



Scientific exchanges with Chinese characteristics

Limits and pitfalls of academic cooperation with the People's Republic of China

Policy brief

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International cooperation is an important part of academic work and contributes greatly to the advancement of scientific research. In the current global trend towards a re-bipolarized world, however, in which open societies are under threat from authoritarian regimes, academic contacts are becoming an instrument that some non-democratic states are using to undermine our open societies.

The risks and pitfalls of academic cooperation with non-democratic states must be considered. In the case of the People's Republic of China (PRC), academic cooperation is based on a different concept of science itself. Whereas in our European concept, scientific institutions are independent of the state and their aim is the general advancement of scientific knowledge, which does not recognize state borders, in the PRC science is strictly subordinated to the pragmatic aims of the state, or rather the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This subordination of science to the interests of the state is institutionalized in the PRC. Research institutions and universities are subordinate to the Party through their leadership, the head of which in the PRC is the secretary of the local Party organization, not the rector, who has only limited powers (unless, of course, the two functions are combined in one person).

At the same time, it should be remembered that one of the objectives of the PRC, or the CCP as its 'leading force', is to seek a new order of international relations that suits the Chinese political establishment at the expense of the fundamental values of democratic societies. Science is one of the instruments to achieve this, and if we are careless in our scientific cooperation with the PRC, we risk assisting the Beijing leadership in achieving it and thus acting against our own interests. It is important to avoid the impression that the objectives and practices of the PRC do not concern the Czech Republic as a smaller country whose scientific institutions do not occupy the top positions in international rankings. Our science also has something to offer, and as the



latest annual report of the Security Information Service indicates, the relevant Chinese authorities are active on Czech territory, including in the academic sphere.¹

Academics are often unaware of these risks when engaging with institutions from the PRC, treating them as analogous partners; they don't consider research security as an essential parameter. This document summarizes the specifics of the Chinese academic environment in a broader context, describes the risks associated with scientific cooperation with the PRC and offers recommendations to Czech academic institutions on how to avoid these risks. It also provides a number of concrete examples from the Czech and international academic environments.

Risks of cooperation in technical fields

The Chinese state has long and systematically used scientific knowledge and technology from foreign countries to enhance its own development. This process is described in specialist literature,² which has already led to legislative and administrative responses in some countries. Over the past few decades, an extensive technology transfer system has emerged in the PRC, primarily through contacts with both the foreign private business community and academia. Chinese academic institutions are involved in this system and individual Chinese citizens acting in the interests of their country, either on their own initiative or at the behest of the Chinese authorities, may also be involved, as encouraged by state-controlled propaganda. According to a recent influential publication, China's technology transfer methods can be divided into three groups:³

- Legal - joint research agreements, technology exchanges, acquisitions
- Illegal - breach of contract, espionage, misuse of computer networks, insider operations, reverse engineering

¹ BIS (2022). *Výroční zpráva 2021* [online]. Available at: <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocní-zpravy/2021-vz-cz.pdf>.

² Joske, Alex (2018). "Picking flowers, making honey". *ASPI* [online]. Available at: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey>.

³ William C. Hannas, Didi Kirsten Tatlow (ed.) (2021). *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage*. Routledge.



- Extra-legal - those practices and transfer channels where it is difficult to determine their illegality. In the case of the PRC, these include talent programs attracting foreign professionals to work in China.

Areas of interest - key sectors

Scientific cooperation with the PRC must take into account the nature of the research and the risk of potential misuse. China is particularly interested in R&D in the strategic sectors originally identified in its Made in China 2025 plan.⁴ This plan was quietly withdrawn from public discourse after negative feedback from abroad, but by all indications its priorities remain valid. These include information technology, robotics, new materials, energy and aerospace equipment.

Most risky - dual-use technologies

The highest-risk research is in areas involving the development of potentially dual-use technologies, i.e. with both civilian and military applications. Such research is of interest to Chinese institutions with links to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), which is then able to acquire technologies usable for defence purposes through international scientific cooperation despite defence embargoes imposed by Western states.

