

A report from the Swedish National China Centre

Swedish experiences of research collaboration with China: Challenges and the way forward

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Summary

- More than 20 000 Swedish-Chinese co-publications have been authored in the past decade and China was Sweden's fifth largest research collaboration partner in 2019. At the same time, however, the Swedish research community has become more aware that collaboration with Chinese counterparts entails both opportunities and certain challenges and risks.
- This study provides an overview and more detailed examples of the challenges that Sweden's researchers and higher education institutions (HEIs) encounter when working with Chinese partners. Its findings are intended to assist HEIs and researchers to assess their own collaborations and identify potential risks.
- The challenges identified include infringements of academic freedom, failure to live up to ethical standards in research, political influencing efforts, undesirable knowledge transfers, lack of reciprocity and lack of transparency.
- Based on these findings, this study recommends that HEIs should: raise awareness among staff members of the challenges that collaborations with Chinese counterparts might involve, improve support structures for researchers engaging in international collaboration, and make use of collegial networks to promote a shift in norms on academic integrity.

Introduction

Like other European and Western countries, Sweden is currently reassessing its research collaboration with China. There has been a large increase in co-publications involving Swedish and Chinese researchers over the past decade, and there were more than 20 000 such publications between 2010 and 2019 (Shih & Schwaag Serger, 2021). The quality and impact of Chinese research have also improved during this time (Pohl et al., 2021), which has increased the interest and perceived need for Swedish higher education institutions (HEIs) to collaborate with China. Motivations for Swedish researchers to collaborate with Chinese counterparts include access to large datasets as well as financial and personnel resources (Shih & Forsberg, forthcoming).

China's government has pursued a policy of rapidly strengthening research and higher education (d'Hooghe & Lammertink, 2020), while at the same time tightening ideological control over HEIs and restrictions on academic freedom (Svensson, 2021). In the light of these developments, the Swedish research community has become more aware that collaborations with Chinese counterparts entail not only opportunities but also certain challenges and risks (cf. d'Hooghe et al., 2018).

How to evaluate and manage opportunities for research collaboration with Chinese counterparts has therefore become a frequent topic for discussion in Sweden in recent years—in HEIs, in research funding organisations and in government agencies. In 2018, for example, the Swedish government commissioned a report on how to promote Swedish-Chinese collaboration in research, innovation and higher education in a way that recognises both the opportunities and the challenges (Schwaag Serger & Shih, 2018).

In its policy paper “Approach to matters relating to China” (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019), the Swedish government highlights the importance of collaboration and of access to China's research and innovation environments, while also acknowledging the challenges related to ethics, academic freedom, intellectual property rights and dual-use technologies; that is, technologies normally developed for civilian purposes but which can also have military applications. According to the government, the responsibility for addressing such challenges lies with HEIs and research-intensive companies, which are encouraged to collaborate closely with each other and with government agencies.

Following these developments, in 2020 the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education and Research (STINT) published “Responsible internationalisation: Guidelines for reflection on international academic collaboration” to support HEIs with “assessing potential risks and difficulties that should be weighed against the opportunities offered” (Shih, Gaunt & Östlund, 2020, p.3). Using these guidelines, HEIs are currently discussing frameworks for assessing and managing international collaborations. For example, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Karolinska Institutet and Lund University are developing a training format to spread awareness among their staff members about “responsible internationalisation” (Shih et al., 2020).

From a European perspective, the STINT guidelines have been identified in a Leiden Asia Centre report (d'Hooghe & Lammertink, 2020) as an example of a comprehensive approach to

managing international collaboration in research and higher education. Germany (German Rectors' Conference, 2020) and the Netherlands (The Hague Centre for Security Studies, 2019) are among the other EU member states that have published similar guidelines. There are also a number of ongoing initiatives by the European Commission, such as its guidelines on tackling foreign interference in research and innovation (R&I), which are currently being drafted, as well as the creation of a knowledge-sharing R&I network on China (EU-KNOC).

The existing literature provides a general idea of the challenges facing Swedish-Chinese research partnerships, but concrete examples or descriptions are relatively rare.¹ This study categorises the challenges faced by researchers and HEIs in Sweden when collaborating with Chinese partners. It makes recommendations on how HEIs can assist researchers to assess their own collaborations and identify potential risks.

Method

For this report, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals based in Swedish HEIs and research funding organizations (administrators, researchers, and senior management representatives). Respondents were selected based on their extensive experience of collaborations with Chinese counterparts. The respondents represent six HEIs and two funding organizations. Interviews were mainly conducted in face-to-face meetings but a small number were held digitally. In the interviews, respondents were asked to describe their experiences of collaborations with Chinese counterparts. They explained what challenges they had encountered and how they and their organisations had addressed these.² Respondents also discussed their attitude to collaborations with and in China. Examples were collected where individual researchers or other staff members had encountered incidents in or problems with their collaborations. To enable an open conversation around wider challenges that other HEIs might relate to, specific examples have been anonymised.

