

Research Note

China Research, Politics and Expertise in Germany: Some Reflections on a Tension-Fraught Field

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Abstract

China research has always been characterized by a pronounced dependency on politics, significantly shaping its institutional structures, thematic orientations, and methodological approaches. Using the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949 as a case study, this research note systematically explores four central dimensions: the evolution of China research from philological origins toward interdisciplinary, politically engaged scholarship; macro-political contexts shaping research opportunities and agendas; scholars' strategies for balancing collaboration and integrity vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China; and the evolving advisory role of China researchers within German policy-making. By historicizing these complex interactions and critically reflecting upon current ethical debates, the analysis highlights the urgent need for clearer ethical standards and methodological transparency amid escalating geopolitical tensions and authoritarian challenges, thus preserving rigorous and independent scholarship as indispensable for informed policy-making and credible public discourse.

Keywords: China Research, German Sinology, Politics, Academia, Research Ethics, Geopolitical Tensions

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Introduction: Approaching the Relationship Between China Research and Politics

From the 19th century to the present, the academic study of China – referred to variably as “China research”, “China studies” or more traditionally “Sinology” – has been profoundly influenced by the political contexts in which it has developed. As Mechthild Leutner aptly emphasizes in her insightful research note, *Zehn Thesen zur historischen Entwicklung der Chinastudien in Deutschland*, China research has always exhibited a pronounced dependency on politics, affecting its institutional structures, thematic orientations, and methodological frameworks (Leutner 2015: 141). Over time, the field has evolved significantly, shifting from classical philological roots concerned primarily with ancient texts toward an interdisciplinary approach integrating political science, sociology, and economics.¹ Throughout this evolution, German scholars have faced a fundamental challenge: navigating the tension between rigorous academic inquiry and the political demands associated with advisory roles, institutional constraints, and the complexities inherent in conducting research within the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The German federal government’s recent “Strategy on China” exemplifies the urgency and fragility inherent in this tension, explicitly advocating for “solid, current, and independent expertise on China” within universities and think tanks (Federal Government 2023: 61). Simultaneously, it urges universities and scientific organizations to ensure that cooperation with Chinese institutions upholds the “freedom of science, research, and academic teaching”, emphasizing transparency, public scrutiny, and institutional accountability (ibid.: 44). This challenge has intensified under Xi Jinping’s rule, where heightened ideological vigilance and increasingly restrictive measures have severely limited research opportunities, especially for scholars investigating politically sensitive topics (Chen 2024; Schubert 2024). Consequently, China researchers find themselves at the center of an increasingly polarized debate: Should they sustain dialogue and collaboration at virtually any cost, or should they adopt a more critical stance openly acknowledging the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) tightening grip on academic discourse (Fulda et al. 2022; Schubert/ Alpermann 2022)? This polarization foregrounds controversies around perceived self-censorship and intensifies ethical concerns regarding the feasibility and legitimacy of conducting field research under authoritarian conditions (Habich-Sobiegalla/Steinhardt 2022; Klotzbücher 2022; Seiwert/Kinzelbach 2023).

These tensions highlight the complex interdependence between politics, research, and institutional practices. Against the backdrop of Cold War dynamics and shifting cycles in Sino-Western relations, the opportunities to study contemporary China, the permissibility of research topics, and the selection of methodological approaches

1 For an introduction to the history of China studies in Germany, see in addition to Leutner (2015) especially Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2022).

have all been repeatedly renegotiated. Yet, this relationship has never been one-directional. Whether serving as governmental advisors, acting as policy analysts or engaging publicly as intellectuals addressing contemporary issues, German China scholars have significantly influenced policy decisions and public debate alike. Government institutions, media outlets, and business communities actively seek their expertise to better understand China's domestic policies and international strategies, inevitably drawing scholars deeper into the political complexities of Sino-Western relations (Messingschlager 2024b).

Against this intricate historical backdrop, this historiographical research note critically analyzes the multidimensional interplay between China research and politics, focusing on the development of China research in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949. The analysis unfolds along four clearly delineated dimensions: First, how contemporary Chinese politics transitioned from the periphery of classical Sinology to a core focus of interdisciplinary China studies. Second, how macro-political forces such as Cold War tensions, bilateral diplomatic agreements, and geopolitical shifts decisively shaped institutional structures, research opportunities, and thematic priorities. Third, how scholars and institutions have navigated their engagement with the PRC, balancing between close collaboration, deliberate distance, or cautious pragmatism aimed at safeguarding autonomy while ensuring necessary access. Fourth, how German China scholars evolved from academic observers into influential policy advisors, shaping public opinion and governmental policies on issues ranging from economic cooperation and human rights to technological security.

Across these four dimensions, a consistent pattern emerges: academic engagement with China unfolds within a perpetually shifting field of tension, in which scholarly independence and practical cooperation uneasily coexist. Recent developments, notably sanctions against European research institutes critical of the CCP, underscore the pressing need for clearer ethical guidelines to safeguard researchers, ensure transparency, and maintain the integrity of academic inquiry. Amid rising pressures from Chinese authorities and growing scrutiny from Western policymakers, scholars increasingly advocate for collectively articulated ethical standards to address these complex challenges transparently and consistently (Habich-Sobiegalla/ Steinhardt 2022).

In short, this contribution reconstructs the historical trajectory of German China research, tracing its transformation from a predominantly philological endeavor into a dynamic field shaped profoundly by geopolitical interests, authoritarian governance, and global economic interdependencies. Reflecting upon seven decades of Sino-German academic interactions, it critically examines how scholars, think tanks, and institutions have navigated their complex relationships with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), underscoring the enduring challenges that arise whenever scholarly inquiry intersects directly with political realities. Ultimately, this research note aims not only to elucidate these historical dynamics but also to foreground the

distinct ethical and methodological challenges that characterize contemporary scholarship, thereby fostering a nuanced and informed debate about the present and future of China research in Germany.

