



BRIEF

ACADEMIC CO-OPERATION
WITH THE PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF CHINA
DANGERS AND TEMPTATIONS

On 26 February this year, *Eesti Ekspress* ran a story about how the management of the University of Tartu banned the publication of an article in the university publication *Universitas Tartuensis (UT)* about an agreement of common intentions between the university and the Chinese company Huawei Technologies, because the article contained inappropriate criticism of the agreement.¹ On the same day, *UT*'s online version published the controversial article “in the public interest ... unchanged and in full”, as explained in the accompanying press release.² University of Tartu Vice-Rector for Development Mr. Erik Puura, who was considered the person behind the ban, denied this in an interview, stating that bringing up the “slightly dualistic topic” could have damaged the university's reputation.³ On the same day, a group of members of the Estonian Oriental Society openly condemned the ban and, referring to, among other things, a report by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, drew attention to the potential dangers of university cooperation with Chinese authorities and censorship of related information.⁴

This minor episode in the flow of information on the international research cooperation of Estonian universities would not deserve to be highlighted if it were not significant in the broader context of relations with China, which include academic cooperation as a possible risk factor.

STRATEGIC BACKGROUND:
CHINA'S GOAL FOR THE
CENTURY

The People's Republic of China (PRC), led by the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), has openly set itself the goal of becoming a world superpower in the coming decades. The goal is nothing less than taking over global leadership from the Europe—US Atlantic coalition that has dominated the world for the past few centuries. In the PRC's domestic-policy agenda, it is formulated as “two centenary goals” (两个一百年 *liǎng ge yī bǎi nián*): to achieve a “moderately prosperous society” by the time of the CPC's 100th anniversary in 2021 (小康社会 *xiǎo kāng shè huì*) and “to build a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious modern socialist state” by the country's centenary in 2049 (建设一个繁荣, 强大, 民主, 文化先进, 和谐的现代社会主义国家 *jiànshè yīgè fánróng, qiángdà, mínzhǔ, wénhuà xiānjìn, héxié de xiàndài shèhuì zhǔyì guójiā*), which would

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make it one of the world's leading nations in terms of economic and living standards, political influence and military power.⁵ This is Chairman Xi Jinping's “Chinese dream” (中国梦 *zhōng guó mèng*), which is based on the revanchist sentiment of “not forgetting the national

humiliation” (勿忘国耻 *wù wàng guó chǐ*), referring to China’s subjugation to the pressure of the West (including Japan) in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

In the PRC’s foreign-policy agenda, this is reflected in an aggressive emphasis on China’s interests, hypersensitive reactions to criticism, especially in the area of human rights and civil liberties, economic invasion and the increasing emphasis on China’s special role or mission in shaping the future world order. The most characteristic example of the latter is Xi Jinping’s vision of a “community of shared future for mankind” (人类命运共同体 *rén lèi mìng yùn gōng tóng tǐ*), the advocate’s image of which the PRC consistently creates, emphasising the connection between traditional Chinese values and Marxism.⁶

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Some Western politicians interpret current events as the rebirth of the Chinese Empire as a logical course of cyclical change in global politics.⁷

Any of the PRC’s state-led activities on an international scale—whether in the realm of “hard power”, i.e. the economy, politics and the military, or “soft power”, i.e. society, culture and science, including academic cooperation—must be seen and understood in this strategic context as steps and means serving the purpose of increasing China’s global influence, which need not coincide with and may even undermine the interests and objectives of the target countries.

THE TROJAN HORSE OF ACADEMIC COOPERATION

Academic cooperation and the exchange and mediation of knowledge between people and institutions is a perfectly natural phenomenon in the modern world. The survival of human civilisation and the resolution of the daily and global challenges it faces would not be possible without it. It involves all countries, with the

larger and more developed ones mainly in the role of donors of knowledge and technologies, and the smaller and less developed ones as the recipients.

In this context, nothing could be more natural than China’s growing participation in international research. Having become one of the leading economies from a so-called Third World’s country and a nation that has successfully implemented and developed the latest technological solutions over the past 40 years, it would be impossible to exclude China from international academic cooperation. So why do Western countries, in particular, see cooperation with China as a growing problem and threat?

Quite simply, it is the global strategic context described above, in which the PRC is in a special and completely unique position. The strengthening of China’s position threatens to unbalance the current world order, with unforeseen consequences. China’s political system is—from a Western viewpoint—autocratic and chauvinistic, centralist and hierarchical. The CPC, which forms the axis of the system, controls everything and everyone with its rigidly hierarchical structure. It needs more and more resources, especially information on research and technology, not only from China but from all over the world, to keep the growing and increasingly complex system running.

