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Western–Chinese Academic Collaboration in the Social Sciences

Sascha KLOTZBÜCHER

It would be naïve to pretend that politics and the actual needs of governance do not play a role in social sciences in any part of the world. However, the political dismissal of faculty members in Chinese universities, along with other political interventions reported in recent Western media, reveals the outspoken trend toward scientific professionalisation and scientific autonomy in a different light.

The professionalisation, internationalisation, indigenisation and marketisation of social science does not necessarily diminish the role of politics and ideology or even

[...] take out of their practice, as many Chinese social scientists pretend these days, following their counterparts in the US and Europe. The question is not whether there is a relationship between politics and the social sciences, but what manner of relationship it is, and whether or not such a relationship allows room for professional autonomy (Dirlik 2012: 25).

Such reflections on the professional autonomy of the Western researcher are quite common among anthropologists (contributions in Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Gransow, Nyíri, and Fong 2005; Turner 2010). We should be aware that it was neither Chinese researchers nor China researchers who began these reflexive explorations of their role and status. When Western researchers were deprived of their colonial privileges in the regions of decolonised Africa and Asia, their changed collaboration with their indigent research assistant or new bureaucracy was “the key trope and transformative practice for the whole ethnographic enterprise” of data collection and writing (George Marcus in Lassiter 2005: 49).

Working in China, an area with similarly high political gatekeeping, there is a similar need for strategic concessions to the different traditions regarding the social status and autonomy of a researcher. Therefore, we should ask ourselves why this “reflexive turn” towards the social, political and cultural settings of the assumed role as a researcher or the transforming force of collaborations in research situations has almost no impact in the field of China social science. Today,

fieldwork is a key method in contemporary China studies for understanding society and politics in the rural areas (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006: back cover), for graduate students and large research clusters. Leaving aside guerrilla interviewing or small research projects based on individual contacts, the trend in contemporary China studies is to institutionalise these partnerships. There is no doubt that cooperation with the research centres, university departments and think tanks of the party-state can enhance access to the field, key informants, and additional information.

While institutional collaboration expands, the absence of reflexivity about this transition from our role as an outsider without access to the Chinese field to that of a joint researcher with Chinese researchers from universities and think tanks of the Communist Party is remarkable. The inherent logics, forms of taboos on both sides, changing perceptions, and new methods of influencing and monitoring will set new agendas for research. Stimulating reflection was the main motivation when we, together with China-based researchers supposed to “walk [...] in the footsteps of the Communist Party” (Hansen 2006: 81), made a panel submission for the Joint International Conference of the Research Network “Governance in China” and the Association for Social Science Research on China (ASC) at the University of Vienna, 22–23 November 2013.

The following articles argue that the Chinese central party-state is pushing this transition from scholar-to-scholar cooperation towards institutionalised partnerships, joint campuses and long-term projects – and not without reason. We should keep in mind that the internationalisation of research does not necessarily conflict with the more efficient supervision and control of international academic cooperation. What are the pitfalls of this form of collaboration, when our research proposals and plans must always match the intentions and interests of our Chinese collaborators? How can we be aware of the pre-selection of our Chinese partner host, and what is the most efficient methodology for dealing with this problem? These articles do not give an unequivocal answer but instead attempt to identify common research areas and methodological considerations.

The articles build on insights from anthropological, sociological and political studies (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Gransow, Nyíri, and Fong 2005; Heberer and Senz 2004). While the anthropological literature illuminates the local settings, we bring in structural factors

such as the science policies of the central party-state. This allows us to focus on the formative power of political decisions and ideologies as political incentives and sanctions for research goals, cooperation options and dissemination strategies.

There is a need for refined data collection and data aggregation methodologies. Informality during our interviews and with our collaborators is indeed a condition for successful data collection (Tsai 2010). However, as researchers we should critically observe our collaborator's resources, and how we as research partners fit into their career strategies. It is somewhat irritating that those who study the constitution and performance of political power professionally were reluctant to analyse this powerful influence on their own perception and thinking when they entered into this power field during their own field studies. In this sense, political scientists could learn a lot from anthropology.

One special feature of the indigenisation of social sciences in China is the sociologists' tradition of "social reform and [technocratic] engineering" (Dirlik 2012: 9; see also Gransow, Nyíri, and Fong 2005). The role of a consultant is to underline and actualise this traditional relationship between the officials and scientists in a principal-agent relationship.

This collection of five articles was rewritten after our conference round table. It contains four contributions from Europe-based scholars who participated in the round table, plus one paper by a China-based scholar.

The collection begins with Heike Holbig's contribution on the role of the "ideologies" of official social science research funding. Holbig explores the ramifications of the prestigious "Major Projects" programme, established in 2004 by the National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, and reflects on the implications for international academic collaboration.

Doris Fischer identifies the changes in the conditions for international research cooperation since the 1980s. Institutional changes, research financing and career incentives have shifted intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to go abroad or engage in international academic cooperation. Interestingly, while Holbig and Fischer both emphasise that the opportunities for international cooperation have increased dramatically, they point to different potential dilemmas. Holbig sees a tendency to defend and adapt to an increasingly domi-

nant discourse of national self-assertion and scepticism about everything Western. In Fischer's article, however, dissemination becomes complicated because only single authorship is incentivised.

Exploring the strategies of internationalisation in his own university, Josef Gregory Mahoney discusses how changes at leading Chinese research institutions have impacted international cooperation. In the 1980s and 1990s, these relationships were frequently informal and scholar-to-scholar. In the process of discipline construction with several elite programmes, strategic interests have increasingly guided cooperation in his university, which has increased in general. Mahoney explains how, since 2000, the relationships between foreign and Chinese researchers have changed significantly, moving towards strategic and institutionalised cooperation in the context of China's domestic academic professionalisation.

Leaving behind this rather broad focus on science and university policies, the two final papers, by Sascha Klotzbücher and Christian Göbel, focus exclusively on international academic cooperation. Analysing his own field studies for a research project with Chinese public health researchers on rural health service reform in Xinjiang, Klotzbücher argues that well-established but sometimes hidden patterns of scientific advisory work and data collection for local governmental bodies help frame collaborative fieldwork in Sino-Western scientific projects. Researchers themselves have black-boxed the entanglements of science and politics. Providing consultancy is an important window of access for foreign researchers, but in the dissemination of results in academia, this role should be made explicit or minimised in more participatory research methodologies.

Christian Göbel acknowledges the structural constraints that the previous authors suggest. However, an argument built exclusively on the power of structural constraints neglects the power of methodological standards and the role of the researcher in helping us identify and address ideological and selection biases. Based on his fieldwork on rural tax reforms, Göbel presents five strategies for overcoming these biases. The researcher's preparedness, personality, and experience conducting interviews, as well as his or her ability to create an atmosphere of informality, can neutralise structural constraints and bias.

Together, the papers point to the changing entanglements between science and politics in international academic cooperation in

recent years. Depending on its needs, the party-state embeds structures in and designs incentives for international academic cooperation. Instead of avoiding our experiences with these mechanisms or making them taboo, we address them openly and define the cooperation itself and the Chinese science system as our object of inquiry. We hope that, with a clear and adaptive methodological design, we can avoid walking in the footsteps of the Communist Party.

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