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RESEARCH CONSTRAINTS AND
SCHOLARLY RESPONSE:
SURVEY EVIDENCE FROM
CHINA SCHOLARS IN JAPAN

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Research Constraints and Scholarly Response: Survey Evidence from China Scholars in Japan

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Abstract

Amid political hardening in the People's Republic of China and intensifying geopolitical tension, China scholars face increasing research constraints. While the existing studies mainly focus on Western contexts, the experiences of China scholars in Asia remain underexamined. Following a survey conducted by Greitens and Truex, this study draws on the first, large-scale and systematic survey on 362 China scholars in Japan conducted in March 2025. The results indicate that 27.1 per cent of respondents reported research-related obstacles, 21.8 per cent encountered censorship and 43.2 per cent considered political sensitivity when giving advice to graduate students. Notably, these challenges substantially vary across academic fields, with scholars in literature, thought and philosophy exhibiting comparatively low levels of disruption. This disciplinary pattern highlights the importance of historically rooted scholarly traditions and offers broad insights into the ways in which knowledge production on China adapts despite restricted access.

Keywords: China studies; academic repression; self-censorship; knowledge production; Japan; disciplinary variation

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Introduction

Over the past four decades, the field of China studies underwent a profound transformation. The explosion of accessible data—ranging from archival records and local government documents to large-scale surveys and immersive fieldworks—fostered an unprecedented methodological diversification in the history of the field.¹ Scholars extended beyond Cold War–era inference towards empirically grounded approaches, integrating China studies into a vibrant and analytically sophisticated domain of social science.² In recent years, however, this era of expanded access has entered a period of significant contraction. Research conditions internal and external to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have significantly shifted. Evidence has indicated that oversight by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), publisher caution and peer signalling have yielded various patterns of self-censorship among PRC-based scholars.³

The existing scholarship also extensively documents the pressure faced by China scholars operating outside the borders of the PRC. Focusing primarily on the North American context, Greitens and Truex’s pioneering study identifies *repressive experiences* among foreign China scholars, including interrogations, visa denials and loss of research access, thereby highlighting increased risks associated with fieldwork in China.⁴ Truex further argues that, since 2018 and especially after 2020, sustained fieldwork has become nearly impossible, forcing researchers to consider Hong Kong, Taiwan and diaspora communities as alternative field sites.⁵ Apart from the humanities and social sciences, Xie et al. demonstrate that Chinese American scientists have been *caught in the crossfire* of the US–PRC rivalry, with many avoiding federal research funding or considering emigration—thus producing a substantial reverse brain drain.⁶

Parallel dynamics have been observed across other Western academic landscapes. In Germany, intensified pressure—through sanction, espionage accusation and visa denial—has reshaped debates on scholarly positionality,⁷ while structural vulnerabilities within domestic academia further undermine academic freedom.⁸ In the United Kingdom and Australia, China scholars report increasing concern over Chinese state influence and a *climate of fear* driven by national security considerations, which discourages younger researchers from pursuing China-focused expertise.⁹ These narratives collectively underscore decreased access to China, heightened risk for foreign and diaspora scholars and escalating tension within academic communities. As several scholars

¹ Carlson et al. 2010.

² Shambaugh 2024.

³ Leng and Plantan 2025.

⁴ Greitens and Truex 2020.

⁵ Truex 2024.

⁶ Xie et al. 2023.

⁷ Habich-Sobiegalla and Steinhardt 2022.

⁸ Fulda and Missal 2022.

⁹ Amy Borret and Laura Hughes, “British university’s reliance on Chinese fees fueling self-censorship, say academics,” *Financial Times*, 9 December 2025. Australian Academy of the Humanities 2023.

proposed, one implication is renewed reliance on research strategies developed during earlier periods of restricted access—reminiscent of what has been described as ‘Kremlinology’.¹⁰

However, existing studies provide only partial narratives of the challenges faced by China scholars, focusing predominantly on Western contexts and, thereby, reflecting the specific national, institutional and disciplinary environments of these regions. Empirical evidence derived from Asian settings remains significantly limited despite the region’s deep historical ties and geopolitical proximity to China. This study examines the experiences of China scholars in Japan to address this research gap. Japan serves as a particularly instructive case for observing scholarly adaptation, given its sizeable, multi-disciplinary community of China specialists and unique intellectual traditions that may offer alternative modes of resilience compared with those of Western settings.

Towards this end, in March 2025, we conducted a *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*, adapting and extending the framework developed by Greitens and Truex to the Japanese context. To ensure cross-national comparability, a substantial portion of the questionnaire reproduced the items from the original instrument, while approximately one quarter of the non-demographic questions were newly designed to capture the context-specific features of China studies in Japan. To the best of our knowledge, this study constitutes the first large-scale and systematic survey on China scholars in Japan. While Greitens and Truex employed a cross-national design, their sample was heavily weighted towards US-based institutions (358 scholars [64 per cent]). By contrast, the current study focuses on a single national academic context to provide a high-resolution analysis. An online questionnaire was disseminated to 574 researchers, which yielded 362 valid responses or an effective response rate of 63.1 per cent—substantially higher than the 28.6 per cent reported by Greitens and Truex. Thus, the current study provides a robust and representative portrait of the Japanese academic context.

The results reveal widespread exposure to political sensitivity, research constraint and self-censorship among China scholars in Japan. In summary, 27.1 per cent reported research-related challenges, including denied archival access, or cases in which authorities approached contacts in China. In addition, 43.2 per cent of the respondents reported that they take political sensitivity into account when advising graduate students on research topics. A major finding of this study is marked disciplinary variation—a dimension less explored in previous narratives. Because the current sample included a substantial cohort from literature, philosophy and thought, we observe a distinct divergence: while social scientists face higher levels of risk, humanities scholars remain relatively insulated. This finding emphasises structural resilience rooted in Japan’s humanities-based tradition of China studies. Nevertheless, concerns regarding graduate student supervision of political sensitive topics were shared across fields, which demonstrates that the reproduction of knowledge is

¹⁰ Shambaugh 2024; Mertha ed. 2024.

increasingly influenced by self-censorship.

