

Increasing constraints on knowledge production on China

Why knowledge production is important

Research constitutes an important knowledge source for understanding foreign countries. Yet researchers on China often face challenges for conducting research, especially on sensitive topics. This policy brief uncovers decreasing knowledge production among researchers of Chinese politics outside of China and reveals significant constraints, both inside China, but also abroad. These constraints reduce quality of information as less empirical evidence is shared, specifically on sensitive issues.

Low quality of information has profound consequences: Policymakers and civil servants may inadvertently base decisions on false assumptions, misguided risk calculations, or just not be able to see the full range of policy options. People of Asian descent can face harassment and violence. Constraints on knowledge production that reduce quality of information about China is neither in the interest of China nor any other country.

Decline in knowledge production

Researchers on China often face challenges for conducting research, especially on sensitive topics. Many topics related to China have become more sensitive over time, not only inside China, but also abroad. Academic and non-academic experts on Chinese politics have faced significantly more constraints over time, especially in the United States, but also in Europe, which is the focus of this brief.

¹ For more details see working paper.

To detect trends in knowledge production we examine publicly available publications on Google Scholar and conducted an online expert survey of academic and non-academic researchers of Chinese politics connected globally. We detect a worrisome drop in the number of experts and publications, especially on sensitive topics. Researchers affiliated with institutions in the United States face the greatest challenges to freedom for research, followed by the EU+ (including Norway and Switzerland). While researchers used to predominantly face constraints inside China, they now increasingly face challenges in the countries they work in. Actors from China do play a role abroad, but non-state actors identified as Chinese are significantly more active compared to actors identified as being connected to the Chinese state. Not surprisingly, the situation is reversed inside China, where state actors greatly outnumber researchers.

Key Messages

- Knowledge production has significantly declined over time
- Both international and domestic factors in the country of workplace reduce knowledge production
- State and non-state actors unaffiliated with China play a significant role
- China research is becoming more politicised with actors outnumbering researchers



The European context

Since 2023, the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) has been expanding its capacity to identify and understand foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). One important aspect that is not often discussed in the context of FIMI is knowledge production. Researchers at Universities, colleges, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, consultancies, government agencies, and news media organizations play an important role in the creation and dissemination of critical knowledge about China. Although FIMI is usually understood as a deliberate act by authoritarian states inside the European Union, we find that a variety of direct and indirect factors are crucial in narrowing the amount and space for knowledge production over time, both when conducting fieldwork in China and outside of China. A clearer understanding of the processes would allow for better protection and support of researchers in order to produce in-depth understandings of critical topics about China.

Decline in publications

Publicly available Google Scholar publications by the network of researchers of Chinese politics has significantly declined over time after a steep increase until 2020 (Figure 2). China's opening up after the Cultural Revolution provided new opportunities for scholars to conduct research on Chinese social science research and along with further opening up and increasing attention towards China scholarly publications increased. However, more active rejection of "Western" social science research began with the leadership change from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2013.² Despite these pressures publications increased until declining sharply in 2021, around the time of the pandemic.

Scholarly output over time (1970–2024)

