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The Impact of Changing Incentives in China on International Cooperation in Social Science Research on China

Doris FISCHER

Abstract: Over the past three decades, China's fast economic development has induced considerable changes in China's university and research institution landscape, research financing and academic career incentives. This paper argues that these changes have affected the motivation and the ways in which Chinese scholars engage in international research cooperation. Most recently it has been observed that strong pressures on scholars and scientists – especially at leading academic institutions – to excel in international publications while simultaneously fulfilling their obligation to generate income for their institutions can lead to a dilemma with regard to international research cooperation: Those institutions and scholars most interesting for foreign scholars to cooperate with may be the ones with the least amount of both incentive and time to enter into serious cooperation. This article invites us to reflect on the implications of these changes in the incentive structure for cooperation in social science research on China.

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Keywords: China, international cooperation, social science research, incentives, research funds

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Introduction

Research cooperation between scholars and institutions from outside China and from within the country is an integral part of social science research on China, and it is prone to change in reaction to shifts in scientific policy. China's fast economic development has also changed the Chinese university and research institution landscape, the conditions for financing research, and last but not least the way scholarly and scientific careers develop and are evaluated in China. In this context, both the purpose associated with international cooperation and the importance attributed to it by Chinese scholars have changed. Most foreign researchers who have cooperated with Chinese colleagues repeatedly since the 1980s would probably agree with this observation. However, reflection and research on this topic has been scarce.

Against this backdrop, this article sets out to identify changes in the conditions of international research cooperation with China. It sets out from the assumption that researchers are driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to cooperate (Ledford, Gerhart, and Fang 2013). While intrinsic motivation refers to that which originates in the researchers' personal priorities, preferences and enjoyment, extrinsic motivation reacts to incentives set by the institutional environment in which they work – namely, the criteria that define careers and secure income in a given innovation system and scientific community (Holzinger 2007; Fitzenberger and Leuschner 2012; Frey 2009). It is further assumed that changes in the underlying motivation also influence the attitude of researchers towards international cooperation. This assumption is reflected by scientific policy – including policy associated with international cooperation – that explicitly aims to influence the extrinsic motivation of researchers. While in practice international research cooperation relies on individual researchers, scientific policy creates incentives that increase (or decrease) the willingness of the researchers to put effort into international cooperation (Boekholt et al. 2009).

The question of motivation and incentives for international cooperation is relevant for researchers both inside and outside of China. However, in the specific case of social science research on China, given the object of study, foreign researchers cannot refrain from a certain level of international cooperation with China, while Chinese social scientists working on China may not naturally feel obliged to

invest time and effort in international cooperation to investigate social science issues related to their home country, as the value added of such cooperation would be less obvious for them. They therefore may be more inclined to change the level of engagement, or the ways they engage, in international cooperation depending on the incentives created for or against international cooperation.

In this article,¹ “international cooperation” mainly refers to cooperation between Chinese institutions or researchers and single institutions or researchers in another country, as international cooperation mostly translates to bilateral cooperation. However, at least in Europe, there is a trend towards social science research funding programmes that include institutions or researchers from more than one country outside China (British Academy 2008; Volkswagen 2009; ERSC 2013). In contrast to bilateral cooperation, the term “international cooperation” also embraces this latter type of cooperation.

This article does not claim to present in-depth research on the topic. It reflects the personal experience of the author in the course of different projects and types of cooperation with Chinese institutions and researchers over 20 years as well as some additional research conducted over the last decade. In addition, this contribution is limited to social science research on China, though some of the arguments may be equally relevant for cooperation in the natural sciences. The article should be first and foremost understood as an invitation for discussion, because collective reflection on the issue of international cooperation in the social sciences on China has been limited, and experiences may diverge.

The paper is organized as follows: First, I briefly discuss the changing importance of language and travel as intrinsic motivators for Chinese scholars regarding international research cooperation. Second, I highlight some of the changes in extrinsic motivation created by incentives for international research cooperation, analysing the incentives created for international cooperation in the process of the evaluation of researchers within China. The paper ends with some thoughts on what the changing incentives in China might imply on a practical level for future international cooperation between Chinese and foreign institutions and researchers.

1 The author would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for comments made to an earlier version of this article.

Intrinsic Motivation for International Cooperation: Scientific Interest, Language and Travel

Researchers cooperate internationally for a number of reasons, genuine scientific interest, intellectual curiosity and personal pleasure in academic exchange being probably the most important and noble motivations. In practice, though, these intrinsic motivations need to be buttressed by, for example, language skills and the ability to travel.

Since 1978, Chinese scholars have been eager to get into contact and to cooperate with foreign researchers. International contacts and cooperation have been pursued out of genuine scientific interest, but also as a means to enhance language skills and to pave the way for going abroad. The aspects of intrinsic motivation for establishing contacts have changed in the course of China's opening-up to the world.

