党的外事纪律].

<sup>49</sup> State Council of China. (1981). Code of Conduct in foreign affairs [涉外人员守则].

Several incidents from Chinese institutions suggest that those regulations may have become more relevant amidst the rising geopolitical tension in recent years. As a result of the subsequent politicisation of international debates on China, political and security concerns to have a particularly visible impact on think tanks and mostly Humanities and Social Science that are crucial to China's global image and the strategy of 'telling the Chinese Story'. In 2014, the disciplinary board of the CCP accused the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) of 'being ideologically infiltrated by foreign powers', and 'using the camouflage of being academic to spread disinformation'.<sup>50</sup> In 2018, the Yunnan Academy of Social Science emphasised the importance of national security considerations and the obligation for scholars to study the Confidentiality Law, National Security Law, Anti-Espionage Law before travelling abroad or engaging with foreigners.<sup>51</sup> More recently in 2020, Peking University's new regulation on its staff members and students attending webinars hosted by foreign institutions requires to strictly observe 'relevant rules on keeping state secrets'.<sup>52</sup> However, those findings are anecdotal in nature and this report cannot assess the extent of how prevalent political and security concerns are when Chinese governmental bodies, university administrations, and individual scholars approach international academic exchanges.

At least in part, the rise in policy and security concerns in international academic exchanges is likely to be related to the CCP seeking more ideological monopoly and control on the HER sector in recent years. As LeidenAsiaCentre's 2018 report points out, educational policies since 2015 explicitly mention the importance of promoting the CCP's ideology. In 2016, China's MoE issued guidelines on assessing the performance of academic personnel

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<sup>50</sup> Guancha. (14 June, 2014). Central Commission for Discipline Inspection criticises four major ideological issues of CASS: accepting infiltration by foreign forces [中纪委批社科院意识形态四大问题: 接受境外势力点对点渗透]. Retrieved from: [https://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014\\_06\\_14\\_237664.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014_06_14_237664.shtml)

<sup>51</sup> Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences. (13 November, 2018). The Academy hosts a foreign affairs working meeting [我院召开外事工作会议]. Retrieved from: <http://www.sky.yn.gov.cn/jgsz/kfbm/gjxslzx/wszc/7394140471647993565>

<sup>52</sup> International Cooperation Department and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Office of Peking University. Announcement on Regulating the Application and Approval of Participation in Online International Conferences Sponsored by Foreign Partners.

based on their compliance with the Party's narratives, and further specify that academics who 'tolerate the illegal spread of harmful ideas and expressions in the classroom' will be punished.<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, the tightening of political space in Chinese academia and the CCP's pursuit for ideological monopoly are primarily an issues for what is referred to in Chinese policy documents as 'philosophy and social science' disciplines, as other disciplines may simply have very little that would overlap with political issues or ideology. However, policy documents from several Chinese universities that specialise in natural sciences seem to suggest that political and security concerns are relevant to natural sciences albeit to a lesser extent, with somewhat different underlying rationale: the concern over international exchanges for natural sciences is not about preventing scholars from voicing opinions that deviate from official narratives or are detrimental to China's image, but to prevent the leak of classified technologies or research projects, and to exercise greater control on cross-border scientific data flow. At the national level, a number of regulations and laws were adopted in 2017 and 2019 such as the cybersecurity law, and the State Council 'Scientific Data Administrative Measures'. Those policy document often specify information security protocols.<sup>54</sup> For example, scholars are in principle forbidden to travel abroad with paper or hardware that contains classified information, and foreign academics are not allowed to visit classified research projects.<sup>55</sup>

Last but not least, politicisation of international academic ties, and the rise of political and security concern in international academic exchanges do not only take place in China, European institutions and scholars should be aware that the politicisation and securitisation

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<sup>53</sup> d'Hooghe, et al. p.12.

<sup>54</sup> d'Hooghe, et al. p.26.

<sup>55</sup> e.g.