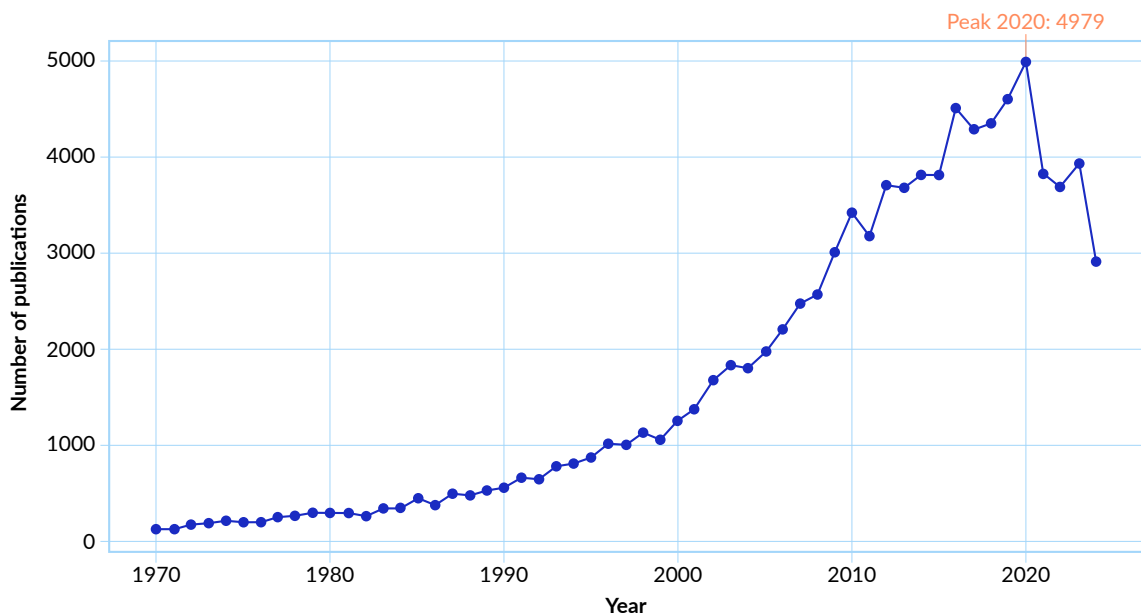


Figure 1. Publications on Google Scholar 1970-2024. Source: *OpenAlex*.

² Chloé Froissart, "Power and Knowledge in 21st Century China: Producing Social Sciences," *China Perspectives* 2018, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.8330>

The reduction in knowledge production is most visible among authors, which dropped from a high of 865 contributors to research on Chinese politics in 2017 to only 667 in 2024 (Figure 3). Starting around 2017 politics became increasingly sensitive resulting in less data production, with even historical research becoming highly politicised.³ We thus see an overall decrease in the number of publications in social science research and history (see Figure 4). Although people across the globe increasingly see China as the world's top economic power and there is thus a demand for information,⁴ empirically based research on China is decreasing in parallel, thus providing less empirically conducted scientific knowledge on China. Overall, this decreases quality of information with profound political and societal consequences.

