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# Shifting Ideologies of Research Funding: The CPC's National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences

Heike HOLBIG

**Abstract:** For more than two decades, the National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences (NPOPSS) has been managing official funding of social science research in China under the orbit of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) propaganda system. By focusing on “Major Projects”, the most prestigious and well-funded program initiated by the NPOPSS in 2004, this contribution outlines the political and institutional ramifications of this line of official funding and attempts to identify larger shifts during the past decade in the “ideologies” of official social science research funding – the changing ideological circumscriptions of research agendas in the more narrow sense of echoing party theory and rhetoric and – in the broader sense – of adapting to an increasingly dominant official discourse of cultural and national self-assertion. To conclude, this article offers reflections on the potential repercussions of these shifts for international academic collaboration.

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**Keywords:** China, National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, Communist Party of China, social sciences, research funding, ideology

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## Philosophy and Social Sciences in the Shadow of the Communist Party

In a very broad sense, if philosophy is about truth, and if social sciences are about social relations and social formations, we understand why they have played a key role in the imaginaire of Socialism since the times of Marx, Engels and Lenin.<sup>1</sup> In general, science and socialist claims for legitimacy have always gone hand in hand. Whereas Engels used the notion of “Scientific Socialism” to delineate Marx’s thoughts from other “utopian” strains of early socialism, Lenin, in his “doctrine of the party” as exemplified in the Soviet Union and other former Soviet-type regimes in Eastern Europe, shaped the concept of “Scientific Communism”. Science, in the sense of a hegemonic claim to the interpretation of truth, conferred to the Communist vanguard party a monopoly of wisdom and, with it, a monopoly of leadership (Brunner 1982; cf. Holbig 2009). Philosophy, and social sciences in particular, covers the dimensions of knowledge in which the Communist party claims this monopoly.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) adopted the organic link between science and the party’s monopoly of wisdom and leadership during the revolutionary Yan’an period of the late 1930s and 1940s as part and parcel of the Soviet system of political rule that served as a blueprint for Mao Zedong and his comrades (Schurmann 1968). The high political status of science was manifested in the prestigious Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), founded in Beijing in November 1949, one month after the founding of the People’s Republic of China and modelled after the Soviet academy system. During the first three decades, the class-struggle notion of “red versus expert”, which was bred under Mao Zedong and reached its climax during the Cultural Revolution, led to repeated convulsions of political repression against individual teachers, scholars and academics, as well as the near-extinction of philosophy and social sciences at large. To restore

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1 This version was revised from a paper presented at the Joint International Conference of the Research Network “Governance in China” sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Association for Social Science Research on China (ASC) on 22–23 November 2013, at the University of Vienna. I would like to thank Andrew Nathan, Yang Dali, Yang Xuedong and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Additionally, I am grateful to Janet Lin for her valuable research assistance.

its status and to reinvigorate scholarly research in these areas, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) was established in May 1977 by taking out respective research units from the CAS and merging them to form a nationwide hierarchy of central, regional and local research institutes. The political role of CASS is underlined not only by its formal affiliation with the State Council, but even more by the fact that research work of all CASS scholars is directly overseen by the CPC's propaganda system up to today (Christmann-Budian 2012; Brady 2008, 2012).

Going beyond this traditional role of philosophy and social sciences in the self-image of China's socialist regime, the political status of these disciplines was significantly shored up under Hu Jintao, who succeeded Jiang Zemin as party chief in 2002. His pet concept of a "Scientific Outlook on Development" – formulated in early 2004 as a milestone innovation of party theory calling for a new, more sustainable development model that should combine economic growth with social and ecological considerations – implied an offer for the co-optation of scholars, universities, academies and think tanks as allies in a more consultative style of party leadership. At the same time, the concept renewed the party's claim for a monopoly of wisdom and rightful political authority (cf. Holbig 2009). A year later, a new "Academy of Marxism" was founded under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences with an explicit mission to, among others, promote the theoretical innovation of Marxism in the fields of philosophy and social sciences in the name of a 10-year program labelled "Marxist engineering" (马工程, *Ma gongcheng*) (cf. project homepage: <<http://hxd.wenming.cn/mkszy/mkszy.htm>>). A key party document of October 2011 titled "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Major Issues Pertaining to Deepening Reform of the Cultural System and Promoting the Great Development and Flourishing of Socialist Culture" once more emphasised the important political role of philosophy and social sciences and their potential contribution to an improving global image of China's national culture:

We must vigorously develop philosophy and the social sciences, and make better use of their important role in understanding the world, passing on culture, making theoretical innovations, advising the government, nourishing the people and serving society. We will [...] focus our support on research projects concerning the

praxis of socialism with Chinese characteristics; and strive to obtain outstanding results that reflect our country's level, have a global impact, and are capable of standing the test of practice and history. [...] We will [...] encourage national-level academic groups [...] to play a constructive role in appropriate international organisations, and sponsor the translation of outstanding academic achievements and cultural products into foreign languages (CPC Central Committee 2011: 12, 21).