Xidian University. (8 July, 2014). Regulations on Confidentiality Management of Foreign-related Activities of Xidian University (Revised) [西安电子科技大学涉外活动保密管理规定(修订)]. Retrieved from: <https://xxgk.xidian.edu.cn/info/1209/3707.htm>;

Dalian University of Technology. (19 October, 2014). Regulations on the Administration of Confidentiality of Foreign-related Activities of Dalian University of Technology [大连理工大学涉外活动保密管理规定]. Retrieved from: <https://info.dlut.edu.cn/info/1364/1960.htm>.

in the West certainly also alienate Chinese partners. According to Wei Zongyou, a researcher from Fudan Centre for American Studies, the official US view on Sino-American societal and academic ties has become more hawkish and confrontational, and those exchanges are more and more often viewed in the US government as Chinese influence campaigns, channels of espionage, or threats to academic freedom.<sup>56</sup> During Donald Trump's presidency, politicisation of academic ties with China led to incidents of visa-cancellations of Chinese scholars, and efforts such as the FBI's China initiative, which amounted to racial profiling and specifically targeted Chinese diaspora scholars in the US. Logically, many PRC-based scholars are wary of those developments.<sup>57</sup> However, the discussion among Chinese sources on politicisation in the West almost solely concerns the development in English-speaking countries, whereas politicisation and securitisation in continental Europe has not yet captured the attention of Chinese commentators.

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<sup>56</sup> Wei, Z. (2019). Shifting US policies and views on people-to-people exchanges with China [美国对华人人文交流的看法及政策变化探析]. *US Studies*: 2019(3), pp. 60-79;

Li, J. (2019). The New Situation of America's Current Understanding of China and China's Communication to America [当前美国对华认知新态势与中国对美传播]. *External Communication*: 2019(2), pp.4-6;

Liu, X. (2020). Facing Reciprocal Understanding: the Exploration of Sino-US People-to-people Exchanges by Chinese Higher Education under the Background of COVID-19--Taking Wuhan University as an Example[面向互惠性理解:疫情语境下高校推进中美人文交流的探索——以武汉大学为例]. *Journal of World Education*: 2020(7), pp. 7-13.

<sup>57</sup> Wei. Shifting US policies and views on people-to-people exchanges with China.

## Chinese scholars' assessment of the development of regulations

As Chinese academics are most directly affected by the regulations on international exchanges, an overview of their assessments on recent developments can be conducive in understanding the impact of those developments. However, all commentaries found by this report are written by Chinese scholars from Social Science and Humanities disciplines, and the following observations and findings might therefore be less relevant for Chinese academics in the field of natural sciences and their non-Chinese partners.

The observations made in various pieces of Chinese literature are usually not overt but subtle and suggestive criticism on tightening international exchange regulations: they often point out that the internationalisation of Chinese academia and the opening-up [开放] of the HER sector have 'achieved very limited success' in recent years, and then recommend that regulations on international exchanges could be an area of future reforms.<sup>58</sup> However, there are also a few Chinese scholars who are relatively outspoken on this issue. For example, Professor Jia Qingguo (the former dean of Peking University's School of International Relations) has quite straightforwardly pointed out that 'management' of scholars' international exchanges has been tightened in recent years. He also criticised that stringent regulations, although mitigating the political and security risk in international exchanges, do harm to China's national interests, as they first and foremost create obstacles in China learning 'advanced ideas, research methods, and ways of governance', from which China's modernisation in the past decades has greatly benefited. According to Jia, tightening

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<sup>58</sup> Fan. The innovation of thoughts and the internationalisation of think tanks.

Wang. Mobilizing the "Army of Millions"- On the Progress, Difficulties and Policy Recommendations of Chinese Think Tanks' External Communication.

Wang. Mobilizing the "Army of Millions"- On the Progress, Difficulties and Policy Recommendations of Chinese Think Tanks' External Communication.