Number of authors publishing each year

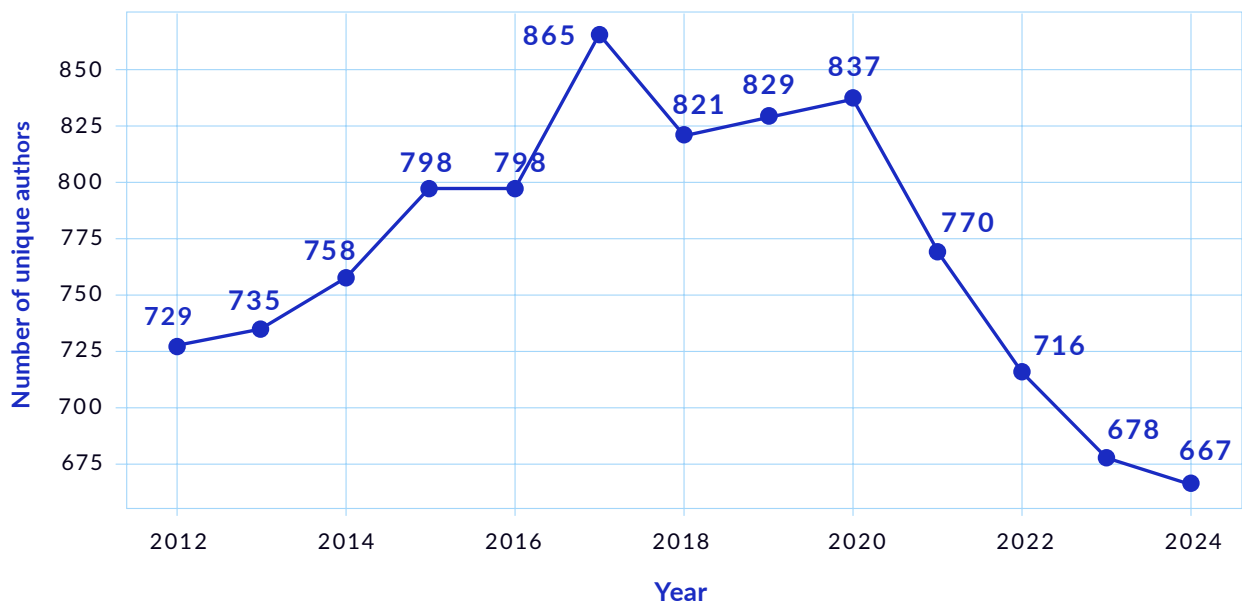


Figure 2. Number of Authors Publishing on Google Scholar, 2012-2024. Source: *OpenAlex*.

³ Trinkle, Garten et al, "How to successfully carry out research on China in challenging times – a perspective from junior scholars", www.scripts-berlin.eu/transfer-activities/read/blog/Think-Piece-14_Trinkle-et-al_China/index.html. Stockmann, Daniela and Ting Luo. 2025. *Governing Digital China* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

⁴ Pew Research Center, "China's Economic Power and Economic Relations," Pew Research Center, July 15, 2025 www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/07/15/chinas-economic-power-and-economic-relations/.

Trends of top 7 topics over time

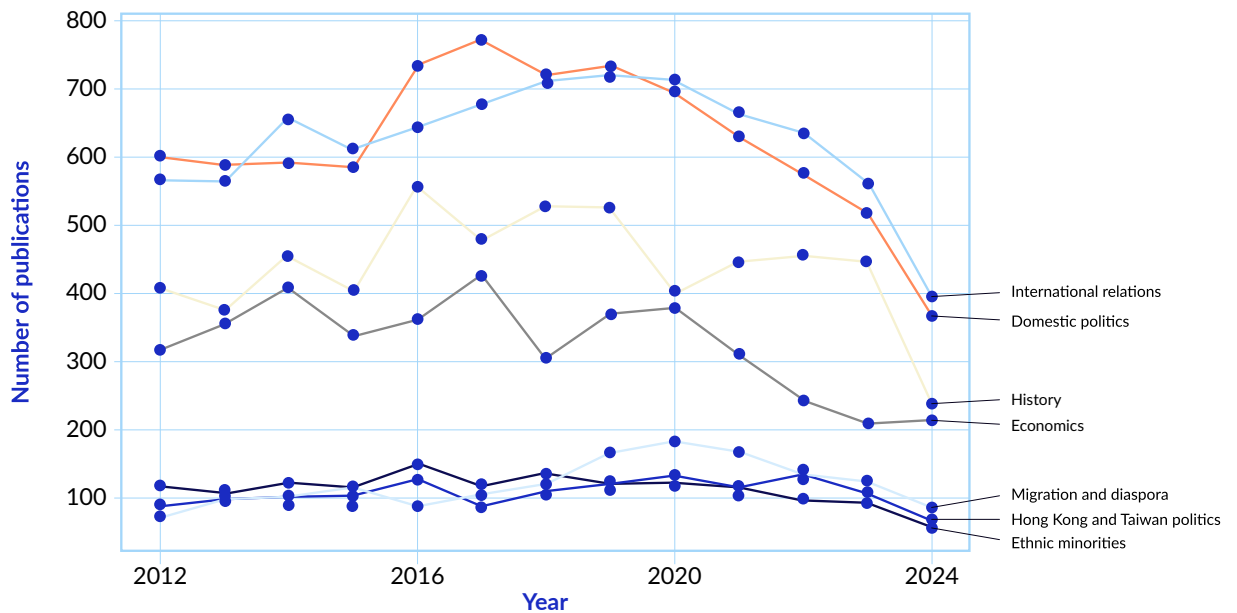


Figure 3. Trends of Key Topics Related to China, 2012-2024. Source: OpenAlex.