From Philology to Politics: Embracing Contemporary China

For much of the early postwar era in West Germany, contemporary Chinese politics occupied only a marginal position within academic Sinology. Many senior scholars of the 1950s and 1960s focused primarily on classical texts and premodern history, regarding the People's Republic of China and its revolutionary politics as overly ideological and thus ill-suited to what they saw as "objective" scholarship (Leutner 2015: 148–150). This attitude stemmed from the inherited philological ethos of the discipline, which emphasized linguistic rigor and historical exegesis, as well as from a Cold War climate that cast detailed inquiries into a Communist state as politically fraught. In that environment, Sinology in West Germany presented itself as a neutral field bound to textual traditions, thereby evading what its practitioners deemed too topical or politicized – namely, Mao's radical transformations. The result was an often stark divide between Sinology's classical-linguistic focus and emerging social-scientific approaches that sought to engage with contemporary Chinese society, mass campaigns, ideology, and political change.

An important early exception was the Hamburg-based Sinologist Wolfgang Franke, who from 1950 onward argued that neglecting the PRC's current realities meant failing to understand China's broader cultural and social transformations. At his institute, he deliberately shifted the curriculum so that students learned modern Chinese before classical language, an unconventional pedagogy that exemplified his conviction that present-day developments deserved equal scholarly attention (Messingschlager 2024a). In his inaugural lecture at Hamburg University in 1951, Franke explicitly advocated for opening Sinology toward an interdisciplinary approach that incorporated methodologies from archaeology, history, and philosophy, clearly opposing the dominant philological tradition in Germany (Franke 1952). This innovative stance sharply contrasted with positions taken at other institutions, notably Munich University under Erich Haenisch, who explicitly rejected the introduction of modern Chinese into curricula as "unscientific", firmly adhering to a strictly philological orientation (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 49; Messingschlager 2024a).

Despite Franke's progressive stance, he remained relatively isolated within the broader Sinological community throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Thus, it was political scientists rather than classical Sinologists who began to systematically examine contemporary Chinese politics during this period. In the 1960s, Jürgen Domes emerged as a key proponent of "gegenwartsbezogene China-Forschung" (contemporary-oriented China research), situating the Chinese Communist Party's organizational structure, elite rivalries, and ideological campaigns at the heart of his

empirical inquiries.² His early publications, notably *Von der Volkskommune zur Krise in China* (1964) and *Die Ära Mao Tse-tung* (1971), deployed data-driven methods that departed sharply from the hermeneutic focus on classical texts. Domes' endeavors at the Free University of Berlin and later in Saarbrücken institutionalized the study of contemporary Chinese politics in West German higher education and paved the way for a broader realignment that would see politics become an increasingly vital research field.

By the late 1960s, several convergent factors sparked a decisive paradigm shift. Exposure to American-style "China Studies", which integrated politics and sociology, combined with a new generation of scholars keen to investigate Mao-era campaigns and early reform efforts, prompted West German universities to expand their programs. Particularly significant in this context, as Mechthild Leutner points out, were figures such as Hellmut Wilhelm, himself a student of Otto Franke, the so-called "Nestor of German Sinology". This interdisciplinary and politically engaged approach, introduced in the United States, was effectively re-imported into German academia, marking a substantial turning point (Leutner 2015: 150).

Additional impetus came from broader geopolitical developments, including Sino-American rapprochement and West Germany's diplomatic recognition of the PRC in 1972. Private foundations such as the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk increasingly supported interdisciplinary "Area Studies" models, facilitating institutional innovations. At the Ruhr University Bochum, the newly established Faculty of East Asian Studies under Wolfgang Franke's former student Bodo Wiethoff introduced parallel professorships in language, literature, history, economics, and politics, signifying a conscious move toward comprehensive regional expertise and a more interdisciplinary approach (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 50–52). Meanwhile, the Free University of Berlin, in the wake of the 1968 student movement, reorganized its East Asian Institute to include specialized positions for modern Chinese politics and devoted more coursework to topics such as CCP governance, policy-making, and ideology.

Beyond the universities, a cluster of policy-oriented think tanks emerged or expanded their remit in ways that fostered rigorous analysis of modern China. The Hamburg-based Institute for Asian Studies (Institut für Asienkunde, IfA) began publishing *China aktuell* and supported new research on the PRC's domestic and foreign policies. The Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien (BIOst) in Cologne, founded in 1961, widened its Soviet-centered scope to include the PRC, particularly after 1966. The Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Ebenhausen, also established in the early 1960s, produced influential policy analyses that positioned China's reforms and international ambitions within broader strategic debates. Scholars such as Oskar Weggel (IfA), Joachim Glaubitz (SWP) and Dieter Heinzig (BIOst) gained visibility in academic and policy circles.

2 Cf. the author's telephone and written interview with Marie-Luise Domes-Näth conducted in May 2022.

These institutions, operating at the intersection of scholarship and policy advice, helped nurture a generation of researchers committed to empirically grounded, politically relevant China expertise (Messingschlager 2024b).

In the German Democratic Republic, China research underwent an ideologically distinct but parallel evolution. Initially, GDR scholars viewed Mao's China as a socialist counterpart to be praised, yet the Sino-Soviet rift of the 1960s led to a more critical approach framed by Soviet-aligned Marxist-Leninist interpretations. Rather than dissolving China studies programs outright, institutions like Humboldt University's Section for Asian Studies introduced courses examining Maoist policies through a lens that conformed to prevailing socialist doctrines. This perspective, while ideologically circumscribed, nonetheless engaged systematically with contemporary politics in China. Even where official guidelines mandated criticism of Mao's "cult of personality", GDR-based sinologists such as Eduard Erkes and Siegfried Behrsing continued to influence teaching on modern China, showing that both East and West German contexts ultimately contributed to the field's heightened interest in current affairs by the late 1970s (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 56, 58).