Throughout the 1980s, contact and cooperation with foreign researchers (and students) was often the only link Chinese scholars had to the outside world, as travelling abroad was restricted. Only very few Chinese researchers were entitled to government scholarships. Given these circumstances, contact with foreign scholars provided opportunities to practise other languages and learn about the outside world; in some cases, Chinese researchers were even invited by foreign institutions to travel and study or work abroad. For some Chinese scholars, contact with foreigners in China was also precondition for being able to access Foreign Exchange Certificates (FEC). Until 1994 FECs were the only Chinese currency convertible to foreign exchange, but the average Chinese citizen did not have access to them. As convertible currency was needed to pay for TOEFL test fees, gaining access to FECs was a serious hurdle for many students and junior scholars.

By the end of the 1990s, English-language training for students had long become obligatory (Mei 2013), and English-language skills in Chinese academia had improved significantly. As a result, English-language proficiency increasingly became an important requirement for promotion of scientists at universities. This requirement was particularly challenging for those scholars who had attended university in the early 1980s or earlier, who had often not received sufficient English-language training. This challenge was exacerbated by the new competition that arose from colleagues returning from overseas: the

so-called “turtles” (海龟, *haigui*) (Zweig, Chen, and Rosen 2004; Hvistendahl 2008). On the one hand, their return triggered discussions in China regarding whether the superiority of these scholars in terms of social science research on China was real or only alleged (see for an example Sheng 2000); on the other hand, the presence of these returned scholars increased the pressure on their counterparts trained in China to learn English. Soon, doctoral degrees could not be received without a certain proficiency in English, and promotion to assistant or full professor also required English-language skills, as well as – ideally – some experience abroad. Promotion to a professorship without a Ph.D., common practice in the 1980s, has since become impossible. Thus, in order to enhance their careers, scholars had an intrinsic motivation to cooperate internationally as a means to improve their language skills and to spend time abroad.

From the perspective of foreign researchers, the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, were good times for international research: Chinese scholars had a strong interest in and intrinsic motivation to take part in international cooperation and did not yet face excessive (additional) pressure to publish (which is discussed later in this paper). As a result, as long as funding was provided by the foreign partner, it was easy to find cooperation partners in China for social science research on China that smoothed access to information, archives and interview partners. Given the long separation of Chinese researchers from much of the rest of the international scientific community, expectations regarding scholarly contributions to joint research by Chinese partners generally remained low. Only leading universities such as Beijing University and Tsinghua University embraced returnees from abroad, while most universities and research institutions still mainly relied on locally trained personnel less familiar with Western academic traditions and discourses.

Things have changed tremendously over the past decade. For one thing, travelling has become much easier for Chinese citizens in general and for Chinese scholars specifically. As comparatively affluent members of the Chinese “middle class” (Unger 2006), Chinese researchers from the leading universities and think tanks no longer rely on invitations from foreign institutions to travel abroad. They can afford to spend holidays abroad, send their kids to school in foreign countries and possibly even visit them there. Also, their institu-

tions are able to fund international travel if deemed necessary (as is elaborated later).

Furthermore, the younger generation are well trained in English at school and at university. Getting into contact with foreign scholars just to practise language skills is less important for most Chinese scholars today. As far as language proficiency remains an issue, it is in relation to academic writing skills. However, this relates much more to extrinsic than intrinsic motivation: Chinese scholars face strong pressure to publish in international peer-reviewed journals, as I discuss in the next section.

While today the intrinsic motivation of Chinese scholars to cooperate internationally is less driven by practical considerations such as language skills or travel opportunities, genuine scientific interest is playing a larger role in international cooperation than it ever has before. This is good news for foreign researchers in general, but not necessarily for foreign social scientists interested in China: The latter must keep in mind that their “natural” cooperation partners are Chinese social scientists working on Chinese issues. For the latter, the advantages of cooperating with foreign scholars may not always be obvious. Naturally, international research cooperation still provides interesting opportunities for travel, but for Chinese social scientists working on China to travel abroad does not imply getting closer to their object of study. Quite the contrary, Chinese colleagues today face pressing regular obligations and a large workload at home that may limit their ability and willingness to plan stays abroad.

Extrinsic Motivation for International Cooperation

While shifts in the intrinsic motivation of scholars are difficult to identify, shifts in the extrinsic motivation can be inferred from changes in the incentives created to influence the work and priorities of researchers. The difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may blur over time: If strong and clear incentives exist to exhibit certain behaviour and reach particular targets, people may eventually internalize these goals. In the following, it is nevertheless argued that changes in the financing of international cooperation as well as shifts in the criteria for academic promotion primarily relate to extrinsic

motivation and have a major – though, at times, contradictory – impact on Chinese researchers’ motivation to cooperate internationally.