Increasing challenges to knowledge production

Out of 341 respondents 271 worked in academic institutions and 70 worked in non-academic settings in 2025. Researchers were affiliated with institutions inside the United States, the EU+ (including Norway and Switzerland), UK, Pacific (New Zealand or Australia), and South-East Asia.⁵

Researchers working in the United States were more likely to report challenges to academic freedom compared to an earlier survey conducted predominantly among US researchers.⁶ Over time, researchers have reported more challenges, both inside China, but also in the country where their work was located. This was the case for both academics working for universities or colleges, and for non-academic researchers at think tanks, non-governmental organisations, consultancies, government agencies, and news media organisations. Because the sample of non-academic researchers was comparatively small, we concentrate on academics below, pointing out differences to non-academic researchers when those are most significant.⁷

Challenges inside China

Compared to an earlier survey conducted among China experts mostly in the United States⁸, the situation had significantly worsened by 2025. 49% of academic and 39% of non-academic researchers report experiencing at least one of the things listed in Figure 5 in the last ten years regarding their work on China (academics: 53% US, 37% EU; non-academics: 50% US, 33% EU). As shown in figure 5, the most commonly reported challenge is having Chinese friends or acquaintances contacted by authorities and having interview subjects withdrawn from an

⁵ See footnote 1 for details on methods.

⁶ Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex, "Repressive Experiences among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data," *The China Quarterly* 242 (June 2020): 349-75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741019000365>.

⁷ 12 out of 70 respondents were based in the US while 18 were based in the EU.

⁸ Greitens and Truex, "Repressive Experiences among China Scholars."

interview at the last minute without clear explanation. Across regions, researchers from the United States were more likely to face challenges, followed by those located in the EU with some exceptions: US scholars were more likely denied a visa compared to those working at an EU University or College; 17% of non-academic researchers working for an organization inside the EU were asked to cooperate with authorities compared to 8% of US non-academic researchers.