This study makes three contributions. First, it provides the first systematic evidence on the lived experiences of China scholars in Japan, thus extending the literature beyond Western cases. Second, it offers a granular analysis of how political sensitivity, access constraints and self-censorship are experienced and mediated within a specific academic ecosystem by focusing on a single national context. Lastly, it broadens the analytical scope to include the pedagogical consequences of research constraints, thus highlighting implications for the long-term reproduction of China-related knowledge. Taken together, these findings advance a fine-grained, empirically informed understanding of the evolving global landscape of China studies given heightened geopolitical tension.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 1 discusses the background of this study and relevant research. Section 2 outlines the survey design and administration. Section 3 presents the main findings. Section 4 highlights issues, including a comparison with the Greitens and Truex survey. Finally, Section 5 concludes.

Background

A key precedent: The Greitens and Truex survey

The survey conducted by Greitens and Truex serves as a foundational contribution to the systematic documentation of political pressure in the field. Their study represents the first large-scale effort to extend beyond anecdotal accounts by providing survey-based evidence on the risks and constraints faced by scholars conducting research on China. The authors targeted a diverse cohort comprising Chinese and non-Chinese nationals mainly based in North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. A sampling frame was constructed using membership lists from major academic associations in North America and Europe, including contributor information from leading academic journals in the field. In May 2018, the survey was distributed to 1,967 individuals, which yielded 562 responses. Among respondents who completed more than 90 per cent of the questionnaire items, the effective response rate reached 28.6 per cent.¹¹

The survey comprises four major components: (1) demographic and professional characteristics, (2) research area and sensitivity, (3) specific challenges encountered in conducting research and (4) responses and coping strategies.¹² The results revealed that archival and material access constraints are pervasive, affecting 21 per cent of researchers in general and 26 per cent of researchers focused on archival research in particular. Regarding direct state interference, 9 per cent reported being *invited for tea* by officials—a euphemism for interrogation. When asked about the

¹¹ Greitens and Truex's online supplementary materials note that the survey included two follow-up emails sent on May 30 and June 27, 2018, with the survey closing on June 30, 2018.

¹² Their full questionnaire is available in the online supplementary materials accompanying the paper.

sensitivity of their work, 53 per cent considered it *somewhat sensitive*, while 14 per cent responded with *very sensitive*, thus indicating that a significant majority of the community operates under a shadow of political delicacy. While Greitens and Truex's study remains the baseline for challenges faced by North American-centric scholarship, no comparable large-scale surveys have emerged—despite the authors' call for international follow-up studies. The present study addresses this empirical gap by investigating the experiences of Japan-based China scholars and subsequent implications for academic practice.

Importance of the Japanese context

Japan has maintained one of the world's most long-standing and well-established traditions of China-focused scholarship. Scholars trained during the pre-war and wartime eras continued their work in the post-war period, frequently operating under severe information scarcity that closely resembled those faced by scholars of Western Sinology during the Cold War.¹³

A distinct feature of the Japanese academic landscape is the prominence of the humanities—literature, history and thought/philosophy (collectively known in Japanese as *Bun-Shi-Tetsu* 文史哲). These fields have long been characterised by qualitative, text-based modes of inquiry, which distinguish them from data-driven social sciences that emerged at a later stage. Furthermore, they have been institutionalised, particularly within national universities, through established departments of Chinese literature, Chinese history (typically categorised as Oriental history, *Toyoshi*) and Chinese thought and philosophy. By contrast, institutions dedicated to study of contemporary Chinese politics, society and economy have developed in an uneven and fragmented manner, exhibiting considerable variations in scale, substantive emphasis and organisational continuity.

After the normalisation of diplomatic relations in 1972, scholarship on contemporary China rapidly expanded during the 1970s and 1980s. As Kokubun surveyed, major academic associations—such as the Japan Association for Asian Studies (*Ajia Seikei Gakkai*)—along with core journals—such as *Ajia Keizai* (Asian Economy)—established a number of key institutional foundation for this expansion.¹⁴ This period also witnessed the emergence of several research trends: the revival of Manchukuo studies, increased attention to modern Chinese history and empirically grounded research on China's post-Mao economic reforms. From the 1980s to the 1990s, relatively open access to the Chinese mainland enabled Japanese scholars to undertake sustained fieldwork and archival research, while collaborative projects with Chinese universities became an indispensable component of Japan's production of China-related knowledge.

By the early 2000s, however, changes occurred in the environment for academic engagement with China. For example, the introduction of new regulatory frameworks—notably the Measures for

¹³ Suehiro ed. 2006; Hirano et al ed. 2011.

¹⁴ Kokubun 1986.

the Administration of Foreign-Related Surveys (*Shewai Diaocha Guanli Banfa* 涉外调查管理办法) enacted in 2004—signalled the tightening of controls over the activities of foreign researchers inside the PRC. These developments occurred along with a gradual deterioration in Japan–China relations, which was driven by intensifying historical controversies during the mid-2000s and escalating tension over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands circa the 2010s onwards. As noted in the 2013 report of the Japan Science and Technology Agency’s China Research Center, opportunities for sustained, direct academic collaboration diminished as political friction and legal restriction intensified.¹⁵

A key motivation for the present survey is the CCP’s transition over the past decade towards an interventionist and securitised approach to governance on academic research. Consequently, between 2013 and 2024, the Japanese media documented a number of highly publicised cases in which China scholars who were affiliated with Japanese universities and research institutions, including Japanese nationals, were detained or reported missing during their visits to China (Appendix note 1). Unsurprisingly, these incidents have generated heightened concern among China scholars regarding risks associated with conducting research in China.

Apart from these high-profile cases of long-term detention and disappearance is a broad spectrum of less visible research-related incidents. For example, scholars conducting academic visits, archival research or fieldwork in China have occasionally been approached by authorities or subjected to brief interrogation that could last several hours. Restriction on access to archival materials has also become common, but these experiences rarely attract public attention. Although researchers share these experiences informally at academic conferences or in private conversations, this information has remained fragmented within the academic community and has seldom been systematically collected, publicly communicated or placed in comparative perspective.