Financing of International Cooperation

Overall, the financial situation of China’s research and education institutions has improved in the course of the country’s fast economic development. A telling indicator of how this has altered China’s role in international research cooperation is the fact that funding organizations in industrialized countries have started to change the mode of financial support for international cooperation with China. In the past, China was seen as a developing country and, therefore, foreign research-funding institutions were willing to unilaterally fund international cooperation projects with China, including not only the costs associated with travel and fieldwork in China of the foreign scholars, but also the expenses for joint workshops and Chinese partners’ research stays in the foreign institution.

Today, while this kind of funding still exists, the trend is to expect the Chinese side to fund part of the cooperation. Thus, in many cases, scholars in the foreign country and cooperating partners in China simultaneously apply for funds in their respective countries. In the case of Europe, some European funders have jointly established calls for social science projects with Chinese institutions. This was the case in, for example, the “Coordination of Research between Europe and China” (CO-REACH) programme established under the ERANET scheme of the 6th EU Framework Programme in 2005. In this case, several European national funding organizations cooperated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) to fund several social science cooperation projects. Chinese cooperation partners were teams of researchers from within CASS (British Academy 2008). Likewise, the more recent “Europe–China Call for Collaborative Research on the Green Economy and Understanding Population Change” called for projects that included several partners from different European countries and two or more Chinese cooperating institutions. The funding for the Chinese partners was to be provided by the National Science Foundation of China (NSFC) (ERSC 2013).

This kind of joint funding coincides with the fact that the financial means of Chinese research institutions have expanded rapidly. First of all, funds dedicated to programmes for international S&T cooperation by the central government increased more than tenfold

between 2001 and 2011 (National Bureau of Statistics of China and Ministry of Science and Technology 2012: 164). Over the same period, funding by the National Science Foundation of China (NSFC) for international cooperation and exchange grew 21 per cent per year on average, with especially high growth rates of 71 and 65 per cent in 2010 and 2011, respectively (National Bureau of Statistics of China and Ministry of Science and Technology 2012: 166). This annual growth rate declined to 21 per cent in the year 2012 but was still considerably higher than the overall economic growth rate (China Science and Technology Statistics 2013).

Research and educational funds of Chinese academic institutions have also expanded considerably in the course of China's economic development. Though national statistics do not provide detailed data on the income situation of Chinese universities and research institutions or think tanks, they reflect a relatively clear picture of the development of research funding. For example, central government appropriation for the main science and technology programmes grew on average 15.6 per cent a year between 2002 to 2011, compared to an average real GDP growth rate of 10.6 per cent over the same time period. These data include funds from the NSFC, which is the largest funding programme for S&T and which increased its share from 31 per cent in 2002 to 44 per cent in 2011 (NBS 2013).

However, a more detailed look into the financial data reveals that educational and research institutions increasingly depend on so-called "self-generated" funds: Between 1998 and 2011, total educational funds for schools of all kinds and at all levels featured an average annual real growth rate of 13.5 per cent, considerably higher than the average real economic growth of 9.9 per cent over the same period (based on calculations from the National Bureau of Statistics 2013, using the implicit GDP deflator). These educational funds include income from teaching, research and other income-generating activities of schools. The importance of this self-generated income for overall school income has declined somewhat over the last few years, but it still accounts for about 20 per cent of all school income. Most importantly, the share of self-generated income is considerably higher in the case of institutions of higher education (Table 1). Comparable data is only available from 2006 to 2010. In this period, the share of income from auxiliary activities amounted to more than 40 per cent for institutions of higher education.

Table1: Share of Income Generated from Teaching, Research and Other Auxiliary Activities (事业收入, *shiyè shouru*) (Per Cent of Total Educational Funds)

Year	All Schools	Institutions of Higher Education
2006	24.5	42.2
2007	26.2	46.9
2008	23.2	44.5
2009	21.4	43.6
2010	21.0	40.4
2011	18.5	35.1

Source: NBS various issues.

This high dependence on self-generated funds emerges as a major result of the “marketization” of higher education in China (Zhao and Wei 2012): Though Chinese academic institutions are better-off in general, and especially the leading universities and research institutions in Beijing and Shanghai are able to pay attractive salaries to their staff, to do so they heavily rely on money generated from “auxiliary” activities of their staff. This has contributed to large differences between the income of professors from different universities and institutions, working in different locations and on different subjects, as the opportunities to engage in auxiliary activities differ considerably. However, increases in salaries of the personnel and budgets of the institutions financed by auxiliary activities have come at a high price: Professors are forced to spend much time teaching classes that are offered in addition to the normal curricula and for which participants or their employers have to pay (MBA programmes, training classes for cadres, and so on). In addition, departments engage in government or business consultancy that generates extra income.