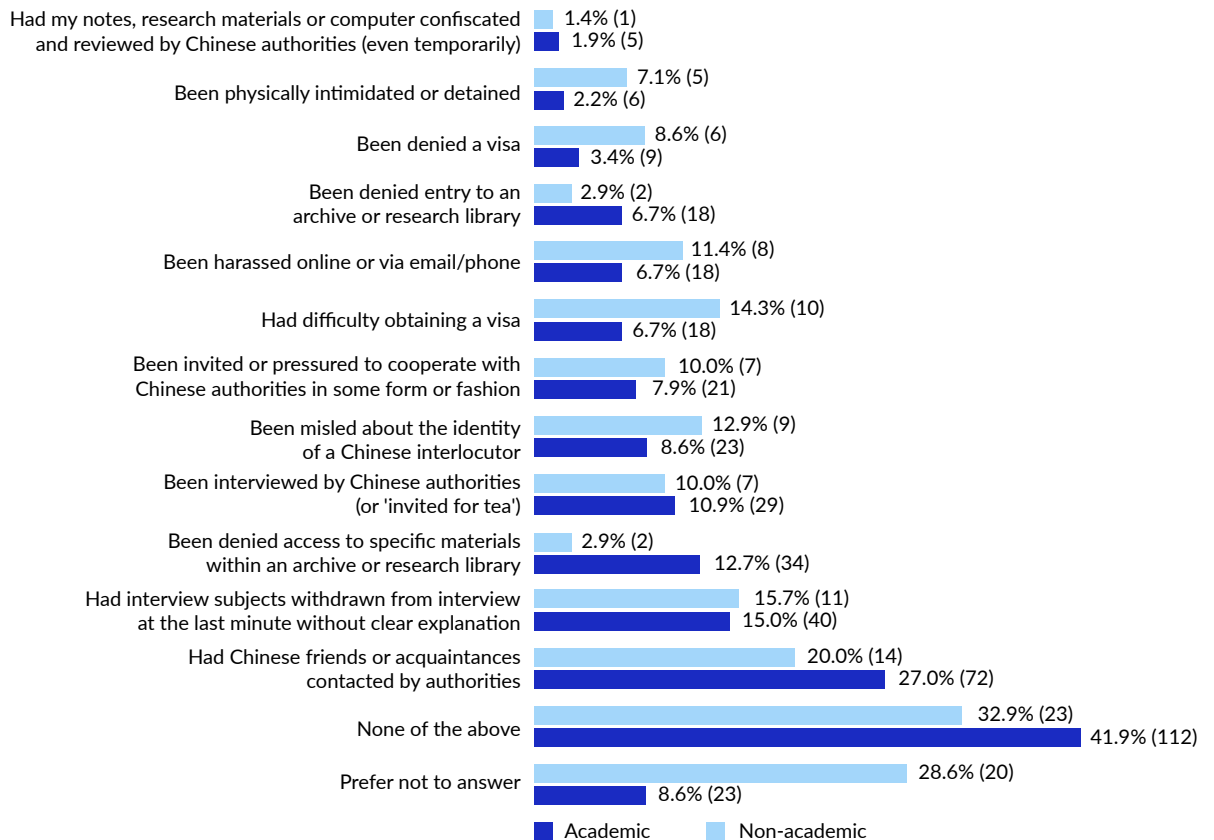


Figure 4. Challenges Inside China. Source: *China Expert Survey 2025*.

Note: Respondents could select multiple options.

When facing challenges listed in Figure 4, actors exerting pressure greatly outnumber researchers. In the survey, many researchers provided more detailed open-ended explanations of the incidents. Scholars reported 6 and non-academic researchers reported 11 incidents on average since 2015. During this time academics had contact with, on average, 2 or 3 different actors (2.6), while non-academic researchers had contact with 4 to 5 (4.4) different actors, because they reported more incidents.⁹ In addition to specific actors, researchers also frequently mention the atmosphere in China leading to concerns about safety among collaborators and research participants.

In light of less opportunities for data collection, researchers have travelled significantly less after Covid compared to the pre-Covid period.¹⁰ More than half of academics (54%) and 33% of non-academic researchers (55% for US-academics, 47% for EU-academics; 17% for US-non-academics, 50% for EU-non-academics) have resorted to at least one of the following strategies.

⁹ See Working paper for details.

¹⁰ See Working paper for details.

Challenges in the country of the researcher’s workplace

Challenges outside of China have become a major constraint for knowledge production in recent years.¹¹ 30% of scholars and 31% of non-academic researchers reported to have experienced at least one of the constraints listed in the country where they work (Figure 6). For non-academic researchers the situation is worse compared to academics. This especially applies to individual personal insults (17% from non-academics, 25% from US, 22% from EU) and 13% experienced reputational attacks (17% from both US and EU). 7% reported other types of pressure (0% from US, 11% from EU), and 6% experienced direct threats or intimidation (8% from US, 6% from EU). 6% reported experiences of dogpiling (8% from US, 0% from EU). Online and offline stalking and doxxing was not reported among non-academic researchers in the United States or Europe (4% reported online/offline stalking in other regions, but no one doxxing). This points towards stalking and doxxing being specifically targeted at academics. Among academics, the situation has become more challenging in the United States except for dogpiling, stalking, and doxxing, which is more likely in the EU.