From the 1980s onward, the emphasis on Chinese politics intensified, propelled by Deng Xiaoping's market-oriented reforms, the country's rising global profile, and the political shock of the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Research agendas diversified to include elite politics, minority policy, civil-military relations, and evolving legal frameworks. Scholars such as Jürgen Domes, Thomas Heberer, Eberhard Sandschneider, Thomas Scharping and Mechthild Leutner embraced a more eclectic methodological toolkit that combined historical depth with sociopolitical inquiry, and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's work on historiography and legitimacy discourses further bridged the gap between historical and contemporary approaches (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1984). Policy think tanks like SWP and BIOst broadened their portfolios, publishing analyses on human rights, administrative reforms, and China's budding legal system. As a result, the line separating Sinology and political science blurred, and a new generation of China specialists emerged with a shared focus on contemporary realities.³

By the early 21st century, politics had become a cornerstone of China research, reflected in the creation of chairs dedicated specifically to contemporary Chinese politics at major universities such as Berlin, Duisburg, and Tübingen. Scholars including Sebastian Heilmann, Gunter Schubert, Kristin Shi-Kupfer, and Björn Alpermann have investigated everything from party institutions and cadre management to state-society relations under Xi Jinping, employing comparative frameworks that situate China's authoritarian governance alongside global political trends. This approach, however, has also prompted deeper ethical concerns about

3 On the state of social-science research on China around the turn of the millennium, cf. Thomas Scharping, *Die sozialwissenschaftliche China-Forschung: Rückblick und Ausblick* (Kölner China-Studien Online, no. 1, 2000).

data reliability and the broader question of how a powerful party-state shapes the terms under which it can be studied (Alpermann 2022).

As this brief historical overview illustrates, the integration of political analysis into German China research evolved from a peripheral interest into a central pillar of Sinology and related disciplines. This transformation was neither linear nor uncontroversial: Cold War anxieties, disciplinary disputes, institutional reforms, and international scholarly exchanges all shaped the extent to which political themes could be explored. Nevertheless, by the turn of the millennium, a broad scholarly consensus had emerged that understanding contemporary China fundamentally required engaging with its political dynamics. This paradigmatic shift established the foundation for the politically attuned and socially engaged scholarship that now characterizes German China studies.

Geopolitical Shifts and Internal Dynamics: How Politics Mold China Research

This disciplinary trajectory, however, has always been closely intertwined with the broader macro-political environment. Academic inquiry into China in Germany has never occurred in isolation; rather, from the earliest postwar years onward, it evolved within the political architecture of a divided Germany, the wider context of Cold War geopolitics, and subsequently the shifting currents of global power relations (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, research into contemporary Chinese history and Mao Zedong's China remained marginal and was approached with considerable caution. The few Sinological institutes that survived or were re-established in West Germany predominantly concentrated on classical and pre-modern China, deliberately steering clear of contemporary political controversies. Scholars who ventured into an examination of Maoist developments risked being labeled as "communist sympathizers" – a considerable threat, given the prevailing anti-communist climate and the lack of formal diplomatic relations between West Germany and the People's Republic of China until 1972. This cautious and conservative stance was further reinforced by the earlier exodus of talented Sinologists under the Nazi regime, which severely weakened the discipline's capacity for intellectual renewal (Messingschlager 2024a).

By contrast, the German Democratic Republic formally recognized the PRC as early as 1949, aligning ideologically with China as part of the socialist bloc under Soviet leadership. Yet East German scholars also found themselves navigating shifting ideological demands, particularly after the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. The ideological divide between East and West thus explicitly shaped research agendas: West German scholars faced political suspicion and potential isolation when studying Maoist China, while their East German counterparts, despite formal diplomatic recognition, were compelled to align their analyses closely with Soviet ideological positions. Paradoxically, however, this ideological rupture drove East

German institutions – particularly Humboldt University’s Section for Asian Studies – to engage more directly and systematically with contemporary political developments in the PRC. They analyzed Mao’s “deviant socialism” within an explicitly Marxist-Leninist interpretative framework. Although these analyses were overshadowed by doctrinal constraints, they often addressed contemporary developments more explicitly and rigorously than was typical in the predominantly philologically oriented environment of West German Sinology. This yielded valuable research, though much remained unpublished and restricted to archival obscurity (Kampen 1998; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2022: 55–58).

A decisive turning point for West German engagement with contemporary China came toward the end of the 1960s, when Chancellor Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik catalyzed a broader rapprochement with socialist states, culminating in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1972. This diplomatic shift allowed West German researchers for the first time to systematically study contemporary China. The intergovernmental agreement on scientific and technological cooperation, signed on October 9, 1978, proved especially significant for fostering academic exchanges and funded collaborations among government agencies, universities, and research institutes. While these initiatives were not solely academic – economic interests and strategic considerations played a considerable role – they did inspire delegations to explore the PRC’s evolving policy landscape. Early efforts by scholars like Oskar Weggel in Hamburg signaled a deliberate move toward policy-relevant China research, with political scientists and economists joining sinologists to assess Deng Xiaoping’s initial reforms, thereby accelerating an interdisciplinary turn in German China studies (Schütte 2006; Messingschlager 2024b).