Survey design

Population of interest

Focusing on Japan-based China researchers, the current study conducted a survey to identify the types of challenges they have encountered at varying stages of their China-focused research as well as strategies they have employed to mitigate challenges and associated risks, including those related to graduate student supervision.

The target population was defined as ‘humanities and social science researchers based in Japan whose research focuses on China’. Nationality was not restricted, and the fields of these scholars covered a broad range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The historical periods under study were also unrestricted—spanning from ancient to modern and contemporary eras. This survey included not only university-affiliated researchers but also individuals working in think tanks,

¹⁵ Japan Science and Technology Agency’s China Research Center ed. 2013.

research institutes within private companies and public organisations, as well as independent scholars. In the current context, *China* refers not only to the mainland but also to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was drafted by first translating the survey by Greitens and Truex into Japanese and using it as a baseline structure. To preserve comparability with the original version, a substantial proportion of the Japanese version replicated the core items of the original version; at the same time, approximately one quarter of the non-demographic questions were newly designed to enable in-depth engagement with the Japanese context.

Based on this framework, we controlled for the overall number by omitting items while adding others tailored to the Japanese case. The omitted items included the country to which an affiliated research institution belongs, number of university students, year of PhD completion, questions on colleagues' research and inquiries on promotion reviews at the affiliated institution. Newly added questions captured features specific to China studies in Japan, including the extended historical scope, impacts of recent incidents (e.g. scholar detention due to research activities), whether respondents supervised graduate students and the influence of recent pressure on this supervision. Additionally, for the retained questions, response options and wording were modified as necessary to ensure clarity and contextual appropriateness. For transparency, the Appendix provides the full questionnaire, including the original Japanese version and its English translation.

Survey participants and implementation

The list of participants was initially compiled using public information registered in J-Global¹⁶ and Researchmap.¹⁷ In this process, the researchers paid particular attention to the uncommonly broad disciplinary composition of China studies in Japan. This foundational list was then supplemented with public data derived from academic societies, research institutions, academic journals and individual inquiries, which resulted in a final list composed of 624 individuals. The list creation process excluded internal membership lists of any academic organisations (e.g. societies or research institutions).

The survey was conducted on 11 March 2025. Out of the 624 invitations, 50 were undeliverable, which resulted in 574 successfully delivered questionnaires. After sending two reminder emails, the survey was ended on 31 March 2025. The number of valid responses, defined as those with a completion rate of 90 per cent or higher with answers to key questions, was 362, which corresponded to an effective response rate of 63.1 per cent [=362/574]. Appendix note 2

¹⁶ J-Global: <https://jglobal.jst.go.jp/>

¹⁷ Researchmap: <https://researchmap.jp/>

provides details of the survey implementation.

Results

Respondent attributes

Table 1 presents the basic attributes of the respondents, demonstrating a nearly even split between those in the humanities and social sciences. Specifically, history (a key field in Japanese China studies), literature and thought/philosophy accounted for 22.1 per cent, 16.9 per cent and 8.6 per cent, respectively, for a total of 47.6 per cent. Thus, approximately half of the respondents were from the humanities, commonly referred to as the abovementioned *Bun-Shi-Tetsu*. Meanwhile, political science and law; economics, business administration and public policy; and sociology and anthropology accounted for 21.5 per cent, 19.9 per cent and 5.6 per cent, respectively, for a total of 47.0 per cent in the social sciences. Other fields included area studies and linguistics, among others.

Regarding institutional affiliation, 86.2 per cent of the respondents were university researchers, while 8.0 per cent were associated with research institutes or think tanks. Although details were omitted, 58 per cent of the respondents held professorial positions, thus making them the main contributors to the survey.

In terms of gender composition, female, male and nonbinary comprised 26.2 per cent, 72.1 per cent and 0.6 per cent of the sample, respectively. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan, women accounted for 28.2 per cent of all faculty members at national, public and private universities as of 1 May 2025. This figure is comparable to the proportion of female respondents in the survey, which indicates that the sample broadly reflects the gender distribution of Japan's academic community.¹⁸

Table 1. Profile of Survey Respondents

¹⁸ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) 2025.

Respondent Attributes	N = 362 (%)	Research Focus & Methods	N = 362 (%)
Affiliated Institution		Academic Discipline	
University	312 (86.2%)	History	80 (22.1%)
Research Institute / Think Tank	29 (8.0%)	Political Science and Law	71 (19.6%)
Independent	9 (2.5%)	Economics, Business, and Public Policy	68 (18.8%)
NPO	3 (0.8%)	Literature	61 (16.9%)
Private Company	1 (0.3%)	Thought and Philosophy	31 (8.6%)
Other	5 (1.4%)	Sociology and Anthropology	20 (5.5%)
Unknown	3 (0.8%)	Others	29 (8.0%)
Gender		Research Period	
Male	261 (72.1%)	Five Dynasties and earlier	52 (14.4%)
Female	95 (26.2%)	Song Dynasty	40 (11.0%)
Nonbinary	2 (0.6%)	Yuan Dynasty	27 (7.5%)
Other / Prefer not to say	4 (1.1%)	Ming Dynasty	44 (12.2%)
Passport		Research Methods	
Japan	289 (79.8%)	Qing Dynasty	50 (13.8%)
China (PRC)	63 (17.4%)	Late Qing to Republican period	113 (31.2%)
Taiwan	3 (0.8%)	1949–1978	150 (41.4%)
Korea	1 (0.3%)	1978–2011	173 (47.8%)
Other	6 (1.7%)	2012 onward	188 (51.9%)
Main Research Region		Research Methods	
Mainland China	339 (93.6%)	Purchase of published materials	337 (93.1%)
Hong Kong / Macau	50 (13.8%)	Archival research in archives / libraries	259 (71.5%)
Taiwan	105 (29.0%)	Qualitative interviews / participant observation	154 (42.5%)
Other	58 (16.0%)	Original quantitative survey	47 (13.0%)
		Acquisition of individual-level microdata	26 (7.2%)
		Online data collection	199 (55.0%)
		Other	18 (5.0%)

Notes. The total percentages for main research regions, research period and research methods exceeded 100 per cent due to multiple choices allowed.

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*.