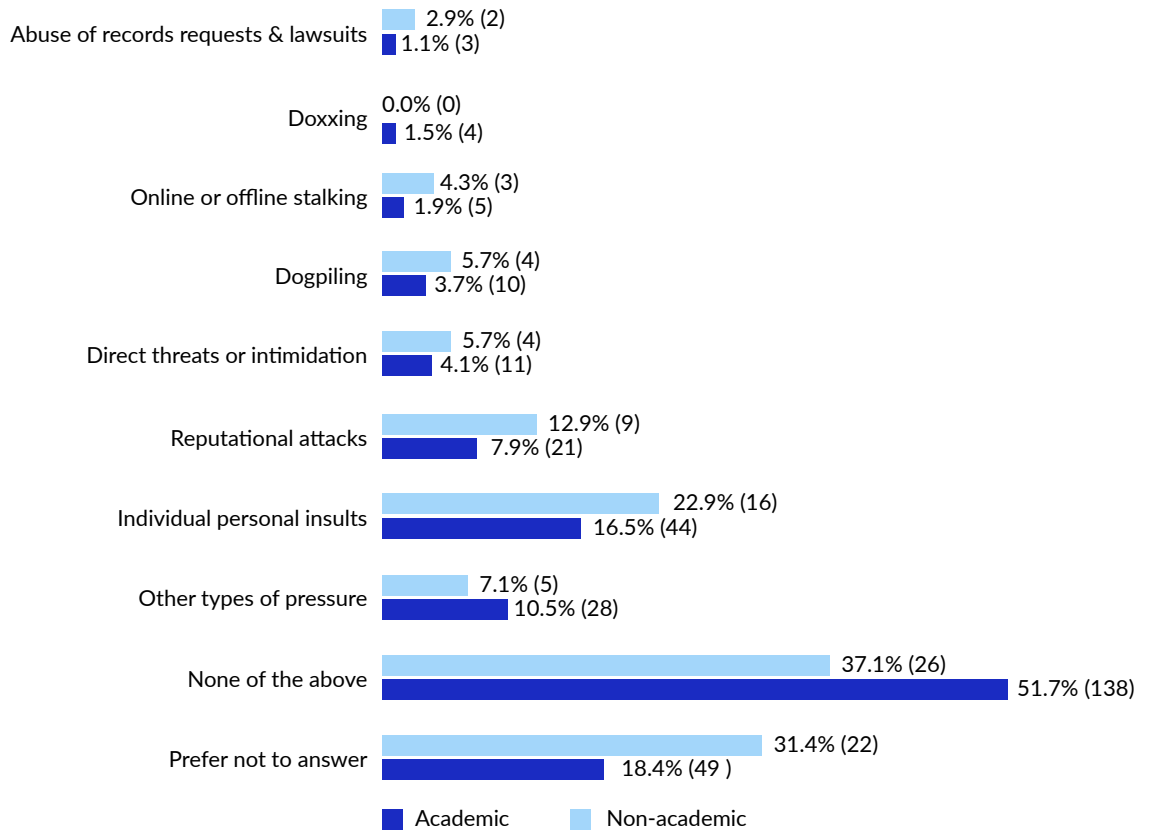


Figure 5. Online and Offline Pressures in Country of Workplace. Source: *China Expert Survey 2025*. Note: Respondents could select multiple options.

When facing the constraints during the past 10 years listed in Figure 5, researchers reported about two actors involved. Researchers were especially likely to be targeted in their country of workplace by non-state actors identified as non-Chinese.¹²

¹¹ Based on background conversations with scholars prior to the survey. Greitens and Treux did not include questions about the situation in the country of workplace because it was not considered a main challenge at the time: Greitens and Truex, “Repressive Experiences among China Scholars.”

¹² See Working paper for details.

In addition, researchers also report pressures at their workplace. 27% of scholars note additional administrative burden or approval requirements that increase time and resources spent (33% for US, 20% for EU). 14% report being discouraged or questioned by colleagues to work on China (14% for both US and EU). Other issues, such as restricted access to state funding for travel (10% for US, 2% for EU), institutional ethics review problems (3% for US, no reported cases from EU-based respondent) were reported by smaller shares of respondents. Not surprisingly, researchers working at other organisations than Universities and Colleges also face less administrative burden or approval requirements.



When developing policies:

- **Think about quality of information on China.** Engage with sources, data collection, and engage with uncertainty in empirical knowledge when interpreting information.
- **Consider that state and non-state actors are involved.**
- **Consider measures that allow temporary diplomatic status to researchers for travel to China:** even travel without data collection can improve understanding of context.
- **Create incentives for research on China.**
- **Engage in agreements that reduce barriers for researchers in the social sciences:** China has selectively engaged in bilateral talks on scientific cooperation with countries.
- **Safeguard open and critical discussion that allow researchers to not take political stances:** separate normative discussions from empirical discussions more explicitly, both when presenting research to broader audiences, but also within research settings.

Disclaimer

Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or REA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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