Results

With inspiration from the typology of risks/challenges in higher education and research collaboration with China provided by d'Hooghe and Lammertink (2020, p. 38), we categorized 10 incidents described by our respondents.³ In addition to the challenges mentioned by the respondents, two further challenges discussed in media and other reports are also included to provide a more comprehensive oversight of the issues that might occur in Swedish research collaborations with Chinese partners.

¹ Notable exceptions include a recent evaluation of projects in a bilateral funding programme, which discusses how lack of reciprocity, lack of transparency and ethical challenges affect collaborations (Shih and Forsberg, forthcoming). The current study, however, describes additional types of challenges and additional examples of the challenges described by Shih and Forsberg, including situations that occur outside of the bilateral funding programme.

² This report focuses on the challenges that the respondents have experienced, which should be weighed against the potential benefits of Swedish-Chinese research collaborations.

³ Risks/challenges in HE&R collaboration with China are defined by d'Hooghe and Lammertink as: breaches of academic integrity (infringements on academic freedom, not living up to ethical standards in research, political influence efforts, dual-use and unintended use of findings); breaches of knowledge security (undesirable transfer of knowledge, cyberattacks, espionage, infringements on intellectual property rights); and lack of reciprocity in cooperation (lack of transparency, lack of equal access to research and facilities, non-compliance with contracts). This study discusses lack of reciprocity as a risk/challenge, while it is considered a category of risks/challenges by d'Hooghe and Lammertink.

In total, this report discusses eight challenges: infringements of academic freedom; failure to live up to ethical standards in research; political influencing efforts; lack of reciprocity; lack of transparency; undesirable knowledge transfers; dual-use or unintended use of findings; and espionage (see Table 1).

Table 1: Challenges in research collaborations with China

Challenge	Incident(s) described by respondents
Infringements of academic freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swedish researcher could not conduct research on desired topic in China; no Chinese partner willing to host as the topic was considered too sensitive • Ethnic minority employees were reluctant to return to China when their contracts ended due to concerns about their personal safety
Failure to live up to ethical standards in research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration proposal involved use of a large amount of medical data without patients' consent
Political influencing efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student from Chinese partner HEI questioned map showing Taiwan in a different colour in teaching materials • Teachers from Chinese partner HEIs protested listing of Hong Kong as a "study location" in admissions system • Planned participation by Swedish government representative at joint activity was cancelled, allegedly due to politically motivated interference by Chinese local government
Lack of reciprocity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese partner HEIs did not reply to emails, send course lists, or discuss wording of agreements with their Swedish partner
Lack of transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees had affiliations in China unknown to their Swedish employer • Swedish HEI experienced difficulties interacting with Chinese collaboration facilitator with multiple academic, business and political roles
Undesirable knowledge transfers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese company decided that all project communications should take place on the company's own platform, which was a concern for the Swedish researcher involved
Dual-use or unintended use of findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (No incidents described by respondents)
Espionage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (No incidents described by respondents)

Elaboration on challenges in research collaborations with China

Infringements of academic freedom

Restrictions on academic freedom in China have in recent years limited the possibilities for conducting research and teaching in the country, especially in the social sciences (Svensson, 2021). Our respondents described how topics such as corruption, women's rights and civil society have become more controversial, which has posed problems for researchers at Swedish HEIs. A researcher in the social sciences wanted to conduct field research in China, but none of the existing Chinese partners were willing to host the researcher as the topic was considered too sensitive. Increasingly ideological control of academic research in China means that Swedish researchers might also encounter difficulties obtaining a visa to conduct research there.

Another aspect of infringements of academic freedom in China is related to the situation for academics from ethnic minorities. One respondent described how some Sweden-based Chinese researchers and PhD students from ethnic minorities are now reluctant to return to China due to concerns about their personal safety.

While it is difficult for Swedish research actors to influence the current situation in China, individual researchers can tackle this challenge by selecting non-sensitive topics when conducting research in China, or by selecting locations other than China for their field studies.

Failure to live up to ethical standards in research

Respondents describe how differences in ethical standards sometimes hamper collaborations between Swedish and Chinese partners. For example, a Swedish partner opted out of a proposed collaborative project when it became clear that patient data would be collected in China without the consent of the individuals concerned. Research funding organisations have also seen some examples of so-called ethics dumping, in which project applicants proposed conducting studies in China that would not be allowed in Sweden.