Table 1 indicates that 93.6 per cent of the respondents indicated mainland China as their main (or one of their main) research area(s) in terms of primary research regions (multiple answers allowed). Similarly, 29.0 per cent selected Taiwan. For research periods (multiple responses allowed), approximately half conducted research on the period after the founding of the PRC (post-1949). Meanwhile, 14.4 per cent focused on the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period or earlier, which indicated that the respondents covered a wide range of history, including ancient and medieval times. With regard to research materials and data collection methods (multiple answers allowed), the

majority used published sources, while 42.5 per cent conducted qualitative interviews.

Compared with the Greitens and Truex survey, the current respondents displayed several distinct characteristics. First, the present survey encompassed a markedly more diverse disciplinary composition. In addition to political science and history, the respondents were drawn from a wide range of fields, including literature, thought/philosophy, economics, business and public policy. By contrast, the Greitens and Truex survey heavily focused on two disciplines: political science (34 per cent) and history (32 per cent), which collectively accounted for approximately two-thirds of their respondent pool. This difference in disciplinary coverage is substantively important, because it enabled the present study to capture patterns of political sensitivity and adaptive behaviour across a broad spectrum of scholarly traditions, including literature and thought/philosophy.

Second, 86.2 per cent of the current respondents were affiliated with universities, which is slightly lower than the 93 per cent reported by Greitens and Truex, thus reflecting a comparatively higher representation of scholars working in think tanks and research institutes. Third, the proportion of female respondents in the current survey (26.2 per cent) is lower than that of Greitens and Truex (47 per cent), which underscored a notable difference in gender composition between the two samples.

Basic findings I: Experiences of political sensitivity and research constraints

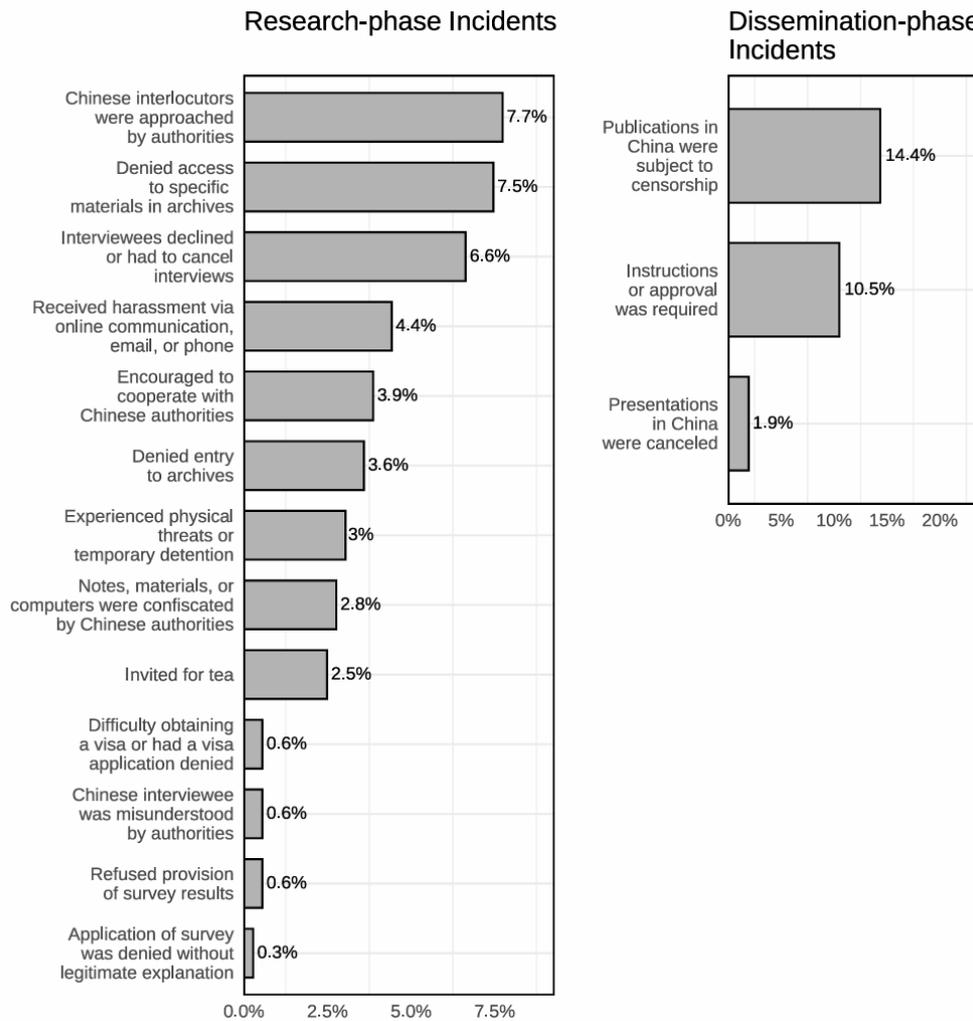
This sub-section narrates repressive events encountered by the respondents during the research and dissemination phases, which forms the empirical core of the study.

Respondents were asked whether they had experienced any incident while conducting research. The majority (70.7 per cent) reported no such experiences, while 27.1 per cent mentioned that they encountered at least one research-related incident; the remaining responses were coded as missing (NA). Figure 1 presents the distribution of research- and dissemination-related incidents encountered by the scholars. During the research phase, the most frequently reported problems involved indirect pressure and access restriction: 7.7 per cent of the respondents indicated that authorities approached their Chinese acquaintances and interlocutors, while 7.5 per cent experienced denial of access to archival materials. Interview cancellations (6.6 per cent) and online or phone harassment (4.4 per cent) seemingly occurred with notable regularity, thus underscoring the interpersonal and digital dimensions of state monitoring. Although less common, experiences of direct interference, including physical threat or temporary detention (3 per cent) or confiscation of notes or devices (2.8 per cent), demonstrated that a small but non-negligible share of researchers faced acute, coercive pressure. A longer tail of low-frequency events, such as visa difficulty or survey denial, further illuminated the wide spectrum of measures for impeding scholarly work.