These activities are important as they secure the budget and thereby also the salary increases of the research staff. In 2004, the presidents of Peking University and Tsinghua University complained that government regular funding supported about one-third of their budget, whereas research and auxiliary activities each secured another third of the budget (Dialogue 2004). According to information provided by the dean of one of Tsinghua University’s leading schools in a conversation in 2009, the regular budget allocated to the school by the government was merely sufficient to pay for the pensions of retired professors. Thus while the auxiliary activities are obviously im-

portant, they also limit the time that can be invested in joint research efforts, as the latter – generally speaking – would contribute less to the institutional income.

Other Incentives and Disincentives to International Cooperation?

Time constraints resulting from auxiliary activities undertaken to generate income do not, however, give members of the academic staff a full reprieve from needing to engage in international research cooperation, as that also may generate extra funding, boost an institute's reputation and thereby make applications for national research funding more likely to end in success.

In addition, while being occupied with teaching obligations, consultancy research and other activities, scholars are still expected to publish. Expectations differ between universities and between lecturers, assistant professors, tenure-track professors and full professors, but monthly salaries – as far as they exceed the rather unimpressive basic wages – are usually defined by detailed annual accounting of the different achievements and chores accomplished by each researcher, with publications being weighted heavily in the calculations (Cao and Que 2014). The pressure to publish is ubiquitous, and one's publication record is essential for being appointed as a professor or promoted. Only the so-called “outstanding” universities supported by government programmes “985” and “211” are independent in their rights to appoint and promote professors. For all other universities, appointments and promotions are subject to the provincial human resource departments and the social security as well as educational offices (Pei and Pan 2014), a process which regularly results in complaints that the evaluation of researchers and professors is overly controlled by administrative logics.

The pressure to publish seems to be continuously on the rise, especially with regard to junior scholars. International publications have gained importance for the regular evaluation of scholars and are essential for promotion. While in the past, publishing in international peer-reviewed journals or other international publications was a sufficient sign of success and therefore co-authorship was allowed or even welcomed as a step in this direction, more recently the importance of single authorship has been emphasized, at least at the leading institutions. According to information provided by Chinese partners from

Tsinghua University in 2013 during discussions regarding our joint project entitled “Technological Trajectories of Climate Change Mitigation in China, Europe and India” (see <www.die-gdi.de>), co-authored articles in journals are now only assessed in the evaluation process at Tsinghua University if the Chinese cohort was the lead author or, at least, the corresponding author of an article published in a leading international journal (see also Zhejiang University 2012). No incentives remain to publish in anthologies.

In sum, the current university personnel system seems to rely on incentives and pressure to increase the extrinsic motivation of researchers to perform well, while the criteria for good performance attribute only minor value to international cooperation in the form of joint research projects, and even less value to joint publications.

An Emerging Dilemma for International Cooperation in Social Sciences on China?

It is not clear whether the strict publication requirements reflect the extreme ambitions of leading universities within an ever-growing competition among Chinese academic institutions or, rather, the government’s ambitions to catapult Chinese academia to the vanguard in the perceived global race for academic reputation and R&D. The requirements could merely be a reaction to various strategies deployed by Chinese scholars to cosmetically enhance their publication lists in reaction to the increased pressure to publish that had resulted from earlier reforms.

Whatever the motivation behind these strict evaluation criteria, in combination with the need for academic institutions to generate money with teaching and consultancy activities, they nurture a dilemma that is potentially harmful for international research cooperation in social sciences on China. If researchers from leading academic institutions in China are encouraged to mainly publish as single authors, whereas at the same time international funding organizations, at least in Europe, tend to encourage larger, collaborative research projects, cooperation within such projects may become complicated when it comes to the publication of joint research results.

In the end, those leading Chinese academic institutions that are naturally the preferred partners of foreign researchers for joint projects – as the reputation of these Chinese institutions also increases the likelihood of convincing project funders abroad – may be the

least interested in substantial cooperation and joint research efforts. While joint project proposals may still be welcomed – as an income-generating avenue – joint publishing is no longer incentivized. Given the workload of Chinese scholars, especially at the leading academic institutions, substantial cooperation is difficult for them to realize as they try to squeeze into a tight corset of obligations just to ensure that their institution is earning enough money.

Pressure and incentive to attract funds is, of course, not unknown to scholars outside China. Struggling to reserve time for research in the face of numerous other obligations is a situation familiar to scholars in most countries. However, the extremely strict academic evaluation system in China in combination with a generous but distorted salary system obliges us to start reflecting on the potential consequences for social science research cooperation with China.

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