

## Forschung und Lehre

# Debating Academic Autonomy in the German-Speaking Field of China Studies: An Assessment

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### Summary

Geopolitical tensions between China and the West, and hardening authoritarianism in China, have sparked a debate in the German-speaking field of China Studies on how individual scholars and higher education organizations ought to position themselves and how to ensure academic autonomy. Most participants agree that the Chinese government's increasing domestic repression and growing inclination to project state punishments abroad and onto foreign researchers are major problems for China scholarship. However, one side of the debate places China scholars and universities that collaborate with China under suspicion of self-censorship, while the other side fails to address how China scholars can maintain autonomy in an environment of increased Chinese assertiveness. We suggest the following paths to strengthen academic autonomy in the German-speaking China Studies field, and in the process of cooperation between other disciplines and Chinese counterparts:

- Funding for China Studies needs to be increased and existing China expertise should be more comprehensively used in academic institutions collaborating with China, as well as in government and business organizations.
- In the China field, we advocate for continued exchange with Chinese colleagues wherever possible. International cooperation with China and other countries with problematic records in academic freedom and human rights should, during all its stages, routinely be accompanied by individuals with respective country expertise. These specialists can help to assess whether the type of cooperation is in line with principles of academic freedom or whether potential issues of dual-use technology might occur.
- The issues of access (including visas) for scholars who want to do field research in China and restrictions (including sanctions) against scholars directly affects the generation of reliable and open knowledge on China. This is a public good of strategic importance and belongs on the agenda of diplomatic engagements with Chinese counterparts at the national and EU levels.
- Foreign government and private funding to public universities and research institutes must be subject to public scrutiny and therefore should be made transparent.

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