With regard to experiences of censorship or instructions related to research presentations or publications in China over the past ten years, an average of 21.8 per cent of the respondents reported

encountering certain forms of interference. The right panel in Figure 1 shows that this figure is driven primarily by two types of dissemination-phase incidents: 14.4 per cent and 10.5 per cent of the respondents reported that their publications in China were subject to censorship and that they were required to obtain prior instructions or approval for presentations or publications, respectively. By contrast, outright cancellations of presentations in China were relatively rare (1.9 per cent).¹⁹

Figure 1. Research- and Dissemination-Phase Incidents Experienced by China Scholars in Japan



Note: The left panel on research-phase incidents is: ‘In the past 10 years, did you encounter any of the following experiences while conducting research on China?’ (C4a). For the right panel on dissemination-phase incidents is: ‘In the last 10 years, have you experienced any of the following?’ (C6a).

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*.

¹⁹ See Appendix note 3 for the word-clouds of research keywords by self-sensitivity perceptions.

Several scholars provided details on the interference they encountered during fieldwork in China. This interference originated from state security authorities in certain cases and involved local government officials in other cases. For example, a scholar described the abrupt suspension of an interview-based research project on rural development, which focused on poverty and environmental issues, following instructions from higher-level authorities, despite being conducted in collaboration with a local university. The survey found that 11.3 per cent of the respondents were explicitly cited by Chinese authorities for conducting politically sensitive research. Among scholars whose research focused on Taiwan, this proportion increased to 14 per cent.

In the open-ended questions, the respondents provided detailed accounts of being warned. Notably, several respondents reported receiving explicit warnings from Chinese authorities while they were physically based in Japan:

I received a warning from a XXXX (position of the person) at the Chinese embassy in Tokyo, whom I have known personally for several decades. The warning was conveyed through a mutual acquaintance. I was told that my research topic was politically sensitive and could harm Sino–Japanese friendship. The counsellor said that he had previously believed I would contribute to Sino–Japanese friendship and expressed disappointment about my current research position. [Discipline: Other (Area Studies)]

A Chinese diplomat pointed out places I had visited and people I had met. I believe this kind of information could not have been known without intelligence gathering or hacking. I was directly told that my public statements in Japan were viewed negatively from China. I understood this as a warning. I interpreted the message as: ‘We know everything about your words and actions’. [Discipline: Political Science]

In contrast to the research-phase incidents, the dissemination phase is characterised by formalised and routinised forms of control. The most common form of interference is censorship: 14.4 per cent of the scholars reported that their publications in China were subject to modification, removal or editorial intervention by authorities. In addition, 10.5 per cent noted that prior instructions or formal approval was required prior to dissemination. These patterns indicated that although research-phase activities are subject to sporadic but diverse forms of interference, the circulation of research outputs in China is governed by systematic mechanisms of oversight. Specifically, several respondents described experiences of censorship that targeted their research outputs, which authorities justified on the grounds of *political sensitivity*:

I was commissioned by the XXXX (province) Academy of Social Sciences to write an article, but later asked to make extensive revisions. The editors explained that the content was ‘politically sensitive’. [Discipline: History]

When I attempted to publish a translated version of my article in a mainland Chinese journal, the publication was rejected on the grounds that the article was politically sensitive. [Discipline: Thought/Philosophy]

Among the keywords listed by researchers whose research was perceived as *highly politically sensitive*, the most frequently cited ones were diplomacy; military and security; and Taiwan.²⁰ At the same time, responses to the open-ended questions pointed to an expanding scope of sensitivity: the scholars reported that direct and indirect warnings increasingly encompassed topics such as environmental issues, poverty and feminism, which underscored a broadening and less predictable boundary of political sensitivity. Taken together, these responses indicate not only an expansion of politically sensitive topics but also increased uncertainty on the specific boundaries of political sensitivity.

Basic findings II: Scholarly responses and adaptive strategies

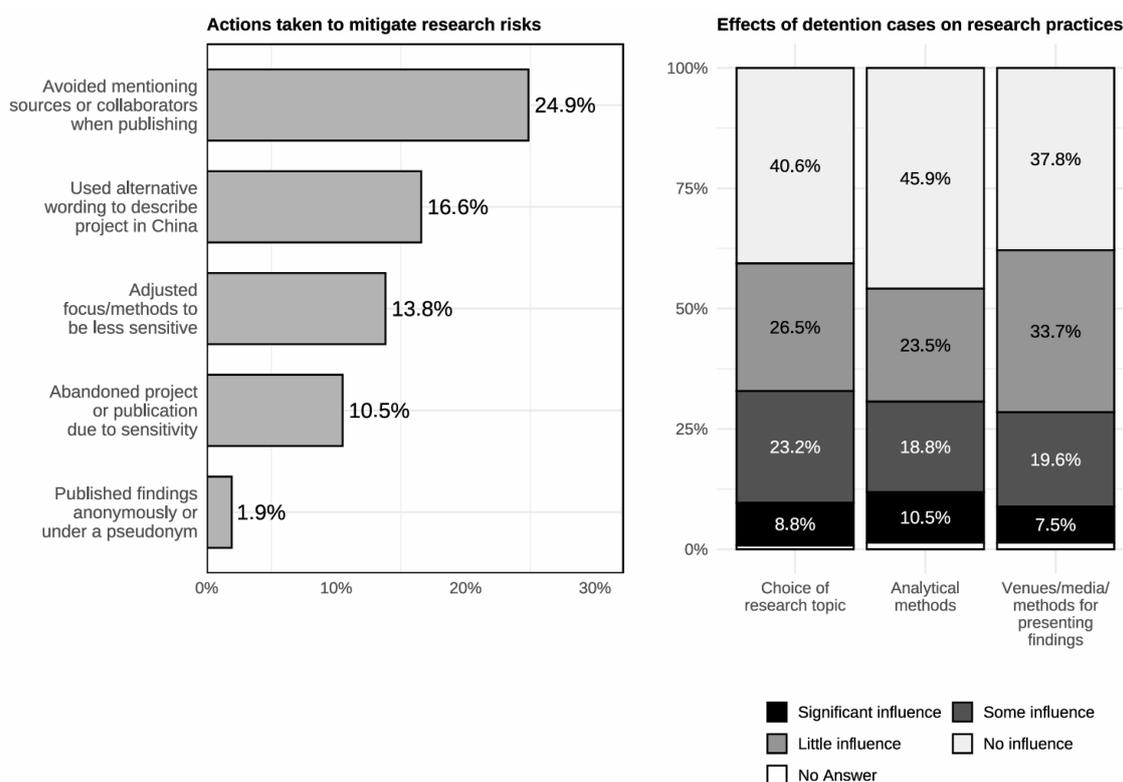
This section explores the responses of China scholars in Japan to these varied forms of pressure. Figure 2 (left panel) illustrates the range of coping strategies employed to mitigate research-related risks. The most common precaution involved avoidance of explicit mentions of Chinese collaborators or sources in publications (24.9 per cent), which reflected heightened concern about exposing interlocutors to potential state scrutiny. A substantial portion of the respondents also reported using alternative wording to describe their research on China (16.6 per cent) or altering research foci and methods to render their work less politically sensitive (13.8 per cent). Drastic measures—the most notable of which is abandoning research projects or publications due to sensitivity concerns (10.5 per cent)—were less frequent but, nonetheless, indicated that a non-trivial minority of scholars felt compelled to significantly alter research trajectories. Collectively, these patterns pointed to a broad tendency towards self-censorship. In addition, Appendix note 4 reports perception of self-censorship by discipline and includes a discussion on Japanese characteristics.