According to our respondents, HEI leaders are increasingly careful to avoid any involvement with research that would not be allowed in Sweden, but some individual researchers consider such a situation to be an opportunity rather than a challenge. Our respondents described how incentive structures for researchers, such as publication requirements, could prompt researchers to exploit legal and ethical grey areas in international collaborations.

One respondent suggested that requesting English translations of research ethics approvals made in China might help to explain how the study in question had been conducted and how data had been collected. In addition, research funding organisations have revised the requirements in their bilateral calls for funding with Chinese counterparts to ensure that where ethical standards differ between countries, the strictest rules should apply (eg. Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education and Research, 2020; Swedish Research Council, 2021).

Political influencing efforts

Several of these situations described involve direct requests from Chinese HEIs for their Swedish partner to modify documents to reflect the Chinese government's view of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Our respondents described several incidents during summer schools on Swedish campuses. Teachers from visiting Chinese HEIs expressed disapproval of their Swedish host's admissions system, for example, where "Hong Kong" was listed as a possible location for previous study. They also complained about students' self-identification as "Hong Kong students" rather than "Chinese students". In another summer school at a Swedish HEI, a student from a partner HEI in China protested the use in class of a map in which Taiwan was depicted in a different colour to China. In another case, on the point of signing a cooperation agreement with a Chinese HEI, the proposed Swedish government representative had their invitation to speak at the signing ceremony suddenly withdrawn.

HEIs describe how their responses have had to take different considerations into account, such as protecting colleagues at Chinese partner HEIs and maintaining friendly relationships with institutions, while also maintaining established positions and values.

Lack of reciprocity

Some respondents described how collaborations with Chinese partners have sometimes been hampered by a low level of engagement by the Chinese side. The Chinese partner has not replied to emails or, when signing new agreements, simply sent the agreement text for signature without any prior negotiation or discussion. This made the Swedish partner feel that the Chinese partner cared little about the joint benefits of the partnership.

Some of this perceived lack of reciprocity could stem from Chinese HEIs becoming more strategic in their choice of partners and international collaborators, while Swedish HEIs seem to have lagged behind in this respect. One respondent expressed concern that Chinese recruitment of young researchers from Swedish HEIs could result in losing out on patent opportunities to China. These findings are in line with the observations of Shih and Forsberg (forthcoming) that the Chinese partners in bilateral collaborations apply for patents more often than their Swedish counterparts.

Our respondents suggested that some of the perceived imbalances in Swedish-Chinese research partnerships could be mitigated by Swedish partners developing a better understanding of how to build relationships in Asia, and a clearer view of their own goals in collaborations. One respondent from a research funding organisation described how some Swedish HEIs had previously collaborated with a Chinese partner "just because they were asked" and did not make an informed decision based on the strengths of the proposed partner. The respondent's perception was that Swedish HEIs are now making more strategic decisions, among other things by reviewing their current partnerships.

Lack of transparency

Swedish HEIs have not always been aware of the Chinese affiliations of some of their staff members. These have sometimes prompted questions about dual loyalties. A related challenge for a Swedish HEI is how to gather the information required to assess their potential and current Chinese collaboration partners. For example, Swedish HEIs find it difficult to interact with Chinese “collaboration facilitators”, who often have multiple academic, business and political roles.

Our respondents also describe how they struggle to understand how their Chinese HEI partners are organised, including the role of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In the interviews, representatives from Swedish HEIs emphasised that they avoided collaborations with Chinese HEIs directly connected with China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) but admitted difficulties assessing the extent of military ties at civilian HEIs.

A perceived lack of transparency is also the reason why the China Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarship programme has recently become the subject of debate. It is not clear to Swedish HEIs whether any data generated within the programme might be used by or transferred to Chinese state entities, and what contractual relationship exists between the CSC and scholarship recipients. For example, China’s Scientific Data Administrative Measures (科学数据管理办法), which were put in place in 2018, state that research institutions must submit scientific data generated in government-funded programmes to designated data centres (Hogan Lovell, 2018).

Among the actions taken by Swedish HEIs to overcome this lack of transparency are: asking government agencies, such as the Security Services or the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and its missions abroad, for more information about an individual; and requesting English translations of documents.

Undesirable knowledge transfers

Amid increased awareness of China’s ambitions to acquire technology and innovations, our respondents described how they are mindful when managing partnerships to prevent any undesirable transfers of knowledge. In one example, a Swedish researcher who had entered into a collaborative partnership with a Chinese company was told that all internal communications should take place on the company’s own platform, which made the researcher uncomfortable.

In this case, the Swedish HEI’s solution was to allow their researcher to use a designated computer solely for communication on the collaboration in question. As a more general solution, one respondent described how their HEI has now adopted specific policies on what electronic equipment may be taken on trips abroad.

Other challenges

The fact that some related types of challenges were not mentioned by our respondents does not mean that they do not occur in Swedish research collaborations with Chinese partners.