Throughout the 1980s, cooperation between Germany and China continued to expand, further supported by additional agreements following the 1978 treaty. Subsequent accords covering economic cooperation and cultural exchanges provided the basis for extensive joint academic initiatives. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, projects such as the Chinese-German University of Applied Sciences (CDHAW) and the Chinesisch-Deutsches Hochschulkolleg in Shanghai introduced dual-degree programs, advanced language training, and various institutional collaborations. Concurrently, German research organizations intensified their partnerships with Chinese counterparts, exemplified by the Sino-German Center for Research Promotion, established in Beijing in 2000 (Chinesisch-Deutsches Zentrum für Wissenschaftsförderung). Operated jointly by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and China’s National Natural Science Foundation, this institution initially prioritized collaboration in the natural sciences and engineering – fields viewed as less politically contentious – although the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) soon broadened their funding to encompass social sciences and the humanities as well. Initiatives such as “Sprache und Praxis in der VR China” aimed explicitly at cultivating linguistic and cultural competencies, thereby nurturing a new

generation of scholars equipped to engage deeply with contemporary Chinese realities (BMBF 2025)

This era of relative openness was marked by increased student mobility and a steadily expanding network of bilateral university partnerships, which, by 2024, would encompass over 1,300 formal collaborations. The proliferation of Confucius Institutes across Germany after 2004 further contributed to training a younger generation of Sinologists. Regular governmental consultations within the framework of the so-called “comprehensive strategic partnership”, initiated in 2011, provided an official forum for aligning bilateral research priorities, thus deepening academic and institutional connections between Germany and China (*ibid.*). These periods of positive diplomatic relations undoubtedly facilitated institutional growth, enhanced researchers’ access to visas, permitted on-the-ground data collection, and supported the establishment of robust scholarly networks – highlighting the profound interdependence between scholarship and political conditions.

However, the turmoil surrounding the late 1980s and early 1990s starkly exposed the fragility of these relationships. The Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989 triggered an immediate suspension of numerous academic exchanges and provoked public outrage, prompting German scholars to critically re-examine human rights conditions and the ethical dimensions of engaging with China (Domes-Näth 1995). This crisis initiated profound internal debates within the German academic community about scholars’ ethical responsibilities, resulting in lasting skepticism toward uncritical engagement with official Chinese narratives and reshaping both institutional and individual approaches to fieldwork and collaboration. Though the suspension of exchanges was not permanent, the events of 1989 underscored the extent to which developments in Beijing could abruptly restrict field research and fundamentally reshape German perceptions of China.

The post-Tiananmen period also witnessed accelerated methodological diversification, as German researchers increasingly adopted comparative analyses, discourse analysis, and intensified their cooperation with international scholarly networks. This shift mirrored broader methodological trends toward more critical and interdisciplinary scholarship, reflecting a significant departure from previous, more cautious approaches.

The turn of the millennium brought a fresh wave of enthusiasm for engaging with China, largely driven by its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 – a landmark event that substantially deepened Germany’s commercial involvement with the PRC. This development spurred increased funding for China-focused research, notably through the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and institutions such as the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), both of which shifted greater attention toward the economic and political dimensions of China’s rapid transformation. Many observers at the time anticipated that expanded trade relations and legal reforms would gradually facilitate political liberalization. Cooperative programs focusing on law and governance flourished,

including initiatives designed to train Chinese jurists in Germany. However, despite the proliferation of philanthropic and governmental grants, funding typically favored less politically contentious areas such as infrastructure development and technological cooperation, whereas sensitive issues related to human rights, minority repression, or the authoritarian nature of the Chinese party-state proved significantly more challenging to finance.

Since the early 2010s, China's ascendance on the global stage has coincided with Xi Jinping's consolidation of political authority, creating an increasingly challenging environment for scholarly inquiry. Rising Sino-Western tensions – further exacerbated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic – have heightened uncertainties for researchers (Schubert 2024). Those investigating sensitive topics such as elite politics or ethnic policies in regions like Xinjiang face growing restrictions, including travel bans and the risk of being blacklisted by Chinese authorities (Seiwert/ Kinzelbach 2023). Western governments, increasingly concerned about intellectual property rights and security implications, have intensified scrutiny of collaborative research with Chinese partners (The Federal Government 2023: 41–44). Consequently, German universities have been encouraged to adopt clearer guidelines addressing dual-use technologies and data protection. Moreover, the pandemic underscored the vulnerabilities associated with dependence on in-person fieldwork; as China closed its borders, scholars turned to digital methodologies and diaspora-based studies. This shift highlighted the substantial difficulties inherent in analyzing politically sensitive phenomena under conditions of limited transparency.⁴

Paradoxically, Xi Jinping's increasingly repressive policies have heightened international awareness of China's global ambitions, intensifying the demand for reliable and independent China expertise both in Germany and internationally. Institutions such as the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), alongside renowned university-based institutes, have expanded their capacity to monitor Beijing's policy shifts through remote methodologies and strengthened collaboration with exile and diaspora communities. Simultaneously, established academic centers like the German Institute of Global and Area Studies continue striving to maintain open channels of scholarly communication. Newly developed guidelines from bodies such as the Federal Foreign Office and the BMBF underscore the critical need to safeguard academic independence and responsibly manage associated risks. Although these recommendations sometimes conflict with local interests in maintaining unrestricted cooperation, a heightened sense of caution regarding

4 See, for example, the new EU-funded project “Remote Ethnography of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region”, led by Rune Steenberg (Palacký University, Olomouc), Vanessa Frangville (Université libre de Bruxelles), and Björn Alpermann (JMU Würzburg), URL: <https://www.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/sinologie/forschung/forschungsprojekte/laufende-projekte/remote-ethnography-of-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region/>.

technology transfer, data security, and the potential implications of authoritarian influence now characterizes many Sino-German research partnerships.

In retrospect, developments in German China research since 1949 reveal a consistent pattern: periods marked by intensive collaboration – facilitated through bilateral treaties, academic exchange agreements, and sustained institutional investment – have frequently resulted in significant scholarly achievements and extensive interpersonal networks. Conversely, abrupt political crises have periodically disrupted academic access and shifted researchers' scholarly agendas. Incidents such as the Tiananmen Square crackdown and intermittent travel restrictions vividly illustrate the inherent vulnerability of academic inquiry to external political dynamics. Yet these disruptions have simultaneously spurred methodological innovation, notably in remote sensing and big-data analytics, facilitating rigorous research even when traditional on-site fieldwork becomes impractical. While German funding agencies and policymakers continue to emphasize the importance of robust, autonomous scholarship resistant to political interference, contemporary researchers now routinely navigate complex ethical and methodological dilemmas posed by political constraints, intensifying geopolitical tensions, and increasing demands for specialized knowledge on China's swiftly evolving political and social landscape.