The right panel in Figure 2 examines the influence of high-profile detention cases in China on academic decision-making across three dimensions, namely, topic selection, analytical methods and venues for disseminating research findings. Approximately one-third of respondents reported at least

²⁰ Among the 61 researchers who perceived their own research as “highly politically sensitive,” 36.1% mentioned keywords related to diplomacy, 29.5% mentioned the military or security, and 18.0% mentioned Taiwan.

a certain degree of influence on their choice of analytical methods (18.8 per cent reported varying degrees, while 10.5 per cent reporting significant degrees) and dissemination venues (19.6 per cent and 7.5 per cent, respectively). Topic selection was seemingly relatively less affected but indicates meaningful concern, with 23.2 per cent and 8.8 per cent reporting certain degrees and significant degrees of influence. Unsurprisingly, the impact on analytical method highlighted a deviation from interview-based or in-country fieldwork towards approaches perceived as less risky such as document-based, remote or secondary-data analysis. These results demonstrated that while severe repression remains relatively rare, its symbolic and psychological impact remains substantial: widely publicised cases of detention have reshaped scholars' perceptions of risk and encouraged precautionary adjustments even among those who have not been personally targeted.

Figure 2. Self-Censoring Responses and Impact of Detention Incidents on Research Practices



Note: The left panel on mitigation actions is: ‘Have you done any of the following in the course of your research on China?’ (D8b:); The right panel on detention effects is: ‘There have been sporadic cases of researchers [both Chinese and Japanese] engaged in China studies in Japan being detained or going missing in mainland China. Do you think this series of incidents exerted any impact on your research, including topic selection, analytical methods or the venue, medium and method of publishing your results?’ (D4a).

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*

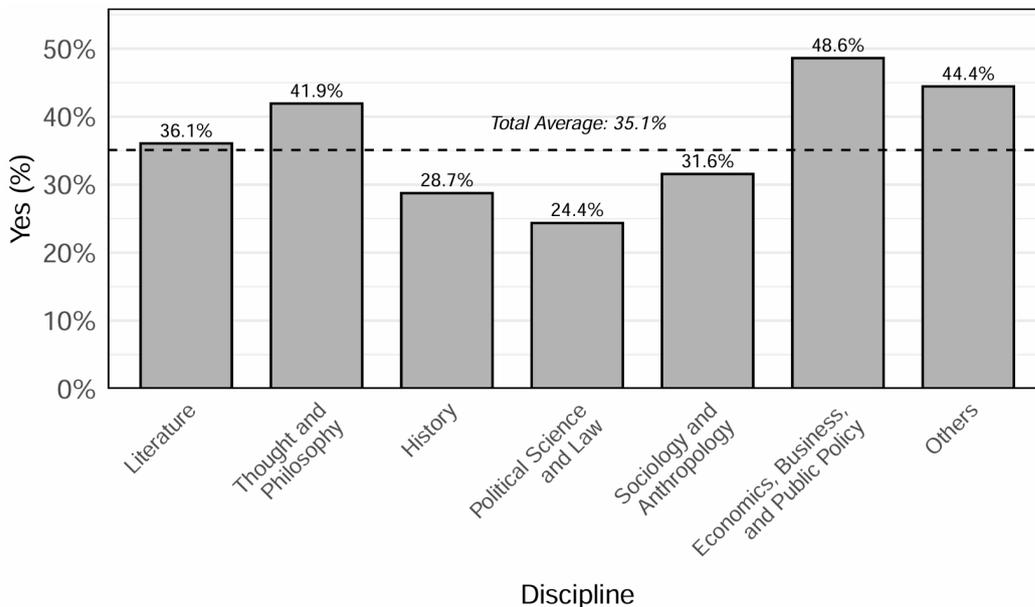
Basic findings III: Research mobility to mainland China after COVID-19

Despite heightened political sensitivity and constraint on China-related research, a substantial proportion of the respondents continued to visit mainland China for research during the post-COVID-19 period. In summary, 35.1 per cent of the respondents reported visiting China for research after January 2020, whereas 64.9 per cent indicated the opposite, thus underscoring the notable persistence of physical engagement despite increased awareness of political and institutional risks.

Figure 3 illustrates that a certain degree of disciplinary variation is observable, although the differences are not significant. Scholars in economics, business and public policy, including those in thought/philosophy, report relatively high frequencies of visits after COVID, whereas historians and scholars in political science and law exhibit low frequency of travel. These patterns could reflect differences in research methods, reliance on in-country access and perceived exposure to political risk across fields.

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that, despite heightened political control and constrained access, a non-trivial share of China scholars continue to maintain direct engagement with mainland China. This persistence denotes an important dimension of adaptive scholarly behaviour, thus complementing the patterns of self-censorship, methodological adjustment and risk mitigation documented in the previous sections.