The 2022 China Science Investigation Project revealed that in the European countries surveyed, over the last 20 years around 3,000 scientific publications have been produced in collaboration with Chinese academics from universities linked to the PLA, notably the National University of Defence Technology (NUDT), which is under the direct supervision of the PRC Central Military Commission.⁵

⁴ ISDP (2018). "Made in China: Backgrounder". Available at: <https://isdpeu.org/content/uploads/2018/06/Made-in-China-Backgrounder.pdf>.

⁵ Matthews, David (2022). "European universities under fire over work with Chinese military". *Science Business* [online]. Available at: <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/european-universities-under-fire-over-work-chinese-military>.



European universities are not always fully aware of the links of Chinese scholars to the PLA, either through their own negligence or because Chinese academics hide these links. A large proportion are PhD students who return to the PRC to work in defence research after receiving their education in Europe.⁶ Moreover, it is not uncommon for military universities to use neutral names in English to hide their real affiliations.⁷

Military-civilian fusion

The risk of misuse of dual-use technologies is not limited to collaboration with institutions with such obvious ties to the PLA as the NUDT. It is also a problem for civilian universities, as they, too, are affected by China's military-civilian fusion strategy, which involves the private and academic sectors in the Chinese military-industrial complex. These universities can also participate in defence research.⁸

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has created the China Defence Universities Tracker database, which monitors the links of Chinese civilian universities to the defence sector and assesses the extent to which the results of collaborations with these institutions may be used for military purposes.⁹

The universities with the highest risk ratings, dubbed the "Seven Sons of National Defence", may outwardly present themselves to their foreign partners as civilian

⁶ Joske, Alex (2018). "Picking flowers, making honey". *ASPI* [online]. Available at: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/picking-flowers-making-honey>.

⁷ Chinese universities' links with the military can be verified in ASPI's database of defence universities, see <https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/>.

⁸ Fritz, Audrey (2021). "The foundation of innovation under military-civil fusion: The role of universities". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/en/mcf/>

⁹ The China Defense Universities Tracker database is also used by other projects to monitor the riskiness of inter-university agreements, such as the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker in Europe, see <https://academytracker.ceias.eu>.



universities, but by their nature and strong links to the military they can be defined more as defence universities.¹⁰¹¹

Examples in the Czech Republic

A survey in July 2020 by the Sinopsis project in cooperation with Czech Radio revealed that 14 Czech public universities had established cooperation with Chinese civilian universities that pose a medium to very high risk according to the ASPI database, including universities that are among the highest risk "Seven Sons", such as Northwestern Polytechnic University or Beijing Institute of Technology.¹² In one case, a Czech explosives expert had very close ties to Chinese high-risk institutions.¹³ The survey further revealed that Czech universities were not aware of the risks of cooperation with their Chinese partners and treated them as equal foreign partners of a purely academic type.¹⁴

¹⁰ Joske, Alex (2019). "The China Defence Universities Tracker". *ASPI* [online]. Available at: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/china-defence-universities-tracker>.

¹¹ A concrete example of the blending of Chinese military-civilian fusion into the European academic environment is described, for example, in the case study of the Estonian International Centre for Defence and Security. See Lill, N. (2023). "Chinese Military-Civil Fusion: Sino-Italian Research Cooperation". *International Centre for Defence and Security* [online]. Available at: <https://icds.ee/en/chinese-military-civil-fusion-sino-italian-research-cooperation/>

¹² Chaloupská, Markéta (2020). "Spolupráce s čínskými univerzitami je riziková, tvrdí výzkum. Studenti mohou být nastrčenými špiony". *iRozhlas* [online]. Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/univerzita-vysoka-skola-cina-cesko-spionaz-spoluprace-studenti_2007270600_onz.

¹³ Janoušek, Artur (2022). "Český expert na výbušniny spolupracuje s čínskými specialisty na zbraně. Před ‚verbováním‘ Pekingu varuje BIS". *iRozhlas* [online]. Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/profesor-svatopluk-zeman-vybusniny-spoluprace-cina-zbrane-univerzita-pardubice_2203160600_sam.