These macro-political conditions highlight the necessity for German China studies to remain flexible and resilient, drawing valuable lessons from past disruptions to refine both scholarly methodologies and ethical frameworks (Alpermann 2022; Fulda 2024: 181–196). As Xi Jinping's administration intensifies domestic control and global alliances shift, the question of how extensively scholars should or can collaborate with institutions in the People's Republic of China has grown increasingly complex. The manner in which this delicate balance is achieved will significantly shape the field's future trajectory, particularly given its historical experience navigating Cold War suspicion, post-Mao rapprochement, and the often contradictory forces inherent in globalization.

Balancing Access and Integrity: How China Researchers Manage Engagement with Beijing

Since the 1970s, German-speaking China studies has repeatedly confronted the question of how closely scholars should align themselves with the People's Republic of China and its ruling Chinese Communist Party. This dilemma reflects a persistent tension: on one side, many researchers see engagement with the PRC as vital for accessing archives, field sites, and personal networks that enable deeper insight into Chinese society; on the other, such cooperation may invite self-censorship or a tacit acceptance of authoritarian norms, particularly if political sensitivities or unwritten rules restrict open inquiry. Over the decades, attitudes toward engagement with Beijing have shifted in response to China's internal developments – such as Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, and Xi Jinping's increasingly

strict ideological controls – and to evolving debates in Germany itself, where discussions of “systemic rivalry” and authoritarian influence have grown increasingly contentious.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a climate of political rapprochement significantly expanded opportunities for West German scholars to conduct firsthand research in the PRC. Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening up” enabled greater access to archives, field sites, and official institutions, encouraging many Western researchers to explore previously inaccessible aspects of contemporary Chinese society and politics.

Yet despite this new openness, scholars working in the PRC continued to encounter implicit but clearly delineated boundaries set by the CCP. Research typically needed to remain within politically acceptable frameworks, such as economic reform, rural modernization, and cultural subjects, while sensitive political topics – particularly those challenging CCP legitimacy – remained tacitly discouraged. Avoiding explicit criticism of the regime often facilitated visa approvals, extended fieldwork stays, and deeper collaboration with Chinese institutions. Consequently, researchers who ventured too openly into sensitive subjects risked subtle forms of obstruction, from delayed archival access to the quiet withdrawal of local cooperation.

Within this constrained but comparatively permissive environment, experiences varied considerably. In this context, some Western scholars were drawn to China not only by scholarly interest but also by ideological sympathies or revolutionary enthusiasm shaped by their experiences during the 1960s and 1970s. Their favorable stance toward China’s modernization policies often resulted in privileged access and official goodwill. Researchers who developed informal networks and trusted personal relationships frequently gained deeper insights and access to unofficial information compared to scholars who relied solely on formal institutional channels. Some scholars perceived as maintaining particularly close ties with Chinese authorities secured unique research opportunities. Thomas Heberer, who initiated fieldwork in China in the 1980s, cultivated robust relationships with local officials and community leaders, facilitating groundbreaking research into minority policies and grassroots political participation. Similarly, Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer developed a nuanced approach to understanding China’s historical and philosophical traditions, consistently warning Western audiences against oversimplified portrayals of the PRC as merely “authoritarian”. Their open stance toward dialogue resonated positively with Chinese institutions, culminating notably in their trip to Xinjiang in 2023. The subsequent reflections published by Heberer and Schmidt-Glintzer in a Swiss newspaper and later compiled into a book sparked significant controversy in Germany (Heberer/ Schmidt-Glintzer 2023). Critics argue that such visits risked unintentionally endorsing sanitized narratives regarding the treatment of Uyghurs, whereas supporters counter that direct, albeit carefully controlled, access was indispensable for obtaining authentic insights into sensitive issues.

This episode captures the ongoing dilemma for well-connected German sinologists: although proximity to the CCP can yield privileged data and insight, it also exposes researchers to accusations of legitimizing propaganda. The same dynamic applies, in reverse, to those taking a more distant or openly critical stance. In recent years, under Xi Jinping's tightened rule, foreign academics who publish or speak bluntly about minority repression, elite politics, or other sensitive subjects risk being blacklisted altogether (Kostka 2025). The ban on Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) staff in 2021, along with travel prohibitions against scholars such as Adrian Zenz, reflects Beijing's growing readiness to sanction outside researchers who challenge official narratives (Human Rights Foundation 2021; MERICS 2021). While such "distant" experts often achieve high visibility and moral authority in European policy circles and the media, they pay the price of losing direct access to field sites, data, and interlocutors within mainland China.⁵

In 2022, a significant and contentious debate emerged within German-speaking China studies concerning the appropriate stance and conduct of scholars researching China. This discourse centered on questions of moral responsibility related to human rights issues, conditions for fieldwork within China, and the positionality of researchers. On March 9, 2022, sinologists Björn Alpermann and Gunter Schubert published an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) titled *Gegen das moralische Kreuzrittertum*, in which they criticized what they perceived as the increasing moralization of China studies. They cautioned against turning research into a "moral crusade", arguing instead for nuanced analysis and warning that an overly confrontational approach could undermine meaningful scholarly exchange and critical dialogue.