Figure 3. Post-COVID-19 Research Visits to Mainland China by Academic Field



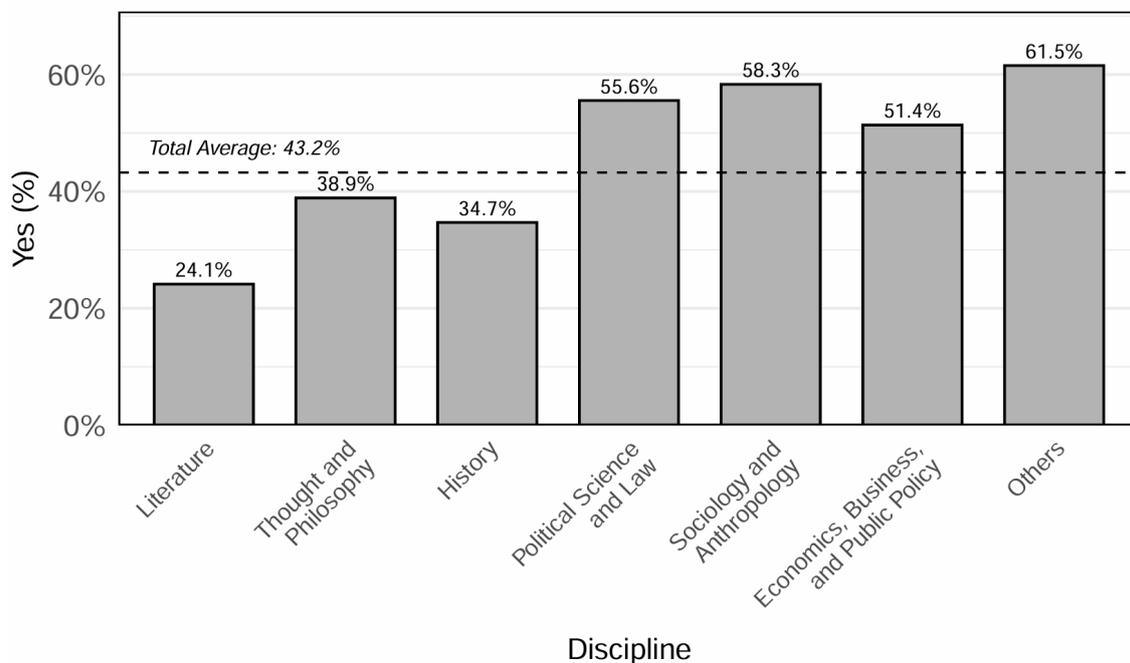
Note: Item is: ‘Have you ever visited mainland China for research-related purposes since the Wuhan lockdown on January 23, 2020 (including conferences and site visits)?’ (C3a).

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*.

Basic findings IV: Impacts on graduate education and knowledge reproduction

Figure 4 highlights a distinctive and consequential form of adaptation: increased caution in graduate student supervision has become a central coping strategy for Japan-based China scholars. Overall, 43.2 per cent of the respondents supervising graduate students reported that they provided guidance that considers the political sensitivity of research topics or encouraged students to reconsider their proposed topics on this basis. Across disciplines, a substantial proportion of the respondents mentioned that they considered political sensitivity when advising students on research topics, methods or fieldwork plans. This pattern is evident in disciplines that face the highest level of direct exposure to political risk. Specifically, 55.6 per cent and 58.3 per cent of scholars in political science/law and sociology/anthropology, respectively, confirmed that they exercised caution. As these fields frequently involve interviews, policy analysis or engagement with contemporary political issues, graduate research was particularly vulnerable to perceived risks. Importantly, however, supervisory caution was not confined to disciplines with the most exposure. Even in fields traditionally viewed as relatively insulated—such as history (34.7 per cent), thought/philosophy (38.9 per cent) and literature (24.1 per cent)—a non-trivial share of scholars reported that they tailored their guidance to students in response to political sensitivity.

Figure 4. Impacts of Political Sensitivity on Graduate Student Supervision by Discipline



Notes: Item is: ‘When supervising graduate students, have you ever encouraged them to take sensitivity into account when selecting research topics, or encouraged them to reconsider their proposed topics, taking into account the possibility that they may be sensitive?’ (D8b).

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*.

Apart from aggregate patterns, the responses to the open-ended questions revealed the increased internalisation of political sensitivity within daily practices in education. Several respondents described adjusting supervisory guidance depending on whether students—particularly Chinese nationals—planned to return to China. They advised students to modify research approaches to enable the domestic presentation of their work without triggering political risk, while explicitly attempting to avoid overt self-censorship. Others highlighted increased tension in classroom settings, where concerns centred less on faculty speech and more on peer-level *mutual monitoring* among Chinese students, thus forcing instructors to exercise heightened caution. A particularly striking narrative involved a supervisor who became markedly more guarded after a graduate student disclosed membership with the CCP, reporting persistent anxiety on whether discussions of China-related topics may be deemed politically sensitive.

Comparison with the Greitens and Truex survey

To situate these findings within the existing literature, this section compares our survey with the study by Greitens and Truex. Three methodological and contextual differences merit particular attention.

First, the timing of data collection differs: the Greitens and Truex survey was conducted in 2018, while the current data were collected in 2025. During this interval, the research environment surrounding China studies changed substantially, including the imposition and lifting of COVID-19 related travel restrictions.²¹ Second, the composition of respondents differs markedly. Approximately half of the Greitens and Truex survey respondents were PRC citizens, and a substantial majority were political scientists and historians. By contrast, the present study reflects a more diverse disciplinary and national profile, including scholars in literature and thought/philosophy. Third, response rates diverge significantly—28.6 per cent in the earlier survey versus 63.1 per cent in the current study. This discrepancy is analytically consequential: if scholars with repressive experiences were more likely to participate, variation in response rates may bias estimates of incident prevalence and complicate direct comparison.

Given these caveats, broad cross-survey patterns remains informative. In the Greitens and Truex study, the most frequently reported difficulties included denial of access to specific materials (approximately 16 per cent)²², archival restrictions (14.7 per cent), interview cancellations (approximately 12 per cent)²³, and authorities approaching Chinese contacts (12 per cent). In the

²¹ Truex 2024.