Long, G. (2020). Build a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics and promote the modernization of the national governance system [建设中国特色新型智库,促进国家治理体系现代化]. *China Development Watch*: 2020(5), pp. 7-12.

regulations has also been detrimental to scholars' abilities of making informed policy recommendations, and contributing to enhancing China's international discursive power.

Several Chinese scholars have also mentioned the unwillingness of Chinese academics to engage in international exchanges, although it is unclear whether that is a recent development. Nevertheless, various Chinese sources suggest that the unwillingness might be connected to overregulation of international exchanges and the narrowing political space in Chinese academia. Wang Wen points out that scholars are particularly unwilling to engage in the international debate on politically sensitive issues, as it is difficult to walk the thin line between using the language that international audience can relate to and sticking to the official narrative. Regardless of whether scholars' discursive presence abroad is beneficial to China, it is possible that what scholars say abroad will be picked up and scrutinised and cause backlashes in China from peers, governmental officials, or China's increasingly vigilant social media users.<sup>59</sup> Another important disincentive is the red tape Chinese scholars have to go through in order to have contacts with non-Chinese partners.<sup>60</sup> There may also be a few other non-political factors that contribute to Chinese academics' lack of incentives in working with non-Chinese partners: for example, international academic ties are not a part of Chinese academics' career development evaluation which means that it could be 'all the efforts for nothing'.<sup>61</sup>

Tightening regulations and political space in Chinese academia has also affected Chinese scholars' agenda-setting power in the international debate on China, according to some other Chinese sources. Under the current circumstances, scholars are less likely to take initiative and instead rely on the so-called 'state-led' approach: i.e. that scholars are used to responding to the state's call to do research on certain topics, instead of taking the initiative to expand their research into new areas.<sup>62</sup> Wang Wen from Renmin University indicates that China Studies scholars abroad are usually ahead of their counterparts in China when it

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<sup>59</sup> Wang, W. (2021). Mobilizing the "Army of Millions"- On the Progress, Difficulties and Policy Recommendations of Chinese Think Tanks' External Communication.

<sup>60</sup> Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts.

<sup>61</sup> Wang. Mobilizing the "Army of Millions"- On the Progress, Difficulties and Policy Recommendations of Chinese Think Tanks' External Communication.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



comes to research on new policy-relevant topics, which negatively affects China's discursive power. For example, the concept of 'community of common destiny' was initially introduced and promoted between 2013 and 2014, yet 91% of the available Chinese literature in CNKI on this concept is published only after 2017.<sup>63</sup>

As mentioned, a few Chinese sources point to the necessity of reform in international academic exchanges, while most of them do not mention exactly what kind of reforms they would like to see. This report finds two Chinese commentaries that made recommendations on areas where regulations should be liberalised. Dr. Chen Wenling from China Centre for International Economic Exchanges called for a 'mistake-tolerance mechanism' [容错机制] for what academics may say abroad, and more flexibility to rules on international travels.<sup>64</sup> Prof. Jia Qingguo from Peking University called for the decentralisation of the shenpi procedure of international conferences – universities should decide for themselves whether to organise a conference. He also called for limiting the scope of international exchange regulation only to the scholars who work with classified information or research projects.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> The rule that the stay in one destination country should not be longer than five days.

Chen, W. (10 Dec., 2020). Establish a mistake-tolerant mechanism, promote data openness, and promote dialogue and exchanges among international think tanks. [建立容错机制、推进数据开放, 促进国际智库对话交流].

Retrieved from: <http://scholarsupdate.hi2net.com/news.asp?NewsID=29287>

<sup>65</sup> Jia. Proposal on improving the management of international exchanges of scholars and experts.