In Hu Jintao's report at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, at which political power was transferred to his successor Xi Jinping, the disciplines once more found explicit mention. In the context of a chapter on "Strengthening core socialist values", the document demanded to "further implement the national project to study and develop Marxist theory [and] build an innovation system in philosophy and the social sciences". Along with the press and publishing, radio, television, films, literature and art, philosophy and social sciences were to be vigorously developed to "enhance the overall strength and international competitiveness of Chinese culture" (CPC Central Committee 2012: 18, 19). As revealed by these party documents of recent years, to this day philosophy and social sciences are attributed not only "classical" ideological functions in the Leninist sense but also a new role in propagating/ promoting the progressiveness, innovativeness and international competitiveness of the "Strong Socialist Cultural Power" (社会主义文化强国, *shehuizhuyi wenhua qiangguo*) that China claims to be (CPC Central Committee 2011, 2012, 2013).

Of course, this is not to say that the party universally and successfully instrumentalises social science researchers in China. Instead, as the rich anecdotal evidence collected from collaborations with many Chinese colleagues shows, most members of the scientific community at large – and social scientists in particular – learned how to circumvent ideological restrictions and push against the boundaries of party doctrine. Students of social sciences are trained in the arts of "double-tonguing" (using different idioms in official and non-official settings), avoiding sensitive vocabulary in titles of books, articles and conferences, using surrogate topics from Chinese history or foreign debates as proxies to discuss sensitive domestic issues of contemporary China and organising "small group discussions" during large conferences and international symposia to speak their minds. Nevertheless, mastering the art of circumvention does not indicate that the ideological functions attributed to philosophy and social sciences by

the party are not bearing out at all. Rather, social scientists in China are viewed as professional acrobats walking a tightrope between their individual research preferences on the one hand and their desire for academic influence (and perhaps political and social leverage) on the other hand.

The following text takes a glimpse at the work of NPOPSS, which today is widely regarded as the highest authority in the field of funding for social science research and provides the largest and most prestigious grants. The paper focuses on this most dynamic segment in the field of official research funding to gain insights into how research agendas in the social sciences have been ideologically circumscribed and how the rules of the game of the on-going balancing act have changed over time, particularly during the past decade, 2004–2013.

## Institutional Setup of Research Funding under NPOPSS

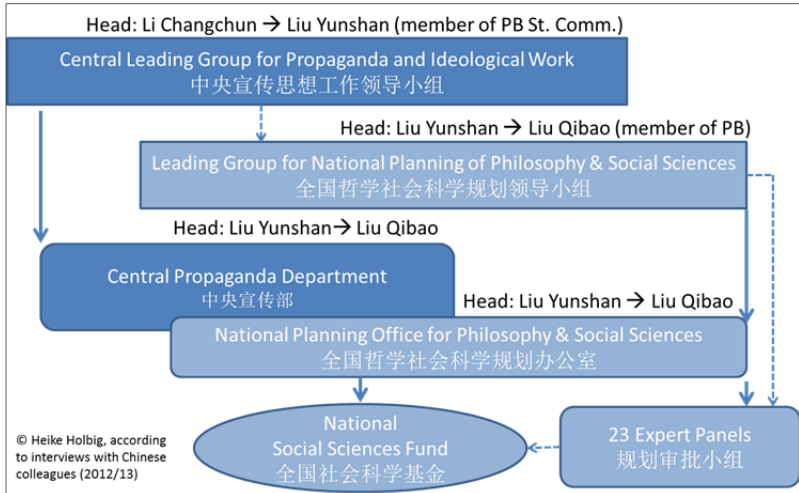
Social scientists today have a number of domestic choices when applying for third-party funding for their research. In addition to the prestigious National Natural Science Foundation and the National Soft Sciences Foundation, which usually do not cater to social scientists, among other most prestigious funding agencies for such scientists are various project lines funded by the Ministry of Education (for example, the “Strategic Projects on Major Topics (重大课题攻关项目, *zhongda keti gongguan xiangmu*) in Philosophy and Social Sciences” and “National Key Research Centres (重点研究基地, *zhongdian yanjiu jidi*) in Humanities and Social Sciences” funded at universities by the National Humanities and Social Sciences Fund, a new line of “Innovation Projects” (创新项目, *chuangxin xiangmu*) launched in 2011 to promote innovative capacities at universities), the National Publication Fund and social science research programs funded by CASS. Another broad array of project lines is funded by the National Social Science Fund (NSSF, 国家社科基金, *guojia shehui jijin*), among them “Major Projects” (重大项目, *zhongda xiangmu*), “Annual Projects” (年度项目, *niandu xiangmu*), “Projects for Junior Researchers” (青年项目, *qingnian xiangmu*; up to the age of 45), “Projects for the Completion of Research Projects” (后期资助项目, *houqi zizhu xiangmu*), “Projects for