¹⁴ Jirouš, Filip (2020). "Nothing of interest in a small country? Czech-Chinese academic exchange in the age of military-civil fusion". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/en/czech-china-defense-universities/>.



Further studies

The issues of academic cooperation with institutions linked to Chinese defence research are the subject of a detailed case study by the American NGO Center for Research Security and Integrity (CRSI). The study is based on a corpus of bibliographic data from academic articles that have been produced in cooperation between the PRC and researchers from German academic institutions, as well as from other countries, including the Czech Republic. In assessing the risk of collaboration, the study draws on the ASPI database, which it supplements with other institutions related to defence research, such as selected laboratories of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Out of a total corpus of over 40,000 articles published between 2016 and 2022, 835 articles were produced in collaboration with institutions and Chinese researchers linked to the Chinese military-industrial complex.

Some of the articles with a high risk of being misused by the Chinese side were contributed by scientists affiliated with Czech universities. As an example, the study mentions an article dealing with the mechanical properties of transition metal tetraborides, co-authored by a scientist from the University of Ostrava. The paper was co-authored by Chinese scientists working for both U.S. research institutions and Chinese defence research institutions such as Beihang University and the Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics (CAEP), an institution involved in nuclear weapons research. In addition to Chinese and American institutions, the Czech Ministry of Education and Sports (MŠMT) and the European Regional Development Fund contributed to the funding of the research.

The CRSI study also identifies a large number of research projects developed in collaboration with PRC venture partners and funded by American and European institutions. According to the study, in addition to the MŠMT, the Czech Republic has also funded high-risk research through the Czech Science Foundation.¹⁵

¹⁵ Stoff, Jeffrey (2023). "Should Democracies Draw Redlines around Research Collaboration with China? A Case Study of Germany". *CRSI*. [online]. Available at: <https://researchsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Click-here-to-download-the-full-publication.-Stoff-DrawingRedlinesFINAL.pdf>



Cyber attacks and espionage

When cooperating with Chinese universities, increased caution should be taken against cyber attacks and espionage. As the Czech National Cyber and Information Security Agency warns, researchers from China and other high-risk countries are likely to engage in some form of cyber espionage and leak sensitive information about the research or the university itself. In addition, universities are increasingly exposed to potential attacks by Chinese state-sponsored organized groups, which most often seek to obtain sensitive data through phishing emails and similar fraudulent techniques.

Talent programmes and scholarships

In addition to inter-university cooperation, China reaches out directly to foreign scholars through its talent search programs. Potential candidates for the programs are selected by recruitment centres based in the target countries and are often approached directly by email or on social media. These centres often work with organizations linked to the United Front system, which is responsible for co-opting foreign elites. Talent programs usually involve routine scientific cooperation, but their operation is often non-transparent and there is a significant risk of Chinese collusion. This can range from attempts at grant fraud, theft of intellectual property or espionage to recruitment efforts into the intelligence services. China's best-known talent program is the Thousand Talent Plan (千人计划) organized by the Chinese government. In total, there are several hundred talent programs, with varying degrees of centralization.¹⁶

The talent search strategy also targets Chinese scientists established in Western research institutions in order to motivate them to return to the PRC. Perhaps the best example is the case of a group of several dozen Chinese scientists from the US Los Alamos National Laboratory. After years of working on sensitive research projects funded by the US government, they have relocated back to the PRC in recent years to conduct research on key defence technologies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Joske, Alex (2020). "Hunting the Phoenix". *ASPI* [online]. Available at: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/hunting-phoenix>.