The Western academic tradition is by nature an autonomous, independent network of universities and individuals free from any political interference, and has been widely accepted as such by governments. The politicisation of academia and excessive state control have been considered inappropriate, even from a pragmatic point of view, as it has long been clear that the quantity and quality of scientific information coming from a political and overregulated academy suffers as a result. Today, free academic activity and cooperation are protected by laws and international agreements.

The story is quite different in China, where laws—in particular the 2017 National Intelligence Law—stipulate that all agencies and

companies must cooperate with the country's security and intelligence agencies, and this takes precedence over the staff of the relevant agencies.⁸ The interests of the Chinese state are paramount in international academic cooperation. The rules and agreements of other countries are followed insofar as they do not conflict with China's interests. If they do, they can and must be ignored and every effort must be made to enforce China's rules.

China's nationally coordinated influence operation in the guise of academic cooperation can be broadly divided into three areas:

- direct scientific espionage;
- directing and influencing joint projects through financing and using the results in the interests of the Chinese state;
- the use of so-called "soft power", i.e. cultural and humanitarian education, to create attitudes and sentiment favourable to China.

Of these, **scientific espionage** is the most widespread and the most damaging to the target countries. It includes the theft of scientific and technological information, bribery of researchers, disguised financing of projects that benefit China and plagiarism of Western research results. This is the most difficult to control, as Western universities and research institutions are generally open and background checks on all Chinese researchers and students are neither possible nor effective. However, in recent years, a number of cases have been uncovered in the United States and Australia, where the problem is most acute. In several cases, it has been ascertained that academics caught in espionage worked directly under the PRC's intelligence or military structures, so that the main purpose of their work was espionage. The counter-intelligence services of these countries are heavily involved in gathering information and setting up measures, while scientific espionage by the PRC is actually expanding.⁹

Financing from China, both direct and covert, is often linked to the previous point, as it opens up good opportunities for Chinese researchers to participate in direct research and access data and results. Researchers from target countries

are also recruited to work for China, as has recently been the case in American universities.¹⁰ Universities in poorer countries such as Estonia and elsewhere in Eastern and Central Europe are more vulnerable to influence through funding, as their own national financing is often insufficient.¹¹ The potential risks of Chinese-funded joint projects are often not analysed, while censorship and concealment and influencing public opinion may be used to obtain funding. All this happened in the case of the University of Tartu and Huawei mentioned at the beginning of this paper. A special form of influencing through financing is the funding of academic activities (conferences, lecture courses, etc.) promoting Chinese activities through PRC embassies or undercover agents.¹²

The most important and widespread instrument of **China's "soft power"** is the Confucius Institute network, through which Chinese language and culture are taught in collaborations between universities in the PRC and in the target countries, mainly with Chinese funding and teaching staff. Curated by the PRC Ministry of Education, this network includes about 450

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Confucius Institutes worldwide; a total of 37 are in the Eastern and Central European countries belonging to the 17+1 cooperation network, including one in Estonia that has been operating at Tallinn University since 2010.¹³ Their main activities could be considered worthy of merit, if it were not for the numerous cases where Confucius Institutes have tried to interfere in the academic activities of universities in target countries by demanding that they follow Chinese standards in presenting Chinese issues, etc. As a rule, the Confucius Institutes act as extensions of PRC embassies. In addition, other international networks are run and funded by China to promote so-called traditional Chinese values and to justify the PRC's political practices. One example is the International Confucian Association, with which the author of this paper has close experience.¹⁴