the Translation of Chinese Publications into Foreign Languages” (中华学术外译项目, *Zhonghua xueshu waiyi xiangmu*), “Projects for Research on Western China” (西部项目, *Xibu xiangmu*) and specially mandated projects. The NSSF was established in 1986 by the CPC’s Central Committee and has been administered by the NPOPSS since 1991 (for information here and in the following, cf. [www.npopss-cn.gov.cn](http://www.npopss-cn.gov.cn), if not indicated otherwise).

As Figure 1 illustrates, the NPOPSS is nested tightly within the CPC’s propaganda system. The Office answers directly to the Leading Group for National Planning of Philosophy and Social Sciences (LGNPOPSS, 全国哲学社会科学规划领导小组, *quanguo zhexue shehui kexue guihua lingdao xiaozu*), which again is overseen by the high-powered Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work (中央宣传思想工作领导小组, *zhongyang xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*). The NPOPSS is institutionally located within the party’s Central Propaganda Department (中央宣传部, *zhongyang xuanchuanbu*), an organisational structure replicated at the province and municipality levels. The powerful status of the NPOPSS is viewed from the fact that it is headed by a member of the Politburo. From 2000 to 2012, this head was Liu Yunshan (刘云山), who simultaneously headed the Leading Group for National Planning of Philosophy and Social Science and the Central Propaganda Department (the latter from 2002 onwards). In November 2012, Liu Yunshan was succeeded by a new member of the Politburo, Sichuan Party Chief Liu Qibao (刘奇葆), who took over from his predecessor all three posts in personal union and simultaneously became a member of the Central Committee’s Secretariat, another very powerful party organ now under the leadership of Liu Yunshan. Liu Yunshan, now among the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo and successor to former propaganda czar Li Changchun (李长春) as head of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work, is only able to serve for another period given age limits; however, 59-year-old Liu Qibao is able to accompany the CPC’s transition from the “fifth” to the “sixth” leadership generation. Liu Qibao, who holds a master’s in economics, previously worked at the Communist Youth League of China, served as deputy secretary-general of the State Council and deputy editor-in-chief of the *People’s Daily*, the traditional party organ. Liu, who is counted among Hu Jintao’s allies, has been known for his

conservative views regarding media control and intellectual freedom (Li 2012).

Figure 1: NPOPSS: Social Science Research Funding Inside the Propaganda Apparatus



Sources: NPOPSS homepage: [www.npopss-cn.gov.cn](http://www.npopss-cn.gov.cn); Anonymous 1 (2012), Anonymous 2 (2012), Anonymous 3 (2012), Anonymous 4 (2013).

Concerning the administration of the NSSF, the LGNPOPSS is in charge of formulating general guidelines and regulations, long-term and annual plans for the development of philosophy and social sciences, examination (together with the Ministry of Finance) of the Fund's annual budget allocated from central state coffers and the topic-setting of larger research projects. Additionally, the Leading Group oversees the recruitment of members of review panels (规划评审小组, *guihua pingshen xiaozu*) consisting of high-ranking experts from 23 disciplines (see below). The NPOPSS serves as the Leading Group's administrative arm inside the Central Propaganda Department and is mandated with the day-to-day management of project applications, examination and implementation of research projects funded by the NSSF, distribution of the annual budget and assessment, presentation and promotion of the results of on-going and completed research projects. The NPOPSS coordinates the formulation of research topics for annual projects, which are collected bot-



tom-up by research bureaux equivalent to the NPOPSS at the provincial level, in the Central Party School, the CASS and the Ministry of Education. Finally, the NPOPSS assists the Leading Group in recruiting review panel members and serves as a clearinghouse for their assessments and recommendations. Whereas the Leading Group is in charge of the longer-term development of research agendas for philosophy and social sciences and the surveillance of funding schemes, the NPOPSS and its subdivisions at lower administrative levels are in charge of day-to-day implementation, serving as the gatekeeper for applications and reviews and distributing funds. Although the NPOPSS homepage abounds with detailed information on all aspects of project funding, little information is provided on the fund itself. During 2006–2011, NSSF funding was reported to have amounted to 1.746 billion CNY (269 million USD) (*Xinhua* 2011a).

