

increasingly shaped by the Science Citation Index (SCI), SSCI, and A&HCI. Since the overwhelming majority of the HSS English-language journals are not indexed, it has been very difficult for them to attract international and domestic submissions.

The journals have encountered immense challenges in their attempt to internationalize. Only a small proportion have developed a fair understanding of what an international journal looks like and how to operate accordingly. In order to be better accessed internationally, 47 (71 percent) cooperate with international (Western) publishers, 11 (17 percent) with Taylor & Francis Group, nine (14 percent) with Brill, and eight (12 percent) with Springer. While several editors acknowledge the brand effect brought by international publishers, most say that even after years of partnership, the quality and impact of their journals have rarely improved. Some even worry about the financial pressure caused by the high cost of the partnership and its possible impact on the sustainability of their journals.

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### Most editors report English as a major obstacle for their journals.

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#### DILEMMAS BETWEEN LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

All the HSS English-language journals with relatively higher achievements in international visibility are struggling to strike a balance between international ambition and local commitment. The editors demonstrate a clear awareness of the Western, especially Anglo-American, hegemony in global knowledge production. They report a lack of understanding of—and even misunderstandings about—China and China’s social research in international academia. The journals are therefore perceived as a platform for bringing Chinese scholarship to the outside world and facilitating multiple perspectives and mutual understanding in global HSS research.

However, hoping to be better recognized internationally, most of them make great efforts to include international scholars among their editorial board members, reviewers, and authors. The intention to have a larger international readership is desperate. Although many respondents are concerned about “overinternationalization” and “losing academic relevance to local society and autonomy,” most journals in the social sciences set entry into SSCI as their current strategic goal. While SSCI and A&HCI are not des-

ignated as major targets in the humanities, the journals in these disciplines seek in a similar way to orient themselves toward the “golden standards” set by Western practices in order to enhance their international recognition.

Editors confirm the lingering difficulties in the dialogue between Chinese and Western scholarship. As an editor at *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* expressed, “We’ve translated and published articles written by leading Chinese scholars, but they have almost zero download, much lower than those written by younger Chinese diaspora members.” This reflects the global position of China’s HSS research. Issues such as lack of original theoretical contributions, catch-up mentality, overpragmatism, and academic nationalism have exerted a combined impact on HSS research in China, leading to a limited contribution to the dialogue with international scholars.

#### CONCLUSION

Confronted with challenges and dilemmas, China’s HSS English-language journals are still at a preliminary stage of development. With strong support from the state, institutions, and individuals, they are well positioned to contribute to the dialogue between Chinese and international HSS scholars. As the wider contexts change locally and globally, they are required to adjust their agendas and priorities, and recontextualize their themes, concepts, and paradigms. Such adjustment takes time. More fundamentally, they need to balance realistic strategies to enhance international impact with orientation to Western research agendas and their long-term commitment to empowering Chinese HSS researchers to become global. ■

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## World-Class Universities and Institutional Autonomy in China

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*This article is based on a Scholars at Risk’s report entitled Obstacles to Excellence: Academic Freedom and China’s Quest for World-Class Universities, available on SAR’s website at <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/>.*

Once a hallmark of the higher education competition phenomenon of the twenty-first century, the

term “world-class university” now evokes a more specific thought: China. Though how that is interpreted varies widely, as China’s accelerated quest for institutional excellence is often at odds with the core higher education values that assure quality. Particularly at risk among these values are academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Academic freedom has occupied considerable space in recent literature and debate not merely regarding the case of China, but globally—and rightly so. Yet while academic freedom is in part contingent upon institutional autonomy (described by UNESCO as “the institutional form of academic freedom”), less frequently is it discussed in such terms, nor does it receive the global scrutiny it deserves.

#### OBSTACLES TO EXCELLENCE

With the forthcoming release of *Scholars at Risk’s (SAR) Obstacles to Excellence: Academic Freedom and China’s Quest for World-Class Universities*, institutional autonomy ascends to the fore. Based on interviews with Chinese and international sources familiar with Chinese higher education; data from the SAR’s Academic Freedom Monitoring Project; legislative and regulatory texts; statements by government officials; and reporting and research by human rights organizations, academia, and the press, *Obstacles to Excellence* seeks to raise awareness of academic freedom and autonomy-related pressures, and offers recommendations for governments, higher education communities, and civil society in China and around the world.

While US higher education faces decreased public investment and support, the People’s Republic of China has intensified its investment toward excellence, evident in the National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development and various initiatives that came before. In the case of China, however, increased national investments in higher education often outpace respect for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. In *Obstacles to Excellence*, threats to institutional autonomy and academic freedom are traced across Mainland China—from Beijing and Shanghai to the minority regions of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regions, to Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions; through Sino–foreign higher education joint ventures in China to Confucius Institutes abroad; and extend to the enigmatic grasp of the long arm of the Chinese party-state.

