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Chinese transnational authoritarianism in academia and media

Perspectives from Sweden and Japan

Memorandum from workshop held in Tokyo on 3 October 2026

Summary

- The workshop demonstrated that while Chinese transnational authoritarian practices affect knowledge production in both Sweden and Japan, their consequences depend on national and institutional contexts.
- Indirect pressure can be as consequential as overt repression. Researchers might change topics, methods, travel plans or advice to students without experiencing explicit threats. Such adjustments can gradually reshape entire research fields.
- The resilience of China studies to transnational authoritarian practices depends partly on institutional structures. Japan's large and established humanities community appears to provide a buffer, while Sweden faces greater challenges associated with its smaller research community and declining capacity.

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Keio University's Institute of East Asian Studies in Tokyo, in collaboration with the graduate school of integrated arts and science at Hiroshima University and the Swedish National China Centre (NKK) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), hosted a workshop on Chinese transnational authoritarianism and its implications for academic freedom, journalism and knowledge production about China on 3 October 2026. The discussion focused on the similarities and differences between Sweden and Japan.

Dr Erik Mo Welin of the Swedish National China Centre presented findings from recent studies of Swedish China scholars, researchers collaborating with China and journalists. He also presented recent research by NKK on the development and sustainability of China-related expertise in Sweden. Professor Jaehwan Lim of Aoyama Gakuin University served as discussant and provided a comparative perspective based on a survey of Japan-based China scholars and ongoing research into developments in Japanese China studies. Other academics, analysts and students also participated, as well as a former Japanese ambassador who contributed to the subsequent discussion.

The discussion highlighted a common challenge: how to continue independent research and meaningful engagement with China when researchers face political pressure, restrictions on access and concerns about the safety of themselves and their contacts. The findings revealed differences in how these pressures operate and how academic communities respond.

Similarities: Pressure on research and knowledge production

Both Sweden and Japan have had experience of Chinese authoritarian pressure that can influence academic research, particularly in politically sensitive fields. Researchers in both countries reported obstacles to gaining access to information, concerns about the treatment of contacts by the Chinese authorities and making changes to research practices in order to reduce political risks.

Self-censorship and precautionary behaviour emerged as significant concerns. In Sweden, 74% of the China scholars surveyed considered self-censorship to be a problem in their field, while approximately 56% knew colleagues who had adjusted research projects to make them less politically sensitive. In Japan, 27.1% of surveyed scholars reported research-related difficulties and 21.8% reported experiences of censorship. Moreover, approximately 43% considered political sensitivity when advising graduate students.

One important commonality that emerged concerned the indirect and potentially long-term effects on knowledge production. In both countries, supervisors might discourage younger researchers from pursuing politically sensitive topics or conducting fieldwork in China. Researchers increasingly consider alternative methods, such as textual analysis and digital sources. Although such adjustments can be reasonable responses to difficult research conditions, they can also narrow the scope of research and reduce opportunities to generate independent knowledge about contemporary China.

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Both countries also face a dilemma in balancing research independence with continued academic engagement. Contacts with Chinese researchers remain valuable and restricting cooperation could itself undermine knowledge production. Participants emphasised that maintaining collaboration while protecting academic freedom requires careful consideration rather than blanket restrictions.

Key differences between Sweden and Japan

1. Forms of pressure and access to China

In Sweden, visa denials and delays, and restrictions on access for researchers were particularly prominent. Some researchers experienced difficulties after having made public criticisms of China or having participated in activities related to the Gui Minhai case. The deterioration in relations between Sweden and China, particularly during the tenure of China's ambassador from 2017 to 2021, provided an important political context.

In Japan, denial of entry was considerably less common, largely because Japan has visa-free entry to China, which was not the case for Sweden when the studies were conducted. Instead, scholars often restricted their own research activities or travel to avoid potential risks. Concerns about Chinese colleagues, friends or research contacts being approached by the authorities were especially prominent. The detention of a Japanese university professor in China in 2019 has had lasting psychological and practical consequences for the research community.

In other words, while Swedish researchers reported relatively visible restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities, Japanese scholars appeared particularly affected by indirect pressure and anticipatory precautions. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, but their relative prominence differs.

2. The structure and resilience of China studies

Although Sweden has a long tradition of sinology and China studies, it currently has a relatively small China studies community. In addition, there are indications of declining student enrolment in Chinese-language courses, a longer-term decline in the number of dissertations on China-related topics and diminishing opportunities for research in China. Participants described the field as facing resource constraints and some degree of marginalisation. Relatively few Swedish universities offer Chinese or sinology programmes, and the number of social scientists in other fields or departments specialising in China is also limited.

Japan, by contrast, has a much larger and more established China studies community, with a strong and continuing tradition of research on Chinese history, literature, and philosophy. The number of China-related projects funded through competitive research grants declined sharply around 2010, particularly in social science disciplines such as economics and public policy. While the share of China-related projects in the social sciences has continued to decline, the overall number of China-related projects, including those in the humanities, has recovered and increased since the mid-2010s. This suggests that while researchers, and younger researchers

in particular, might be increasingly discouraged from pursuing China-related topics in certain social science disciplines, research in the humanities has remained comparatively resilient. Japan's established humanities tradition could therefore help to sustain China studies despite the increasing political pressures, whereas Sweden's smaller academic community might be more vulnerable to declining resources and expertise.

3. Differences among academic disciplines

Discipline-related differences were evident in both countries, although the available evidence was not directly comparable. In Japan, China scholars in the fields of political science, sociology and history reported greater exposure to repressive practices and were more likely to adopt precautionary measures. Follow-up research found a pronounced decline in the share of China-related projects in economics and public policy, which is likely to reflect decisions by younger researchers and their supervisors. The data also indicates that the number of collaborations with Chinese counterparts has declined. The number of China studies projects funded by Japan's national research funding programme, KAKENHI, that involve collaboration with Chinese institutions has drastically reduced and is now close to zero.

In Sweden, the data compared China scholars with scholars collaborating with China, mostly working in STEM-related fields. The latter had little or no experience of repression and generally viewed their collaborations positively. Approximately 89% reported that cooperation had worked well and some were more concerned about restrictions imposed by Swedish institutions than pressure from China.

The Swedish discussion suggested that a researcher's public visibility, rather than the discipline alone, might influence exposure to Chinese pressure. However, the small sample size prevented firm conclusions.

The workshop then discussed differences in how academics and journalists respond to Chinese authoritarian pressure. The Swedish study found that although journalists reported threats, criticism from Chinese authorities and visa difficulties, there was limited evidence of self-reported self-censorship. Some journalists instead became more outspoken in their criticism of China. This contrasted with the more diverse and in some cases precautionary adjustments observed among China scholars, which highlights how professional roles and norms might shape responses to authoritarian pressure.