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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- ² Mari Eesmaa, ["Koostööleppel Huaweiiga on mitu tahku"](#) [The Cooperation Agreement with Huawei Has Many Facets], *UT* No. 2, February 2020, (viewed on 5 April 2020); ["Avaldamata Huawei-teemaline artikkel"](#) [The Unpublished Article on Huawei], Tartu Ülikooli uudised, 26 February 2020 (viewed on 5 April 2020).
- ³ Brent Pere, ["Erik Puura: sõltumatu ajakiri ei tohiks olla kommunikatsioonijuhi alluvuses"](#) [Erik Puura: An Independent Journal should not be under a Communications Manager], Neljas Dimensioon (viewed on 5 April 2020).
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- ⁵ See, e.g., Ding Lu, ["China's 'Two Centenary Goals': Progress and Challenge."](#) *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April/June 2016, pp. 79–93 (viewed on 6 April 2020); Graham Allison, ["What Xi Jinping Wants,"](#) *The Atlantic*, 31 May 2017 (viewed on 6 April 2020).
- ⁶ See Shiren Liu, ["The Philosophic Interpretation of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind from the Perspective of the Marxist Philosophy,"](#) *Open Access Library Journal*, Vol. 6, e5541, 4 July 2019 (viewed on 11 April 2020). See also Peter Koenig, ["China Is Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,"](#) Global Research, Centre for Research of Globalization, 25 November 2019 (viewed on 11 April 2020).
- ⁷ Almost 20 years ago, Ross Terrill discussed the plans for the rebirth of the Chinese Empire in his book *The New Chinese Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). John Keane, a professor of political science at the University of Sydney, sees the ongoing process in the light of the notions of the inevitable growth of China's global hegemony and the displacement of the United States. See Tarmo Maiberg, ["Professor Keane: USA impeerium taandub ja Hiina impeerium tõuseb"](#) [Professor Keane: The US Empire Retreating, the Chinese Empire Rising], ERR uudised, Välismaal, 18 February 2020 (viewed on 6 April 2020).
- ⁸ Article 7 of the PRC National Intelligence Law states: "Any organization or citizen shall support, assist and cooperate with the state intelligence work in accordance with the law, and keep the secrets of the national intelligence work known to the public". The cooperation duties of organisations and individuals are detailed in Articles 10 to 15. See the [English translation of the Law](#) (viewed on 14 April 2020).
- ⁹ The US Federal Bureau of Investigation's comprehensive report [China: The Risk to Academia](#) analyses the forms and strategic goals of the PRC's scientific espionage in detail, with plenty of examples. The report claims that, as a result, the US suffers annual losses in the range of \$225 to \$600 billion (source viewed on 12 April 2020). The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) database, [The Chinese Defence Universities Tracker](#), contains data on over 150 Chinese universities that directly fulfil orders for the PRC's military-industrial complex and with which cooperation is particularly risky in terms of security. Among these are a number of "ordinary" universities. The report begins with a cautionary statement: "The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is building links between China's civilian universities, military and security agencies. Those efforts, carried out under a policy of leveraging the civilian sector to maximise military power (known as 'military-civil fusion'), have accelerated in the past decade" (source viewed on 12 April 2020).
- ¹⁰ See, e.g., Kate O'Keefe, ["Education Department Investigating Harvard, Yale Over Foreign Funding,"](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2020 (viewed on 6 April 2020) and ["The China Spy Scandal That Entangled Harvard Could Hit Yale and MIT Next,"](#) *Newsweek*, 29 February 2020 (viewed on 12 April 2020).
- ¹¹ See Ivana Karásková, ["Countering China's Influence Campaigns at European Universities,"](#) *The Diplomat*, 20 February 2020 (viewed on 5 April 2020). The same point is made in [the address by the Estonian Orientalists](#) referred to in note 6 in the case of the University of Tartu and Huawei: "[w]e acknowledge that the long-standing confusion and chaos in the normalisation of the higher education system and the coordination of research problems only increases the risks, and suspicious sources of funding may be sought and accepted in the future to cover the gaps in funding caused by extremely low levels of funds."
- ¹² The case of the Czech-Chinese Centre at Charles University in Prague, which led to its closure, was typical. See: Alžběta Bajarová, ["The Czech-Chinese Centre of Influence: How Chinese Embassy in Prague Secretly Funded Activities at the Top Czech University,"](#) China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), 7 November 2019 (viewed on 12 April 2020).
- ¹³ An overview of Confucius Institutes is provided in a recent report by the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE): see Ivana Karaskova (ed.), ["Empty Shell No More: China's growing footprint in Central and Eastern Europe"](#) (Prague: CHOICE, April 2020), pp. 58–61 (viewed on 12 April 2020).
- ¹⁴ See Märt Läänemets, ["Kas Hiina päästab maailma?"](#) [Will China Save the World?], *Sirp*, 6 March 2020 (viewed on 12 April 2020). On the application of traditional Chinese Confucian concepts in the PRC's domestic- and foreign-policy rhetoric, see also Märt Läänemets, ["„Suur ühtsus“ ja „väike hüvanta“ ehk Hiina uus vana poliitiline utoopia](#) ["Great Unity" and "Little Good" or China's New Old Political Utopia], *Tuna*, 2/2013, pp. 2–6 (viewed on 13 April 2020).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MÄRT LÄÄNEMETS

A sinologist and researcher of Eastern thought, long-term researcher and lecturer at the University of Tartu, Märt Läänemets is currently a freelancer. His main areas of research are Chinese thought and Buddhism. He has published over a hundred research papers and translations, and numerous socio-political articles on Chinese topics.

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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
ESTONIAN FOREIGN POLICY INSTITUTE
63/4 NARVA RD., 10152 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

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