The constitution of 23 expert panels corresponds to the 23 disciplines traditionally covered by the NSSF: Marxism and Scientific Socialism, Party history and Party construction, Philosophy, Theoretical Economics, Applied Economics, Management, Statistics, Political Science, Sociology, Demography, Law, International Relations, Chinese History, World History, Archaeology, Research on Ethnic Minorities, Religious Studies, Chinese Literature, Foreign Literature, Linguistics, Journalism and Communication Studies, Library and Information Science and Philology and Sport Studies. Research in three other disciplines – education, arts and military studies – is managed separately and is overseen by the LGNOPSS and the NPOPSS. The average size of expert panels is approximately ten members, whose formal term in office is five years. During their terms on the panels, they are expected to make suggestions for the Fund's program planning and setting of research agendas, examine incoming applications for major projects, assess research results and make recommendations for special awards granted by the NPOPSS (NPOPSS 2013).

In practice, the recruitment of expert panel members has received criticism for its lack of transparency. As an informal rule, research institutions deemed to have played a formative role in the historical genesis of the respective discipline have been asked to recommend their representatives to the panels, usually high-ranking scholars not only with outstanding scholarly achievements but also with well-established links to party-state elites. These scholars tend to remain on the panels for successive terms of office and, therefore, are

perceived by some as forming a kind of academic “oligarchy” (寡头, *guaton*). In the double-blind review process that follows the application (in mid-February each year), they are assisted by colleagues selected from nationwide expert databases according to the specific topics of applications. However, the final decision made in the last round of selection (usually in May or June each year) is made by the members of the respective expert panel themselves, who at this stage also consider the institutional and personal backgrounds of the applicants (Anonymous 6 2014).

## Shifts in NPOPSS Research Funding since 2004

The following analysis focuses on the most prestigious and well-funded project lines managed by the NPOPSS, namely the so-called “Major Projects”) that were initiated in 2004. Three reasons exist for such a focus. First, because the Major Projects form the most prominent line of funding, developments here may be interpreted as spearheading developments in the larger field of research funding in the social sciences. Second, this project line stands as *pars pro toto* for other project lines with respect to, for example, funding principles, general management regulations and composition of disciplines. Third, given the strong visibility of the Major Projects, data accessible online through the NPOPSS homepage are the most detailed and allow the production of relatively consistent statistics and timelines.

Applicants for Major Projects to be funded through the NSSF must be full professors at universities or must hold an equivalent rank as “top-expert professionals” (正高级专业技术职务, *zhenggaogaji zhuanyejishu zhibin*), primarily as senior researchers in party- or government-affiliated research institutions such as the Central Party School, the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau or other think tanks of the party-state. Different from other project lines in which project titles are formulated according to the research preferences of applicants within broader thematic corridors, the regulations stipulate that Major Projects’ topics should be applied for in the given version. In other words, applicants for Major Projects are supposed to subscribe to the official wording of the project titles as formulated by the Leading Group and the NPOPSS. Overall, the effect of party rhetoric and programs and policies on the project calls during the past decade has

been clear but changing. Based on the annual project calls for Major Projects, which have been published by the NPOPSS since 2004, the following three shifts are discerned.

