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# How China Corrupts Academic Research

Beijing's perverse incentives are compromising Western scholarship.

Mar 6, 2026 | Bruce Gilley



To understand how China has corrupted academic research in the West, including in the United States, begin at the top. China is currently headed by a man, Xi Jinping, who is himself an academic fraud. While serving in various government posts between 1998 and 2002, Xi was enrolled in an “in-service” doctoral program at Tsinghua University in Beijing. His dissertation on the marketization of rural areas was [ghost-written](#) by one of his staff members in a local government in southern Fujian Province, Liu Huiyu. She was later given a plum post at Jiangxia University in Fujian handling “library materials.”

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For today's China under Xi Jinping, academics must be loyal stalwarts of the party who advance its goals by means fair and foul. This represents a return to earlier Maoist understandings that were briefly loosened during the 1980s and 1990s. Xi's government has [issued](#) strict new guidelines that tell China's academics to toe the line. In one of my areas of research, environmental policy in China, I have [experienced](#) firsthand how academics in China who pretend to be part of the global academic community, and are often trained and work in the U.S., are tools of party propaganda. One of the perverse consequences of this system is that China's academics now regularly publish patriotic conspiracy-theory articles, such as [one](#) that warned of how Covid could be used to infect Chinese citizens with AIDS.

Given the pervasive rise of scholars from China in Western academic institutions, these norms have now spilled over into Western academic life. Every academic from China, whether based in the West or in China itself, is under pressure to follow these guidelines because of the costs of non-compliance. And the [list of subjects](#) they must fake, avoid, or propagandize just keeps growing.

There is a counterpart to the "don't do this" architecture facing academics from mainland China. It is the "do *lots* of this" guidance, which is equally corrupting. Obsessed with its rise in international knowledge and research, China turns a blind eye to outright fraud and deceit in the publication of academic research. All the "original datasets" coming out of China are not worth the glowing screens that they appear on. Last year, for example, a medical researcher was suspended after publishing a [study](#) based on data drawn from 55 male patients who did not exist. The reason this works is that there is nothing like a research-ethics or -accountability system in China that incentivizes anything other than the creation of fake data, especially when they pertain to China's international reputation.

Xi's dissertation has since been disappeared in China, perhaps because of its obvious borrowing and plagiarism from Liu's own research. As I [reported](#) earlier this year, Liu was eventually promoted to vice president of her university, then given an early retirement from Jiangxia last year after being extolled as a model worker of the party. In addition, 12 academic articles that Xi allegedly published during his doctoral studies have also disappeared from academic databases in China.

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China's corrupt and amoral academic ecosystem, given its size and pressures, has remade academic life the world over. What were once minor problems such as paper mills (companies that write fake papers for hire), predatory journals (journals that publish anything for a price), and citation cartels (academics who collude to boost each other's citation counts) are now pervasive issues in every academic field thanks to China. One recent [study](#) of paper-mill articles that used U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data found that 92 percent of such papers published since 2021 had a first author from China. In this [paper](#) from China, the authors added no fewer than 10 citations in a concluding sentence that was not in the pre-print edition. This, according to the gadfly site PubPeer, is [known as](#) a "citation delivery vehicle."

And the problems will only get worse. In many social-science and humanities fields, academic departments now insist that only a Chinese person can be hired to teach anything on Asia or China. That opens a major breach in academic integrity with respect to all things China. What's more, China's hypercompetitive academic world has created something like academic supermen who are adept at the most performatively over-the-top research [articles](#) that read like an academic brain on steroids even if the findings, whether or not they are based on faked data, amount to saying very little and are often retracted.

AI is only exacerbating the China problem (followed distantly by a South Asian problem). AI-written papers are, of course, the first-level wave coming out of China, which has prompted journals to use AI-detection tools. This in turn has led to the use of paraphrasing tools to avoid detection, which in turn leads to a search for so-called tortured phrases in academic articles that suggest the use of such tools. And so on.

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To make you cry, it is no surprise to learn that scholars in China, ever-attuned to the latest cutting-edge issues that attract Western journal editors, are now mass-producing papers on academic misconduct in China. One mainland Chinese working at the University of Hong Kong, Zhang Xinqu, has begun to carve out a niche with damning qualitative evidence of the pervasive and institutionalized academic corruption in China. But like many academics in China, his method seems to be to "slice up" research into more than one article. In his case, he has produced, seemingly from the same research, both an [institutional](#) and a [psychological](#) account of academic corruption in China. Perhaps several more accounts are forthcoming.

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More broadly, like all mainland-China academics, he dares not point to the top: the problems of academic

research inherent in a Marxist-Leninist one-party state headed by a man who is himself an academic fraud. Zhang, after all, may need to take up a position in China someday. The pioneer in [exposing](#) academic corruption in China, a journalist named Fang Shimin, now lives in California. And thus the scholarly discourse on academic corruption in China itself becomes corrupted.

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The U.S. government has been rightly [vigilant](#) about the infiltration of U.S. academic institutions by party and military cadres from China. One recent [report](#) by a retired U.S. defense analyst, Jeffrey Stoff, found that almost \$1 billion in U.S. government funding has helped fuel research involving China's defense labs since 2019. The study noted no fewer than 313 English-language articles as of 2025 that resulted from such funding, on topics such as directed energy systems and artificial intelligence. Indeed, it is not hard to find even U.S.-based academics from China actively working to bolster the PRC's defense capabilities. The Duke University sociologist Gao Bai, for instance, was a "guest speaker" at the [launch](#) of a report on China's manufacturing capacity and national security in Beijing in 2025.

Still, given what we know about academic research in China, one wonders about the validity of such research. While U.S. policymakers are right to be concerned about a loss of intellectual property and the funding of military research in China, they forget that the academic ecosystem in China is itself rotten to the core. From a certain strategic perspective, the best thing we could do to hobble China might be to unleash its own academics on its national defense system.

Any suggestion that the United States should limit or even sharply curtail its academic integration with our major geostrategic adversary, which labors under the burden of a censorious and grossly unfree state, is predictably met with cries of racism and insularity. "Yellow Peril," "anti-China," and all the rest. The adeptness of China in mobilizing these tropes is impressive, and we are totally defenseless.

But there is no substitute for honesty in admitting the steep costs of having China's scholars, institutions, and practices gradually infiltrating our Western academic tradition.

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