¹⁷ Strider (2022). "The Los Alamos Club: How the People's Republic of China Recruited Leading Scientists from Los Alamos National Laboratory to Advance Its Military Programs". *Strider Technologies, Inc.*



As many as 20,000 Chinese students a year have their studies abroad funded by the China Scholarship Council. Scholarships are conditional on the signing of a contract in which scholarship holders must declare their allegiance to the PRC and the ruling Communist Party and commit to act only in the interests of the Chinese regime. If the students violate this contract, for example by engaging in activities that are politically objectionable to Beijing, they face financial penalties not only for themselves, but also for their guarantors, usually family members or teachers who co-sign the contract. Following various revelations of these contracts, some Swedish universities have ended their cooperation with the China Scholarship Council.¹⁸

Example: Xu Yanjun

One of the best described examples of Chinese technological espionage is the case of a Chinese Ministry of State Security employee who was arrested and convicted in the US for attempted espionage. Xu attempted to obtain information about GE Aviation's aerospace technologies from an engineer he invited to China to lecture at the faculty of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (NUAA), one of the so-called "Seven Sons of National Defence." Xu Yanjun presented himself as a graduate student at NUAA at the time and arranged honoraria for guest lectures. During the preparation of the lectures, he obtained powerpoint presentations with sensitive data from unsuspecting guests.¹⁹

Another pitfall - the politicization of science

One of the peculiarities of the Chinese academic environment is the strong politicization of certain fields and research topics. An example is the current regulation

¹⁸ Wu Yitong (2023). "Tens of thousands of students pledge loyalty to Beijing before arriving abroad". *Radio Free Asia* [online]. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/overseas-students-01202023144547.htm>

¹⁹ Robertson, Jordan a Bennett, Drake (2022). "A Chinese Spy Wanted GE's Secrets, But the US Got China's Instead". *Bloomberg* [online]. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-09-15/china-wanted-ge-s-secrets-but-then-their-spy-got-caught>.



of the scientific debate on the spread of the covid-19 virus, which the Chinese authorities are trying to use to prevent access to current international knowledge about the disease.²⁰ Such knowledge largely contradicts the strict measures used until recently by the Chinese Government in the fight against the virus, which the leadership had long been reluctant to change for fear of losing prestige and undermining General Secretary Xi Jinping's authority as a great leader who is never wrong. For example, the Chinese authorities have suspended the social media accounts of DXY, an online platform that brings together Chinese medical professionals who seek to engage in objective scientific debate. In the past, DXY had published articles refuting the state-promoted narrative about the effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine in treating covid-19 and other diseases.²¹

Chinese authorities may also engage the international academic community in efforts to censor topics that are politicized or sensitive to the CCP. For example, in 2017, under pressure from Chinese authorities, Cambridge University Press blocked 315 academic articles in the renowned journal *The China Quarterly* from its electronic database for users in the PRC without the knowledge of the journal's management or the authors of the articles. The censored articles covered topics sensitive to the CCP, such as the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square protests. After a number of academics spoke out against the move, the publishing house reopened the blocked articles.²²

²⁰ Yang Zeyi (2022). "Why China is still obsessed with disinfecting everything". *MIT Technology Review* [online]. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/05/19/1052458/why-china-disinfect-everything/>.

²¹ Yang Zeyi (2022). "China has censored a top health information platform". *MIT Technology Review* [online]. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/08/11/1057592/china-censored-health-information-platform/>.

²² Sinopsis (2021). "Cenzura akademické práce v zahraničí (případ Cambridge University Press a incident v Braze)". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/sinopsis/cenzura-akademicke-prace-v-zahranici-pripad-cambridge-university-press-a-incident-v-braze/>.



PRC and Social Sciences

Telling the Chinese story well

One of the goals of Chinese academia is to systematically construct a positive image of China as a strong state with a long history, culminating in the CCP government led by a Marxist-Leninist ideology "with Chinese characteristics". The PRC has also attempted to promote this positive narrative, also known as "telling the Chinese story well" (讲好中国故事), internationally, and has frequently used willing or merely inattentive foreign academics and research institutions to do so. Thus, through their collaboration with China, they may contribute to the creation of an international discourse legitimizing the Chinese communist regime, its ambitions to change the international order, or its gross human rights abuses. Academics in target countries are often unaware that their counterparts in the PRC may represent not only their home institution, but also the entire vast bureaucratic system of academic co-optation directly under the CCP.