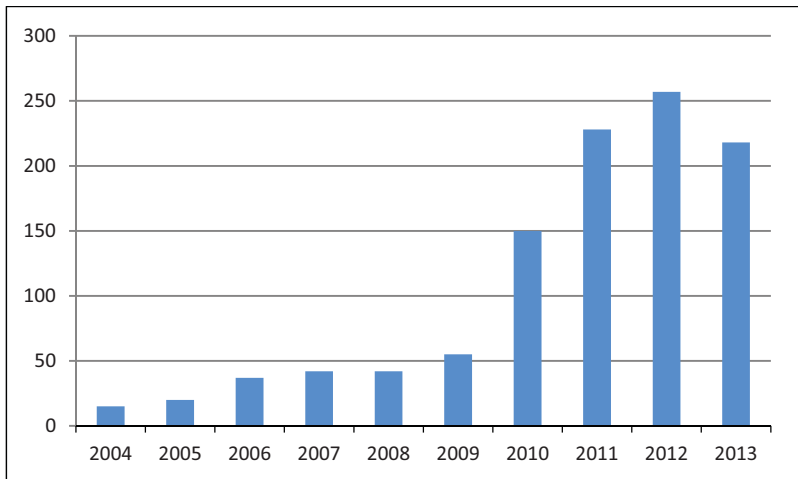
## Incentivisation of NPOPSS Funding

Tracing the annual tenders for Major Projects since 2004 shows that, at first glance, what is striking is the exponential increase in overall numbers. Whereas the annual number of Major Projects steadily increased from approximately 20 to approximately 50 in 2009, this figure jumped to 150 in 2010 and then to 228 in 2011, reaching a climax of 257 in 2012 (cf. Figure 2). Part of this trend seems to be explained by official policy shifts. As previously described, the steep rise in the number of projects is viewed against the backdrop of party policies to promote the development of philosophy and social sciences under Hu Jintao, particularly in the run-up to the party decision on “Socialist Culture” of October 2011. In May 2011, the Chinese media reported about the then-propaganda czar Li Changchun personally calling for a significant increase in the NFSS budget, which was to play a guiding role in the development of social sciences at large. The goal was “to enhance academic innovation as well as to increase the voice and influences of China’s social science research in the international community” in light of growing domestic and international challenges (*Xinhua* 2011b).

However, in addition to this supply-side factor of official party policy, various demand-side factors also seem to exist behind the steep increase in the NFSS budget. On the one hand, obvious material incentives exist for applying for Major Projects funded through the NFSS. Applicants who succeed in the selection process are granted funds that average 600,000 to 800,000 CNY (100,000–132,000 USD) during a three- to five-year period. Although these amounts seem relatively modest compared with U.S. or European standards, they are considerable in the context of Chinese academia – at least in the field of social sciences – and compared with funding ranges for other NPOPSS project lines of between 250,000 CNY (41,000 USD) for Annual Projects and 150,000 CNY (25,000 USD) for Projects for Junior Researchers. The most recent list of annual projects published in December 2013 indicates an average of 400,000 CNY (66,000 USD) per project. This significant mark-up may also be replicated in other project lines. According to hearsay, legal and semi-legal ways

exist to use some of these funds to subsidise researchers' personal incomes – a fact that has made third-party funding more attractive against the backdrop of the decline in real purchasing power during the past few years attributable to increasing housing expenses and other costs of living, particularly in larger cities. Although these practices of directly subsidising applicants' incomes were more recently prohibited, funds may still be used to hire assistants and purchase materials or other equipment. Competition for this and other project lines has been restricted by regulations in force since 2011 that allow researchers to apply for only one nationally funded research project at a time. If successful, researchers cannot apply for other national-level projects when carrying out their projects.

Figure 2: Number of Major Projects in Annual Project Calls, 2004–2013



Sources: Compiled by Janet Lin and Heike Holbig. Full lists of "Major Project" tenders are available online for 2005–2013 (2005 through 2009: [www.gmw.cn/01gmr/2005-05/19/content\\_234775.htm](http://www.gmw.cn/01gmr/2005-05/19/content_234775.htm); [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-07/05/content\\_4797376.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-07/05/content_4797376.htm); <http://skb.pku.edu.cn>; <http://theory.southcn.com>; [www.xzass.org/html/news910.html](http://www.xzass.org/html/news910.html); 2010ff: [www.npopss-cn.gov.cn](http://www.npopss-cn.gov.cn)). The 2004 figure was estimated on the basis of search results for approved projects in the NPOPSS data bank (<http://gp.people.com.cn/yangshuo/skygb/sk/index.php/In dex/index>; thanks to Pascal Abb for bringing attention to this source).