#### SWEPT UNDER THE RANKINGS RUG

In China’s pursuit to transform its institutions into world-class universities, global rankings have offered metrics to purported advancement. Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese government has allocated significant funding to implement programs such as the 211 and 985 Projects to bolster the reputation of key universities. The most recent incarnation,

the 2017 Double World-Class University Project, aims to establish 42 world-class, research-driven universities and 465 world-class disciplines by 2049.

China’s investments have helped enable a growing share of its institutions to rise through world university ranks. Yet its dogged commitment to ranking systems, frequently criticized for failing to adequately factor considerations of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and other core higher education values, is cause for concern. The fixation on rankings shifts the incentives for institutions to focus on quantity rather than quality-based outputs at the helm of future funding. What China’s rise amidst its fault lines signals for higher education everywhere is that in an era of market-based competition and the ranking systems that sustain it, institutional autonomy, like academic freedom, may be increasingly vulnerable. What remains to be seen is if the very system that propelled China’s rise—a centralized, state-centered, and controlled system—is what foreshadows its descent.

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#### STATE DISCRETION ON THE VALUE OF THOUGHT

World-class universities are often described by their ability to address the world’s most vexing challenges through disseminating responsive and disciplined knowledge, but the world-class university as a world-class knowledge producer operates within a set of limitations. For China, these limits are at the discretion of the state. As detailed in *Obstacles to Excellence*, impediments to academic inquiry and expression manifest themselves through restrictions on internet access (China’s “Great Firewall”), pressures on scholars and students who stray from established orthodoxies, vetting and censorship of foreign publication imports, and restrictions on academic travel, to name a few.

A notable development in Chinese party-state interference concerns a rallying of efforts to ensure that knowledge and ideas within the university align with those of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP’s increased efforts to root party ideology at the center of China’s educational foundation are evident in the development of “Xi Jinping Thought Centers.” With the 2017 announcement of Xi Jinping Thought enshrined in the constitution, many universities swiftly established aspiring centers where critics fear

that opportunities for funding will dismiss—if not silence entirely—academic work outside party ideology. Perhaps more chilling is the 2013 leak of an internal CCP directive called “Document Number Nine,” which outlines seven topics allegedly banned within universities and related sectors, including universal values, civil society, a free press, and questioning China’s governance. While there is little public information on the ban’s implementation, it echoes reports of a common understanding of what is off-limits, including “the three Ts”—the autonomy of Tibet, Taiwan’s status, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The CCP’s policing of these and other ideological constraints is evident in part by so-called “student informants,” who report controversial comments or teachings to party and university officials, often resulting in severe disciplinary actions against professors.

Unsurprisingly, with impediments to free inquiry and autonomous governance, many Chinese scholars have had to choose to either abandon their country or their academic profession altogether. In other cases, academics have been wrongfully detained, arrested, and prosecuted. The trend has extended to students, with an uptick of reports of repression on the mainland. It is alarming that censorship and repression are occurring in China with increased frequency within Chinese higher education, through enhanced methods, and enshrined in law, as enormous effort is applied to achieve a reputation as a world-class knowledge producer.

SAR’s *Obstacles to Excellence* challenges the current metrics in rankings to take academic freedom and institutional autonomy into consideration. Likewise, it urges China and the global higher education community to position institutional autonomy as a bedrock of academic freedom and quality universities. Embracing and committing to these values will help China cultivate truly world-class universities from which everyone benefits. ■

## Reforms in France: When Competition and Cooperation Clash

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Many studies show that cooperation among competitors may have positive effects. But, sometimes, competition and cooperation clash. The reforms of the French higher education system are an interesting case for exploring this issue as they increased the level of competition, but also favored cooperative consortia of institutions at the local level.

### MORE COOPERATION...

For many years, the institutional divide between universities, *grandes écoles*, and national research institutions has been a recurrent concern for political actors. In order to overcome this institutional divide, the 2006 law on research and innovation made it possible for higher education institutions to form local consortia called PRES (higher education and research “poles”) and to develop common activities. Beginning in 2007, a number of PRES projects were selected and received funding. But, that same year, a new act increased the autonomy of French universities. The appetite of university presidents for PRES decreased: with increased margins for maneuver at the university level, most became reluctant to transfer powers to the PRES. The latter were maintained but were not very active: some common doctoral schools were created at that level, but universities kept other responsibilities under their own roof.

This situation evolved after the election of François Hollande to the French presidency in 2012. The new minister of higher education and research strengthened the policy for local cooperation: the PRES became COMUE (Community of Universities and Institutions) and, as a result of the 2013 act, every higher education institution must now be part of a COMUE and transfer some powers to that level. The role of the COMUE is to develop cooperation among its members, such as managing COMUE doctoral schools, creating COMUE research labs, asking all academics to include the name of the COMUE in their signature, etc. COMUEs should also define a higher education and research policy on their territory and sign a five-year contract with the ministry, replacing contracts with each individual



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