In response, on March 16, 2022, Andreas Fulda, Mareike Ohlberg, David Missal, Horst Fabian, and Sascha Klotzbücher published a rebuttal in the *FAZ* titled *Grenzenlos kompromissbereit?*. In their article, they accused Alpermann and Schubert of unfairly stigmatizing critical scholars and downplaying the Chinese government's growing influence on German universities. Fulda and his co-authors explicitly highlighted financial dependencies arising from collaborations with Chinese entities – such as Confucius Institutes – and pointed to the associated risks for academic freedom and scholarly independence.

Both sides acknowledged that the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has intensified repressive measures against researchers who critically examine sensitive political issues, using entry bans and sanctions as instruments to discipline academic inquiry. Consequently, these developments significantly influence researchers' methodological choices, the scope of accessible research topics, and even their public positioning. While Alpermann and Schubert advocate continued direct engagement and cooperation with Chinese scholars and institutions, Fulda and his

5 For an introduction to the ethical challenges involved in conducting social science research on contemporary China, see the nuanced discussion provided by Björn Alpermann (2022); for a broader perspective on research in authoritarian contexts, see also Glasius, De Lange, Bartman et al. (2018).

colleagues urge a more critical approach, emphasizing transparency and caution in academic collaborations with China. Ultimately, this debate underscores persistent tensions between scholarly objectivity, practical necessity, and moral responsibility regarding human rights. It has profoundly impacted China studies in Germany, sparking an intensive discourse on academia's role within the current geopolitical landscape and prompting critical reflection on research ethics and positionality among scholars.

A similar trade-off shapes the role of China experts in policy advisory contexts. During periods of relative *détente* – such as the mid-2000s under Germany's "Wandel durch Handel" ("change through trade") policy – the federal government predominantly sought guidance from experts who advocated constructive engagement and maintained cooperative relationships with Chinese counterparts. However, as tensions have risen under Xi Jinping's increasingly assertive and authoritarian governance, German officials have more frequently sought counsel from China scholars willing to deliver forthright assessments on politically sensitive topics such as human rights violations and technological security risks, even if these experts have consequently found themselves barred from entering the PRC. Within the broader scholarly community, a researcher's professional reputation hinges significantly on their ability to navigate these complex pressures without compromising academic integrity. Scholars who skillfully engage with Chinese sources, provide nuanced yet candid analyses of CCP policies, and maintain respectful dialogue with their Chinese counterparts typically earn substantial recognition among their peers. Conversely, academics perceived as overly accommodating towards official narratives or those whose critical advocacy verges on polemics at the expense of analytical depth are often subject to scrutiny regarding their scholarly rigor and ethical responsibilities.

The result is a broad spectrum of possible positions, influenced by personal convictions, institutional affiliations, career ambitions, and the broader macro-political climate. With Xi Jinping's consolidation of authority diminishing prospects for political liberalization, German China scholars increasingly confront challenging decisions. Close collaboration with Chinese institutions may promise privileged access to primary sources, valuable personal networks, and substantial policy influence, yet it simultaneously raises significant ethical dilemmas and carries reputational risks. Conversely, adopting a more critical or detached stance might provide clearer ethical grounding and align more closely with principles of academic freedom, but this approach often comes at the cost of severely limited access to research sites, data, and interlocutors within China. Recurrent controversies – ranging from accusations of self-censorship at Confucius Institutes to Beijing's awards and honors bestowed upon Western scholars – demonstrate how these decisions resonate beyond academia, affecting institutional credibility, funding opportunities, and public perceptions of scholarly independence.

Increasingly, there are calls within the scholarly community to develop collective strategies and clearer ethical standards to manage these challenges. For instance, some German academics have proposed that research visas should be treated as a collective European public good, preventing Beijing from selectively restricting access to scholars it deems critical. Others advocate the establishment of alternative funding mechanisms that reduce dependency on grants tied to the PRC, thereby mitigating the risk of sudden withdrawal of financial support in case of diplomatic disputes or academic disagreements (Habich-Sobiegalla/ Steinhardt 2022). More broadly, scholars increasingly recognize that their positionality – how closely or distantly they engage with CCP authorities – transcends personal decisions, representing instead the core challenge of preserving open and critical academic inquiry amidst growing tensions in Sino-Western relations (Diefenbach 2022).

Looking ahead, these positioning choices are likely to have profound and lasting consequences for German China studies. As Sino-German relations become more complex, with policymakers in Berlin growing increasingly wary of economic dependency and political influence from Beijing, China scholars will need to adapt their approaches without sacrificing methodological rigor. Experiences within the discipline – ranging from those who maintain research access through tactical restraint to those who relinquish such access due to outspoken criticism – underscore the inseparable link between knowledge production and ethical self-reflection. By carefully examining concrete cases across this spectrum, it becomes evident that research feasibility, moral responsibility, and scholarly reputation are fundamentally intertwined within the evolving landscape of Sino-German academic relations. Recognizing this interdependence underscores the urgent need for more transparent, collectively agreed-upon norms and standards, ensuring that the pursuit of firsthand knowledge does not compromise the integrity and independence of scholarly research.

Advisors in Demand: The Evolving Role of China Scholars in German Politics

In the immediate postwar decades, German sinologists were few in number yet played a crucial role as intermediaries between the largely isolated People's Republic of China and West German policymakers, diplomats, and the broader public. This continued a tradition that had begun in the late 19th century and persisted through the first half of the 20th century: from its very inception, German sinology has been oriented toward producing politically useful knowledge, closely aligning the discipline with state and diplomatic interests (Leutner 2015).