In contrast, growing pressure from academic evaluation systems has been contributing to the incentivisation trend. Similar to earlier trends in Western social sciences, the number of scholarly publications in

Chinese or even international refereed journals and the number, amount and prestige of third-party-funded research projects acquired on their own initiative during the past decade have become the main indicators for evaluating academic achievements. Being selected as principal investigator of a NFSS-funded research project has grown in importance, particularly for Chinese researchers who wish to pursue careers as professors at one of the more prestigious universities in the country. Despite the growth in available funds, the competitiveness of the selection process does not seem to have abated. According to data found for 2011, the ratio between approved projects and applications for all NFSS project lines was given as lower than 15 per cent: out of 21,180 project applications, approximately 6,000 projects were listed for final selection, out of which only 2,900 were ultimately selected for funding (*Xinhua* 2011b). According to one interview partner, in recent years, the success rate of NPOPSS applications has declined to 13 per cent in the field of political science. Additionally, the transparency of approvals and evaluation results publicly available through the NPOPSS homepage may put additional pressure on competitors to perform well (Anonymous 5 2014).

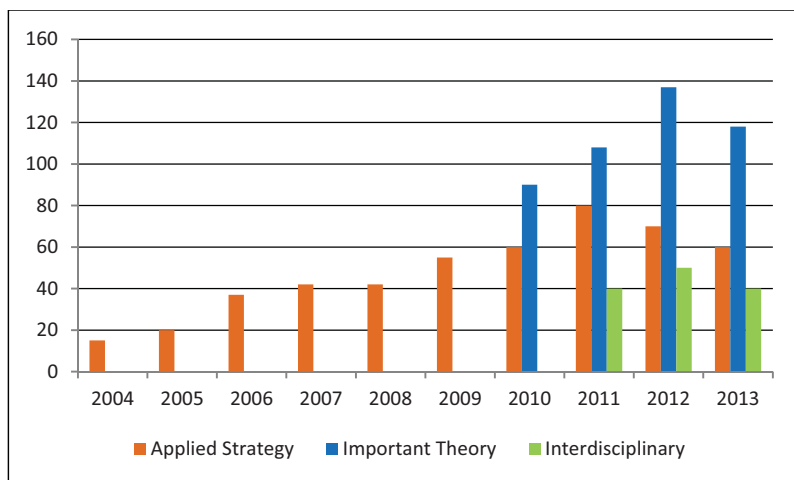
Overall, we conclude that the material and career incentives for social scientists to apply for NFSS-funded projects in general and for Major Projects in particular have grown during the past decade, even if the process implies the obligation to subscribe to an officially prescribed research agenda.

## Diversification of Research Topics

Another important shift in the NPOPSS funding regime is recognised in the more recent diversification of Major Projects' research topics into various generic categories, which has paralleled the steep increase in project numbers since 2010. During this year, the new category of "Important Theory" (基础理论, *jichu lilun*) was introduced to support original research projects that address prominent basic theories, also with a view to promoting the "national spirit" (民族精神, *minzu jingshen*) and "national culture" (民族文化, *minzu wenhua*) (NPOPSS 2011). Since its launch, this category has formed the bulk of Major Projects, reaching a high of 137 in 2012. The new category was delineated from the previous category of "Applied Strategy" (应用对策, *yingyong duice*), which comprised more practical topics related to social,

economic, financial, ecological, legal, foreign policy and other issues pertaining to current domestic and international reform policies.

Figure 3: Numbers of Major Projects Separated into Sub-categories of Annual Project Calls, 2004–2013



Sources: See Figure 2. The three categories' project lists are published in various batches and distributed unevenly throughout the years: two batches in 2010, three in 2011, four in 2012 and two in 2013 (the second one, published in June 2013, combines "Important Theory" with "Interdisciplinary Research" topics).

A third category was added in 2011 under the name of "Interdisciplinary Research" (跨学科研究, *kuaxueke yanjiu*). Whereas the number of projects in this category has been rather low at between 40 and 50 for 2011–2013, the projects seem to carry relatively high innovative potential given their interdisciplinary design. Interestingly, the respective project calls not only list the topics but also the specific disciplines envisaged for participation. Overall, given the on-going diversification of categories and research topics, the research agenda has become much richer and, at least in part, more innovative, covering more complex issues with potentially far-reaching effects.

As far as could be learned in the interviews, the research agenda for each discipline is usually developed by the NPOPSS in close collaboration with members of the review panels, among which a particular role is ascribed to the panel chair and vice-chair. In the past, although research agendas were primarily designed in accordance

with new emphases in party theory and practical policy announced in official party and government documents, they are now more frequently based on surveys among scholars at top universities, which are organised annually by the chairs and vice-chairs of the review panels within their respective disciplines. During this shift, many new and empirically driven topics found their way into the project calls; however, this shift does not indicate that the NPOPSS has given up its role as the ultimate gatekeeper of research agendas.