The Chinese side can achieve this goal by:

- Making seemingly apolitical contacts in Western academic circles, especially in the social sciences and humanities, such as history, international relations, sociology, political science, and even sinology.
- Cultivating relationships with China-friendly academics, for example by offering collaboration, paid trips to China or offers of publication and well-paid lectureships in the PRC.
- Supporting the development of selected social science theories that lack critical reflection on Chinese reality and respond to the needs of the Chinese narrative.
- Supporting the publication of academic papers that appear to be the normal activities of Western scholars, but in fact were produced in the tightly controlled Chinese academic environment with the aim of defending the Beijing regime.²³

²³ For example, the publications of the Marxist philosopher Roland Boer at the Dalian University of Technology.



- Publishing in reputable international publishing houses English-language papers by Chinese academics, that were produced in the Chinese academic environment under the control of the Party authorities, yet have the outward appearance of expressing an independent scholarly opinion. This is a particularly unsettling element in the Czech environment.

Social sciences with Chinese characteristics

By the nature of the Chinese regime, the social sciences and humanities are subordinated to the "leading role" of the Chinese Communist Party, and their nature and mode of research are thus diametrically opposed to the same fields in Western countries. The importance of these disciplines has grown, particularly under General Secretary Xi Jinping, in direct proportion to the growing importance of the ideological anchor of Chinese politics and the PRC's growing desire to assert its influence internationally.

As early as 2016, Xi Jinping emphasized the "strategic importance of building a specifically Chinese philosophy and social sciences." Philosophers and scholars in the humanities and social sciences, he said, are to build a "new system of scientific disciplines, methodology and terminology", collectively referred to as the "three great systems" (三大体系), with the basis of the desired Chinese specifics being the "scientific teachings of Marxism-Leninism" enriched by the unspecified traditions of "exquisite Chinese culture".²⁴ This system, the construction of which is strongly centralized and fully subordinated to the CCP, is to become independent of and even competitive with international science in the future. Western scholars are often unaware of these specifics and, when working with their Chinese counterparts, are oblivious to the strong politicization and ideologization of Chinese social sciences and humanities.²⁵

²⁴ "San da tixi ruhe jianshe" 三大体系"如何建设 [How to build the "three great systems"]. *Zhongguo gongchandang xinwenwang* 中国共产党新闻网 [online]. Available at: <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1009/c434335-32248123.html>.

²⁵ An example of the politicization of the social sciences is the multidisciplinary National Research Project on Tracing the Origins of Chinese Civilization (中华文明探源工程), which has involved more than 70 academic institutions since its inception around 2001 and whose political significance was emphasized by General Secretary Xi Jinping at a study session of the Politburo of the CPC Central Committee on 27 May 2022. See http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2022-07/15/c_1128830256.htm.



Example: Marek Hrubec

An example of Western academic cooperation with Chinese institutions is the case of Marek Hrubec, former director of the Centre for Global Studies of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS), who was removed from his position by the CAS leadership in 2021 because of his ties to the PRC. One of the main reasons for his dismissal was his work on the scientific board of the think tank China-CEE Institute in Budapest. This think tank presents itself as politically independent, but in reality it is an institution with links to the Chinese Ministry of State Security and the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. Its findings can therefore be used by Chinese intelligence services for further work in European countries.²⁶

Hrubec has made several appearances in the Chinese state media, where he, as a representative of the CAS, has made positive statements about the Chinese regime without the CAS's knowledge and has criticized the Czech government's policies in a manner consistent with Chinese narratives. It should be emphasized that Hrubec's texts, which were published in English and Chinese, were not published by the Chinese media for their academic quality or originality of scholarly opinion, but for Hrubec's willingness to express himself in accordance with the Chinese narrative under the banner of the CAS as a prestigious European academic institution.²⁷ In addition to his publications in the Chinese media, Hrubec co-edited a publication entitled *Global China: Opening Up and the Belt and Road Initiative*. This book was published in both Chinese and English by The China International Publishing Group (中国国际出版集团), owned by the Communist Party of China. The edited collection aimed to promote China's policies and a positive assessment of China's role in the world. From the text of the decision of the Ethics Committee of the CAS on the case of Marek Hrubec, it is clear that when the book was published, it was partially censored without the

²⁶ Hála, Martin a Jirouš, Filip a Klimeš, Ondřej (2021). "Borrowed Boats Capsizing: State Security Ties to CCP Propaganda Laundering Rile Czech Public". *China Brief* 21/23. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/borrowed-boats-capsizing-state-security-ties-to-ccp-propaganda-laundering-rile-czech-public/>.