During the 1950s, only a handful of scholars in West Germany systematically addressed contemporary developments in the People's Republic of China. Among these few, Wolfgang Franke stood out prominently. Having lived and taught in China until 1950, Franke possessed rare firsthand insights into the Communist regime, positioning him as a crucial interpreter of Maoist politics for West German

officials at a time when direct diplomatic channels with Beijing were nonexistent. Beyond his academic activities, Franke emerged as a pivotal advisor within West German policy circles. From the late 1950s onward, he was actively involved in an expert working group providing regular consultations to the Foreign Office on China-related matters. In the late 1960s, Franke delivered a detailed expert report at the request of the Foreign Office's planning staff, explicitly addressing the strategic question of how West Germany should position itself vis-à-vis China in the future. Furthermore, in preparation for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the PRC in the summer of 1972, Franke supported the Foreign Office substantially and also personally accompanied Foreign Minister Walter Scheel as an advisor during his official visit to Beijing in October 1972 (Messingschlager 2024a).

Alongside his colleague Kuo Heng-yü in West Berlin, Franke was thus recognized as one of the very few authoritative experts on a country that remained politically contentious and geographically distant. His influential publications, such as *Das Jahrhundert der chinesischen Revolution* (1958) and *China und das Abendland* (1962), significantly shaped public perception and political understanding in West Germany by introducing broader audiences to the profound transformations taking place in Mao's China.

From the mid-1960s onward, West German foreign policy increasingly drew upon systematically integrated policy advisory institutions. During this period, the German Foreign Office and the Chancellor's Office began extensively utilizing publicly funded think tanks that had progressively emerged since the previous decade. Institutions such as the Institut für Asienkunde (IfA), the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), and the Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien (BIOst) formed an influential infrastructure of non-university expertise. Prominent scholars affiliated with these institutes – including Oskar Weggel (IfA), Dieter Heinzig (BIOst), and Joachim Glaubitz (SWP) – gained substantial recognition during the 1970s and 1980s, cultivating extensive networks across political, diplomatic, economic, and media circles. Together with university-based experts on Chinese politics, notably Jürgen Domes, these specialists significantly shaped West Germany's understanding of contemporary China, laying the groundwork for sinologists and China scholars to assume increasingly influential advisory roles (Messingschlager 2024b).

The Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, initially founded in 1961 as the “Institut zur Erforschung des Marxismus-Leninismus” and renamed in 1966, provides a notable example of this evolution. Its renaming signified a strategic shift away from ideologically driven Soviet studies toward empirically rigorous, interdisciplinary research focused on the Soviet Union, its successor states, East-Central and Southeastern Europe, and the People's Republic of China. Serving as a crucial nexus between academia and policy-making, BIOst regularly supplied federal ministries and the German parliament with detailed

analyses, significantly shaping West Germany's analytical capacities regarding developments in communist countries.

The diplomatic thaw of the early 1970s, culminating in the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between West Germany and the PRC in 1972, further elevated demand for comprehensive, politically relevant China expertise. Sinologists who previously operated predominantly in academic contexts became increasingly engaged in policy discussions. Wolfgang Franke's authoritative *China-Handbuch* (1974) emerged as a standard reference for policymakers, journalists, and business leaders seeking informed perspectives on China's politics, economy, and society. Institutional initiatives complemented this trend; the Institut für Asienkunde launched its monthly publication *China aktuell* (later the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*) in 1970, offering timely analyses of China's domestic and international developments and bridging academic research with practical policy concerns.

Throughout the subsequent two decades, German China scholars frequently advised diplomatic delegations, briefed government officials, and provided nuanced commentary on China's internal upheavals. As the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping's early reforms, and later events such as the Tiananmen Square crackdown captured international attention, experts from institutions like BIOst and SWP became essential interpreters, guiding German audiences and policymakers beyond sensationalism toward informed engagement with China's complex transformations. SWP notably expanded its Asia department from the 1970s onward, producing influential analyses informing parliamentary debates on deepening bilateral ties. Thus, the dual role of these scholars – as rigorous academics and influential policy advisors – was decisively consolidated, cementing their position as indispensable mediators between academic insight and political decision-making (Messingschlager 2024b).

China's accelerating rise in the 1990s and early 2000s pushed the demand for expert guidance to a new level. German governments led by Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder embraced an engagement policy, encapsulated in the phrase "Wandel durch Handel", that required knowledgeable interpreters of China's evolving economy and governance. One leading figure was Eberhard Sandschneider, who became a professor of Chinese politics in 1998 and later directed the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). His work exemplified the increasingly close intersection between scholarship and policy in the 2000s, as he regularly briefed government ministries and addressed parliamentary committees. In books like *Globale Rivalen. Chinas unheimlicher Aufstieg und die Ohnmacht des Westens* (2007) and in media appearances, Sandschneider argued for a balanced approach that avoided both alarmism and naive optimism. His emphasis on China's interest in a stable international order, particularly during the Eurozone crisis, resonated with officials who viewed steady Sino-German relations as economically vital. Such perspectives shaped the mainstream German stance on

China, especially in the early Merkel era, when policymakers favored forging deeper ties rather than drifting into confrontation.

Institutional transformations after 2000 further amplified the reach and influence of German China experts. Following the closure of BIOst in 2000, many of its experienced staff joined the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), significantly enhancing its analytical capabilities on topics ranging from China's military modernization to EU-China relations. Through targeted policy briefs, confidential consultations, and influential public reports, SWP effectively shaped foreign-policy debates and further reinforced the standing of sinologists as essential interpreters of Asia's largest power. Concurrently, the Hamburg-based GIGA Institute of Asian Studies expanded its advisory role through the widely disseminated *GIGA Focus* series and active participation in governmental working groups.

In this evolving landscape, Sebastian Heilmann – who began his career at the Institut für Asienkunde – emerged as a prominent figure known for integrating rigorous academic inquiry with timely, policy-relevant analysis. Under his leadership, the establishment of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin in 2013 marked a significant evolution in Germany's institutional structure for China research. Unbound by traditional university constraints, MERICS quickly became Europe's largest think tank dedicated exclusively to contemporary China, regularly delivering detailed and influential analyses directly to policymakers. The institute's close collaboration with the German Foreign Office was notably highlighted in 2023, when Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock chose MERICS' headquarters as the venue to publicly unveil Germany's official China Strategy. This Strategy explicitly praised MERICS as a critical research hub and indispensable contributor to German policymaking (The Federal Government 2023: 61).