## De- or Re-ideologisation of Research Agendas?

If the increasingly diversified research agenda is traced in greater detail, ambiguous trends in the imprint of ideological guidance via the NPOPSS and the larger propaganda apparatus of which it is an integral part are observed. In the Applied Strategy segment, changes in the overall composition of research topics over time have been rather modest. The topics most prominently cover the fields of party theory, party history and party construction, and national, social and economic development (together making up approximately three quarters of the topics during 2004–2013) and – to a lesser extent – law, ecology, foreign policy, security and other fields. Clearly, the percentage of party theory topics varies with the temporal vicinity of Party Congresses, but at an overall declining trend. Whereas party theory topics in the narrow sense, such as “Harmonious Society”, “Scientific Outlook on Development” or “Socialist Core Values”, have amounted to approximately one-third of the topics in 2006 and 2007 (that is, before the 17th Party Congress in the fall of 2007), they only made up 4, 12 and 25 per cent, respectively, during 2011–2013 (that is, surrounding the 18th Party Congress in the fall of 2012 and its Third Plenum in the fall of 2013). Since its inception in 2011, the Interdisciplinary Research segment has not included party theory topics (the only exception being three topics focusing on Marxist theory from the Chinese and Western perspectives); instead, the research topics are spread quite evenly over complex issues that cover socioeconomic, legal, foreign policy, ecological, communication, linguistic and ethnical aspects, each with a view to multi-approach problem-solving strategies. Illustrative examples include topics such as the effect of computer gaming on Chinese youngsters (2011), developments in the Chinese language in the wake of the country’s contemporary development (2012) and legal issues resulting from the internationalisation

of the Renminbi (2013). A review of the overall trend in these two segments shows a rather clear pattern away from party ideology in a more narrow sense – discernible also in the declining overlap between the vocabulary of official party documents and the project calls during the ten-year period from 2004 to 2013.

However, the trend is different for the “Important Theory” segment initiated in 2010, which has formed the bulk of Major Projects since then. On the one hand, this category seems to have “inherited” from the “Applied Strategy” category the mission to anticipate and echo key party documents and their innovations of party theory. The percentage of party theory topics, such as variations in “Socialism With Chinese Characteristics”, “Socialist Consultative Democracy” and the “Chinese Dream”, covered in this segment was 13 per cent in 2011, reached a high of 25 per cent in 2012 – the year of the 18th Party Congress – and declined to a mere 3 per cent the year after.

On the other hand, the majority of the project calls in the Important Theory segment unequivocally mirrors the party’s new emphasis on promoting China’s national history and culture. In this category, the project lists seem to spell out the goals of building a “Strong Socialist Cultural Power” and reinvigorating the nation formulated in the 2011 party document on “Socialist Culture” previously mentioned. Moreover, the lists seem to fulfil the increased official demand for rewriting the country’s history, starting from a previous focus on the Qing Dynasty and covering earlier historical epochs in more recent years. Thus, historical topics covered 72 per cent of projects in the “Important Theory” category in 2010, 55 per cent in 2011, 75 per cent in the third batch of 2012 and 76 per cent in 2013. Another batch in the “Important Theory” segment published in December 2011, three months after the promulgation of the party document on “Socialist Culture”, primarily covers the fields of cultural politics (64 per cent of projects) and communication studies (11 per cent of projects, with a particular focus on Internet control and another focus on the 2011 party document) – together again comprising three quarters of the topics.

Overall, although these new research agendas do not bear a direct verbatim imprint of party ideology in the narrow sense, they could be interpreted as being subject to a “re-ideologisation” of social sciences in the much broader sense of manifesting hegemonic claims for a historiographically bolstered self-assertion of China’s national



culture that corresponds to the official party programmes of recent years. A review of the relative weights of involved disciplines shows that history, cultural, linguistic, ethnological studies and the like have been allotted much symbolic capital during the past three years compared with their more down-to-earth counterparts in social sciences, such as economics, management, sociology, law or international relations. The NPOPSS funding regime has held the latter in high regard according to absolute numbers, but with declining relative shares of the NFSS pie that has grown rapidly since 2010. Altogether, although a clear trend of de-ideologisation exists in the narrow sense of academic replications of party rhetoric, a countertrend of re-ideologisation in the broad sense of a hegemonic effect of officially backed culturalist and nationalist traits is discerned for NPOPSS research agendas during the past few years.