Such challenges include dual-use and unintended use of findings as well as espionage. However, it should be noted that given the long timespan from research to application, and the open sharing of data within academia, it is difficult to identify or prove the existence of any such incidents.

According to the Swedish Security Services, “Russia, China and Iran collect information and know-how from Swedish universities and institutes for higher education and research. They also engage in attempts to recruit personnel and to influence Swedish researchers” (Swedish Security Services, 2020). A report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) investigating peer-reviewed literature co-authored by scientists affiliated with universities linked to the PLA found that Sweden ranked sixth among those countries with the largest number of such publications (Joske, 2018). The Swedish government is currently reviewing legislative amendments to better protect technical trade secrets, an initiative that has been publicly welcomed by HEIs (Swedish Ministry of Justice, 2020).

There has been public discussion in neighbouring Scandinavian countries about espionage in the wind power sector involving HEIs. In 2015, Norway expelled two scientists affiliated with a Chinese HEI over fears that their work could be used “for military purposes in other countries” (Wee, Campbell & Solsvik, 2015). In Denmark there were media reports in early 2021 that eight academics working in HEIs or wind energy companies were part of China’s Thousand Talents Plan, which the FBI believes has been set up specifically to steal research (Stryhn Kjeldtoft, 2021b). One of the HEIs in question found that an employee had filed patent applications in China without informing his employer (Stryhn Kjeldtoft, 2021a).

Best practices

This report has demonstrated how Swedish HEIs encounter a range of challenges in connection with their China collaborations. Some of these challenges, such as lack of transparency in China or incentive structures that prompt researchers to exploit ethical grey areas, are beyond the control of Swedish HEIs. This report therefore focuses on the examples provided by our respondents of what HEIs might do or have done to address the remaining challenges, which could serve as best practices for others.

Most respondents report that their HEIs have become more selective in recent years when entering into or deepening partnerships with Chinese institutions. A first step in this process seems to be to clearly define the HEI's own goals in collaborations with Chinese partners, and to choose "fewer but better" projects. In developing this idea further into a cost-benefit analysis, some HEIs have adopted new work routines for assessing proposed international collaborations or set up working groups to ensure that collaborations are conducted in a way that reduces unnecessary risks. To ensure that all staff members are on board, HEIs also organise internal training to increase awareness of the challenges that arise in collaborations with Chinese partners.

Another solution favoured by some Swedish HEIs is to avoid collaborations with certain categories of partners in China. For example, some have ruled out all or certain kinds of collaborations with Chinese companies due to a perceived increase in party-state control over commercial entities. Our respondents discussed how HEI leaders are becoming more cautious about reputational risk, as collaborating with Chinese partners has become more controversial in recent years. Swedish public opinion has shifted towards a more negative perception of China shifted (Rühlig et al., 2020), and HEIs could now face criticism from politicians and in the media for collaborating with Chinese partners (e.g. Déak, Sjöberg & Andreasson, 2020; Nilsson, 2021). Some HEIs are also making efforts to mitigate information security risks in connection with their collaborations, such as adopting and enforcing policies on what electronic equipment to take when travelling abroad, and being vigilant about what communication channels to use for interactions with partners in China.

While each HEI needs to design and implement its own measures for managing collaborations, discussions between HEIs with the aim of finding common ground would also be beneficial. This would avoid situations where some HEIs or researchers enjoy a competitive advantage from engaging in collaborations that others have ruled out for ethical or security reasons.

Recommendations

Based on the best practices shared by our respondents, three general recommendations could be valuable for Swedish HEIs when managing international collaborations in general and collaborations in China in particular:

- **Raise awareness among staff members of the challenges involved in collaborating with Chinese counterparts** and how unnecessary risks can be reduced. This could be done for example by providing information and training materials or in seminars. The goal would be to enable both administrators and researchers to make a more comprehensive assessment of the benefits and risks involved with a proposed collaboration, and to consider how factors such as academic integrity, knowledge security and transparency might affect the partnership. One example would be to raise awareness of the institution's policies on what electronic equipment to take when travelling abroad.
- **Improve the support structures put in place for researchers engaging in international collaborations**, for example, by improving the advice available to researchers when initiating or developing collaborative projects. This would help researchers to define their own goals for the collaboration and consider how these contribute to the institution as a whole. HEIs could also encourage researchers to learn more about their proposed partners and the wider context, for example by requesting English translations of Chinese documents.
- **Make use of collegial networks to promote a shift in norms on academic integrity** within the research community, thereby fostering a culture in which more researchers take ethical concerns into account when conducting research abroad. This could be done by enabling a continuing discussion between HEIs in new or existing groups and networks on how to address the challenges of international collaborations.

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