²⁷ Valášek, Lukáš (2021). "Oslava Pekingu. Vysoce postavený badatel Akademie věd píše pro list čínské propagandy". *Aktuálně* [online]. Available at: <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/vysoce-postaveny-manazer-akademie-ved-pise-pro-cinskou-propa/~10b0a53a40b311ecbc3f0cc47ab5f122/>.



knowledge of the authors whom Hrubec had invited to the project, and without their awareness of all the political implications.²⁸ In addition, Hrubec taught a course at Charles University called the New Silk Road: the Chinese Global Project, in which he lectured on this economic initiative in full accordance with the Chinese official narrative and propaganda, and the syllabus of the course was based largely on Chinese literature by authors close to the Communist regime.²⁹

Restrictions on freedom of speech and academic freedoms

The Chinese side's efforts to restrict freedom of speech and influence public debate in its favour can also be a risk for universities when cooperating with China. In countries with a high number of Chinese students, universities face pressure, especially from nationalist students, to suppress free debate on controversial issues for China, such as the human rights situation in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, under the influence of and often directly organized by the United Front authorities. Universities in these countries, such as Australia and the UK, are often heavily dependent on PRC funding and may self-censor in an effort to avoid controversy. Indeed, such cases have also been described.³⁰

Example: the Czech-Chinese Centre

The relevant authorities of the CCP try to influence the discourse about the PRC in academia in various ways, some of which involve corrupt practices. In 2016, Charles University opened the Czech-Chinese Centre on its campus, which was supposed to "promote research in the fields of sinology, sociology, security, economics, and others." The Centre was established as a result of Rector Tomáš Zima's efforts to establish contacts with government institutions in the PRC, which culminated in a visit by Liu Yandong, Vice Premier of the PRC and former head of the United Front Work

²⁸ Lomová, Olga (2022). "Rozhodnutí Etické komise akademie věd nemůže obstát". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/rozhodnuti-eticke-komise-akademie-ved-nemuze-obstat/>.

²⁹ Sinopsis (2018). "Pás a stezka místo kritického myšlení". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/pas-a-stezka-misto-kritickeho-mysleni/>.

³⁰ Viz Human Rights Watch (2021). "Australia: Beijing Threatening Academic Freedom". *Human Rights Watch* [online]. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/30/australia-beijing-threatening-academic-freedom>.



Department of CCP's Central Committee, who directly concluded the agreement with the Rector on the establishment of the Centre.³¹ Although the Centre presented itself as a specialized platform for research on China, no relevant experts on China were invited to participate, and its main activity was to organize conferences that were undisguised propaganda for the Chinese regime.³²

The centre was nominally headed by Rector Zima, while its practical operation was the responsibility of the centre's secretary, Miloš Balabán. As head of the Centre for Security Policy at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University (FSS CU), Balabán simultaneously sponsored the course The New Silk Road: the Chinese Global Project, primarily based on Chinese propaganda materials.³³ Later it turned out that this course and the conferences organized by Balabán were financed by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China without the knowledge of the university, moreover through his private company, which copied the name and logo of the Centre for Security Policy at FSS CU.³⁴ Following these revelations, Balabán resigned from his academic position at FSS CU, but continued to work as a security expert for the Czech Social Democratic Party.³⁵

Confucius Institutes

Perhaps the most widespread instrument China has used to strengthen its influence in foreign universities is the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CI). These are officially

³¹ Lomová, Olga (2019). "K počátkům Česko-čínského centra na Univerzitě Karlově". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/k-pocatcum-cesko-cinskeho-centra-na-univerzite-karlove/>.

³² Kaloň (2016). "Dopis z Číny: Pás a stezka do bažin". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/dopis-z-ciny-pas-a-stezka-do-bazin/>.