## Conclusions

At the strategic level, the state aims to steer the cooperation with non-Chinese partners towards serving long-term development goals and national interests. For China's natural sciences, scholar-to-scholar exchanges and cooperation are to benefit China's technonationalist development goals, by acquiring the know-how that are crucial for China's industrial transformation to a tech-intensive economy, and to a lesser extent enhancing China's soft-power. In recent years, social sciences and humanities are incorporated into the 'confidence in culture' doctrine at home, and 'telling the Chinese Story' abroad. In particular, policy think tanks are designated as public diplomacy actors by a few Chinese policy documents. In this context, international academic exchanges are to enhance China's international discursive power, by achieving the following inter-connected objectives: (1) promoting China's official narratives abroad, (2) enhancing China's agenda-setting power in various international debates, and (3) increasing the acceptance and attraction of China's governance model and political system.

A wide range of activities that involve foreign partners in Chinese academic institutions are regulated, which are aggregately referred to as 'foreign affairs regulations'. It is not clear exactly what kind of contacts with foreign partners are regulated, but the two main areas of regulations are those on international conferences and international travel, while there are likely significant variations across different institutions in terms of whether institutions can approve things without governmental authority and how stringent the rules are. Strategic documents for the HER sector, regardless of what academic discipline they concern, generally call for more academic ties with international partners and a few of them promise reforms and liberalisation of regulations on international academic exchanges. One such reform materialised in 2019, when MoE decentralised the shenpi power for approving international travels to all 'Double-First-Class' universities. This development should in any case be reviewed positively by European partners of Chinese academics, as it potentially cuts bureaucracies and facilitates more international exchanges. However, decentralisation should not be equated with liberalisation, and the effectiveness still depends on how university administrations will use the powers that are now in their hands. Amid growing Chinese political and security concerns on foreign elements in China's HER sector, it is also

likely that the reform will not lead to easier international travel. Those observations are speculative in nature. After all, the COVID-19 pandemic is an externality that suspended all international travel and makes it impossible to see what the policy outcome would have been.

However, the general picture seems to be that policy reforms have largely been stalled and in certain areas rules tightened, such as the maximum number of days of international travel. Some previously unregulated activities are not subject to regulation and approval procedures either, such as international online events. This is also the assessment of various Chinese social science and humanities scholars. Notably, there are growing perceptions among European scholars that tightening regulations on international academic exchanges in recent years suggest that the Chinese government has moved to discouraging international academic exchanges. This report argues that is probably not the case. What the Chinese government wants is international exchange on Chinese terms and towards Chinese interests, as suggested in policy-planning documents reviewed by this report. Assessments that suspect a government agenda to reduce exchange also fail to take the context of Chinese domestic politics into consideration. For example, the number of days of international travels were tightened around 2015 as a part of the nation-wide anti-corruption campaign. However, regardless of what motivated the tightening of those policies, it is only logical to say that tightening policies are constraining factors of international academic exchange.

The tightening policies on international exchange have, as various Chinese sources point out, hampered international academic ties particularly in the social sciences and humanities, and this is contrary to China's long-term development goals and strategic objectives. International academic ties and the exchanges between Chinese and Western academia are crucial to realising China's strategic objectives mentioned earlier in this report. Tightening policies and political space in China's social sciences and humanities have made Chinese academics less likely to engage in potentially politically sensitive topics and have discouraged scholars from engaging with foreign partners. A few more outspoken Chinese scholars have voiced their hopes that regulations will be simplified and liberalised.

In social science and humanities disciplines, political and security concerns are on the rise in recent years, amid growing geopolitical confrontation and the CCP's growing

ambition for ideological monopoly. This, apart from tightening policies, also has a constraining effect on international exchange. All in all, the practice of regulating academic exchanges simply because they involve non-Chinese partners should remind European institutions that political and security concerns are inherent in the Chinese approach to international academic ties, although this is probably less of an issue for STEM subjects. However, it should be pointed out that in those subjects there seems to be more emphasis on following information security protocols to prevent the leak of classified technologies or research projects. Finally, it should be emphasised that politicisation of academic ties is not a unilateral Chinese act; the phenomenon is also certainly on the rise in the West. This, too, alienates Chinese academics, further contributing what risks to be a bleak future for international knowledge exchange.