This development represented a watershed moment in the history of China expertise in Germany. For the first time since the peak period of academic policy advising in the 1970s and 1980s, China-related scholarly expertise was systematically integrated into policy processes over a period spanning more than eighteen months, utilized in various formats ranging from confidential briefings to public events. This substantial reliance on China experts marked a notable shift, significantly raising the profile and impact of academic China research within German policymaking circles.

Traditional research institutes such as SWP and GIGA continued to sustain their influential advisory roles, conducting comprehensive analyses on critical topics such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, potential security risks associated with 5G technology, and the PRC's expanding economic footprint in Europe. Furthermore, experts from these institutions actively contributed to EU-level forums and international projects, underscoring their growing importance not only within Germany but also in broader European policy contexts. Reports regularly published by MERICS, SWP, and their affiliates frequently alerted policymakers to the emerging challenges posed by China's increasing international influence, thereby

catalyzing strategic discussions on how best to manage the political, economic, and technological risks inherent in deeper engagement with Beijing.

Over the last seventy years, then, the role of German sinologists has undergone a series of transformations. In the 1950s, they were isolated specialists assisting a cautious state. By the 1970s and 1980s, they were interpreters of a dynamic China undergoing both revolutionary and reformist upheavals. In the 1990s and early 2000s, with globalization accelerating, many sinologists became strategists who advised on what was widely seen as a mutually beneficial commercial relationship. The 2010s pushed that trajectory further, as entities like MERICS rose to shape policy debates, and by the early 2020s, contentious topics around human rights, geopolitical competition, and technology transfer made the expert role even more visible and politically charged (Messingschlager 2024b). The long-standing intersection of scholarship and political relevance remains the defining feature of German China studies, which continues to provide the deeper context needed for informed policymaking. With China occupying a central position in Germany's foreign policy agenda, experts in the field have become indispensable participants in public and governmental discussions alike, reminding decision-makers that nuanced, research-based perspectives are vital for navigating an increasingly complex relationship with the People's Republic of China.

Conclusion: Navigating the Complexities of Politics, Scholarship, and Ethics

Tracing the evolution of German China research from 1949 through the early 2020s reveals its profound entanglement with broader political dynamics. Initially rooted in classical Sinology and textual traditions, the discipline gradually expanded into an interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary China, driven by geopolitical shifts and the demand for policy-relevant expertise. Cold War tensions, bilateral diplomatic developments, and most recently, the intensified authoritarian policies under Xi Jinping have recurrently shaped the institutional frameworks, research priorities, and conditions of scholarly access. Throughout these transformations, scholars continuously faced the challenge of balancing rigorous academic inquiry against practical constraints, political sensitivities, and the pressures of institutional affiliations.

The interplay between scholarly independence and political engagement emerges as a central, enduring tension throughout the field's history. In the postwar period, concerns about ideological contamination initially kept contemporary China studies at a distance, while later decades saw scholars navigating complex relationships with Chinese institutions, benefiting from open diplomatic channels but also confronting abrupt ruptures, such as the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown or the more recent tightening of research conditions under Xi Jinping. Individual researchers continue to wrestle with the practical implications of their scholarly positions, balancing the need for nuanced, first-hand insights against the risks of censorship, visa restrictions,

or accusations of complicity. Simultaneously, the expanding role of China experts as public intellectuals and policy advisors underscores how closely intertwined academic work has become with governmental interests and public discourse.

At this critical juncture, marked by escalating geopolitical rivalries and heightened scrutiny, German China studies faces increasingly intricate ethical and methodological dilemmas. Western policymakers now exercise greater caution regarding academic cooperation and intellectual property, while Chinese authorities impose tighter constraints on sensitive research topics. Media coverage, meanwhile, frequently amplifies suspicions of ideological complicity or self-censorship. Navigating such complexities requires scholars to consistently reflect on their positionality, transparency, and ethical responsibilities. Rather than proposing rigid prescriptions or uniform approaches, the scholarly community might benefit from cultivating clearer, collectively endorsed standards that articulate best practices in research transparency, data management, and protection of collaborators.

Such shared principles could help mitigate pressures stemming from external political constraints and public expectations, safeguarding researchers and their interlocutors without imposing undue limitations. Ensuring transparency regarding funding sources and clearly communicating standards for protecting collaborators in China, for example, could reduce ethical ambiguities. Emphasizing methodological rigor and academic autonomy as core values also supports the continued legitimacy and public trust in the discipline. However, these considerations must remain adaptable and context-sensitive, reflecting the inherent complexities and rapid geopolitical shifts that characterize contemporary Sino-German academic interactions.

Historically, nuanced and critical scholarship has been instrumental in enabling Germany's informed engagement with China – from navigating Mao-era transformations to addressing the strategic challenges posed by Xi Jinping's consolidation of power. Precisely because China studies have repeatedly proven their value to policy formation and public understanding, maintaining scholarly integrity and methodological transparency becomes increasingly vital amid rising political pressures. Preserving this delicate balance demands continued intellectual courage, self-awareness, and collective reflection within the scholarly community.

Ultimately, German China studies have consistently proven their resilience and adaptability by directly engaging with complex political realities. The field's ongoing relevance will significantly depend on scholars' sustained commitment to nuanced, critical, and ethically grounded inquiry. As geopolitical tensions grow and research conditions become increasingly constrained, preserving a tradition of reflective, independent scholarship is not merely an intellectual imperative but an essential basis for informed, balanced policymaking. Looking ahead, the development of transparent ethical standards will be indispensable for ensuring the continued integrity, credibility, and practical impact of German China studies in an era marked by intensifying geopolitical rivalry.

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