³³ Sinopsis (2018). "Pás a stezka místo kritického myšlení". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/pas-a-stezka-misto-kritickeho-mysleni/>.

³⁴ Sinopsis (2019). "Globální síť think tanků pro šíření čínského narativu". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/globalni-sit-think-tanku-pro-sireni-cinskeho-narativu/>.

³⁵ Valášek, Lukáš a Bartoníček, Radek a Chripák, Denis (2019). "Experta ČSSD na obranu platila čínská ambasáda. Stojíme za ním, zní ze strany". *Aktuálně* [online]. Available at: <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/univerzita-karlova-vazby-milos-balaban/~5dc6cc54017811eab259ac1f6b220ee8/>.



intended to serve primarily as language centres for the teaching of Chinese, but unlike similar cultural and language centres in other countries, they are directly subordinate to party and government structures and, along with the dissemination of Chinese soft-power and propaganda, they also seek to control discourse about China in academic circles abroad and face frequent criticism for attempting to censor free debate in their host countries. CIs are set up directly by host universities, but their governing organization is the State Group for the Dissemination of the Chinese Language Internationally, formerly known as Hanban.

Following global criticism of the CIs' operations since at least 2014,³⁶ a structural reform was undertaken in 2020, in an attempt to improve their reputation, with the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation replacing Hanban. Like its predecessor, the new governing body not only falls under the Chinese Ministry of Education, but is also anchored in the party's propaganda system and its activities are partly oriented towards influence activities.³⁷ There is also a documented case of CI providing cover for espionage activities.³⁸

In the Czech Republic, the first CI was established at Palacký University in Olomouc in 2007. During its tenure, the university published, for example, a translation of the writings of General Secretary Xi Jinping, prepared for publication in cooperation with Chinese partners. Following protests by academic staff, the university decided not to extend the CI's contract beyond its expiry in 2023. A second CI was established in 2018 at the University of Finance and Administration (VŠFS) in Prague. Its operation was inaugurated during a visit to Prague by Chinese Politburo member and former head of the United Front Work Department of the CCP's Central Committee, Ms. Sun Chunlan. Karel Havlíček, former Dean of one of the faculties of the VŠFS, member of

³⁶ One of the first significant scandals associated with CI was the attempt by the director of Hanban to censor the program of the annual conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies in Braga, Portugal, in 2014. In response to the incident, American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins published an influential article calling CI "academic malware". Viz Sahlins, Marshall (2014). "Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware". *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12/46. Available at: <https://apjif.org/2014/12/46/Marshall-Sahlins/4220.html>.

³⁷ Jichang Lulu (2022). "Propaganda and beyond: A note on the 2020 Confucius Institute reform". *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ci0.pdf>.

³⁸ Ekblom, Jonas (2019). "Chinese academic suspected of espionage banned from Belgium". *Reuters* [online]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-university-idUSKBN1X922O>.



the Board of Directors of the VŠFS and Minister of Industry and Trade in the Babiš government, was also present at the opening.³⁹

Recommendation

Based on the above findings, we make the following recommendations to Czech academic institutions:

- When establishing cooperation with institutions from the PRC, take into account their different position in the state and society and do not approach them mechanically as analogous partners in the sense of openness and academic independence.
- When establishing contacts with Chinese institutions, consult with experts and available information sources about their possible links to the defence sector or security apparatus.
- Similarly, verify the actual affiliations of students and staff from the PRC (due diligence), especially for those interested in postgraduate studies in technological fields.
- Inform your employees about the risks of working with the PRC, the threats of cultivation or recruitment by Chinese institutions.
- Be aware of Chinese efforts to co-opt Western institutions to legitimize their own narrative.
- Promote independent research and education aimed at understanding contemporary China in order to raise awareness in this area.

³⁹ Sinopsis (2019). “Konfucius v Praze: zdaž to není koneckonců radostné?”. *Sinopsis* [online]. Available at: <https://sinopsis.cz/konfucius-v-praze-zdaz-to-neni-koneckoncu-radostne-2/>.