## Implications for International Academic Collaboration

What are the implications for foreign social science researchers in their collaboration with Chinese colleagues? Although drawing far-fetched conclusions from the analysis of the specific case of the NPOPSS's Major Projects funding line is of course not possible, a few cautious reflections may be noted.

First, foreign scholars doing research on social science topics in contemporary China should be aware of the broad array of topics covered by the NPOPSS in the past. The NPOPSS homepage and a data bank that details titles, principal investigators' names, academic ranks and institutional affiliations for all funded research projects back to 2005 provide easy access to relevant information on completed and on-going research projects (<<http://gp.people.com.cn/yangshuo/skygb/sk/index.php/Index/index>>). Undertaking targeted searches or just glimpsing through the project calls reveals that not only the most prominent aspects of on-going party-state reform policies but also more abstract and complex issues and future challenges are covered, often cross-cutting across disciplines. To heed the academic rule of parsimony and to avoid redundancies in social science research on contemporary China, the default assumption that Chinese researchers have already tackled issues of larger relevance and that rich empirical evidence likely exists that was collected by profes-

sional research teams on the basis of longer-term and well-funded research projects should be accepted. Whether the decision is made to enter into institutionalised collaboration with investigators of a project (relevant regulations allow for the formal inclusion of foreign researchers into research teams funded by NPOPSS) or instead to stick with our own empirical data and research agenda is a matter of personal preference, institutional ramifications and considerations of non-academic side-effects. In any event, foreign scholars are well advised not to ignore the steep increase in the quantity and professional quality of social science research undertaken by Chinese colleagues.

Second, the diversification of research topics and the downward trend in the number of topics that directly echo party rhetoric point to larger spaces for the bottom-up setting of research agendas on the side of Chinese social scientists. However, at the same time, the exponential increase in official funding available for social science research, together with the incentivisation of demand for these funds resulting primarily from an increasingly competitive academic evaluation system, might lead to a growing dependence of Chinese universities and individual researchers on NPOPSS funding schemes and to a crowding out of regular institutional allocations for social science research in the longer run. If the re-ideologisation trend in the NPOPSS research agenda in the broader sense of a dominant social science discourse on cultural and national self-assertion continues, the growing dependence on NPOPSS and other official research funding may, overall, increase the pressure for Chinese colleagues to subscribe to this dominant discourse and reduce the manoeuvring space for setting their own research agendas in the social sciences and humanities. Whereas the net effects of these shifting ideologies for the setting of future research agendas in these disciplines is difficult to predict, foreign researchers should at least reflect on what it means for their Chinese colleagues to walk in the footsteps of the CPC in this broader sense, and what it means for “us” to walk in the footsteps of Chinese collaboration partners. Pragmatic incentives to adapt to officially licensed language when co-organising international conferences, co-authoring publications or conducting interviews with Chinese partners have been in place during the past decades; however, should not we also ask ourselves to which degree we might be repro-

ducing the official ideologies of agenda-setting when framing our own social science research on China?

Finally and perhaps most subtly, we should be prepared for more marked ambitions on the side of at least some Chinese social science researchers when delineating Chinese-style social science research from its Western counterpart and when defending the emancipation and particular value of indigenous schools of disciplinary thinking from what some perceive as a hitherto Western hegemony in scientific discourse. Whereas Chinese colleagues during the 1980s, 1990s and well into the new century sometimes seemed plagued by a surprising type of collective “inferiority complex” vis-à-vis Western scholars concerning the theoretical innovativeness of social science research, we might experience a similarly surprising collective “superiority complex” more frequently in the future. Whether or not justified, Western researchers might be confronted more frequently than before with implicit or explicit reservations about their limited understanding of all things Chinese and about the applicability to China of theories claiming universal explanatory power. Notwithstanding well-established trust-based personal relations with individual Chinese collaboration partners, trends such as these might, in the larger picture, hamper international academic co-operation in what could otherwise become an increasingly level playing field in social science research.

Overall, the implications for international collaboration in social science research remain ambiguous. Foreign scholars who decide to co-operate with Chinese colleagues on the ground must tread a delicate path. On the one hand, they are well advised to sufficiently open up their research designs to consider the significant increase in the quantity and professional quality of social science research undertaken by their Chinese counterparts. On the other hand, to remain loyal to their original research questions, they might want to critically reflect on the growing temptation to subscribe to the official ideologies of agenda-setting in the footsteps of their Chinese colleagues who must cope with the rapid incentivisation of academic life in China, and perhaps with a growing official idiosyncrasy vis-à-vis all things “Western”.

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