²² This figure was based on values inferred from Figure 1 on page 354 of Greitens and Truex (2020).

²³ The value inferred from Figure 1 on page 354 of Greitens and Truex (2020).

current survey, these categories remain among the most commonly reported obstacles, albeit at relatively lower rates. For more direct forms of pressure—such as being urged to cooperate with Chinese authorities, physical threats or temporary detention—reported incidence rates are broadly comparable across the two surveys. This convergence suggests that overt coercive measures, although relatively rare, are not confined to a particular national or institutional setting but constitute a shared feature of contemporary research environment on China. Overall, despite variations in magnitude, both surveys point to the same conclusion: a substantial portion of scholars across diverse contexts encounter political constraints and risks in conducting research on China.

Further examination

Disciplinary heterogeneity and uneven exposure

As reported in Basic findings IV, the study finds disciplinary heterogeneity in the level of impact on graduate education. Apart from the overall levels of constraint and adaptation, the survey data reveals substantial variation across academic disciplines, indicating that political sensitivity and its consequences are unevenly distributed within Japan-based China studies.

Panel A in Figure 5 reveals an evident variation in exposure to political sensitivity and repressive experiences. Scholars in political science/law and sociology/anthropology reported the highest levels of direct exposure. In the fields of political science/law, 19.7 per cent of the respondents mentioned being explicitly informed by Chinese authorities that they are conducting politically sensitive research. History also stands out as a high-risk field. Among the historians, 22.5 per cent reported denial of access to archives or research materials, while 26.2 per cent experienced censorship, thus pointing to substantial barriers to data collection and the dissemination of research findings. Notably, the humanities category (*Bun-Shi-Tetsu*) is internally heterogeneous, particularly with respect to reliance on access to archives and primary materials—an issue that places history in a distinct position. By contrast, scholars in literature and thought/philosophy cited fewer direct incidents and lower perceived levels of political sensitivity and censorship.

Economics, business and public policy occupy an intermediate position between the humanities and other social sciences. While only 8.3 per cent of the respondents in this group reported being directly informed that their research was politically sensitive, they exhibited one of the highest reported rates of serious direct threats such as interrogation, detention or pressure (13.9 per cent). A plausible explanation for this pattern lies in the distinctive tradition of China-focused economic research in Japan, which has placed a strong emphasis on qualitative fieldwork for a long time, including interview-based and local-level studies. These research practices entail sustained presence in the country and close interaction with local actors, thus potentially increasing researchers' visibility and exposure to direct forms of scrutiny. In the responses to the open-ended questions, several scholars expressed concern about a political *grey zone* in economic research such as the

CCP-promoted ‘bright future discourse of the Chinese economy’ (*Zhongguo Jingji Guangming Lun* 中国经济光明论), which encourages analysts to emphasise optimistic assessments of China’s economic prospects.²⁴ These narratives underscored that economic analysis is increasingly influenced not only by overt constraints but also by implicit expectations regarding acceptable narratives.

Panel B in Figure 5 highlights an evident cross-disciplinary variation in the adoption of adaptive and self-censoring strategies. For nearly all response categories, scholars in the social sciences—particularly political science, law, sociology and anthropology—emphasised substantially higher levels of behavioural adjustment, including modifying research foci or methods, using alternative wording and avoiding explicit reference to sources or collaborators. By contrast, scholars in literature and thought/philosophy exhibited markedly lower levels of such adaptations, while historians occupied an intermediate position.

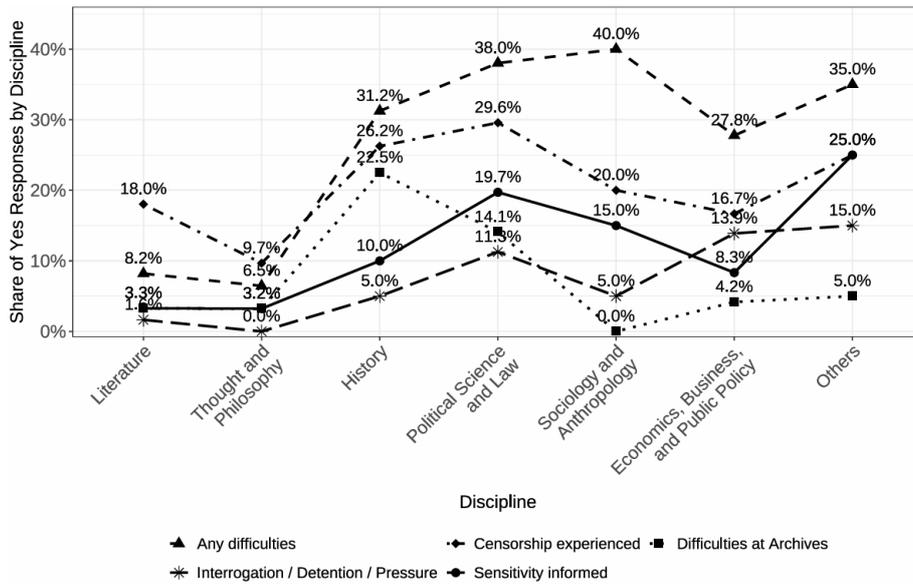
Panel C in Figure 5 displays a broadly similar disciplinary pattern in perceived impacts of recent high-profile cases. Social scientists reported the highest levels of influence on research practices, whereas scholars in literature and thought/philosophy displayed relatively limited effects. Once again, historians fall between these two poles, which reflects their close engagement with politically sensitive historical materials and the salience of widely publicised cases of detention involving historians.

Evidence depicted in Panels A–C underscores that disciplinary differences in exposure, adaptation and perceived impact are structurally patterned and not incidental. Fields that rely on fieldwork, interviews and engagement with contemporary political or social processes face systematically higher risks and, accordingly, exhibit more extensive adaptive and self-censoring responses. Conversely, disciplines anchored in text-based, historical, and philosophical approaches encounter fewer direct constraints and report lower levels of adjustment. This alignment of exposure, adaptation and perceived impact implies that these patterns are embedded in differentiated disciplinary logics and practices among Japan-based China scholars, rather than reflecting isolated individual responses.

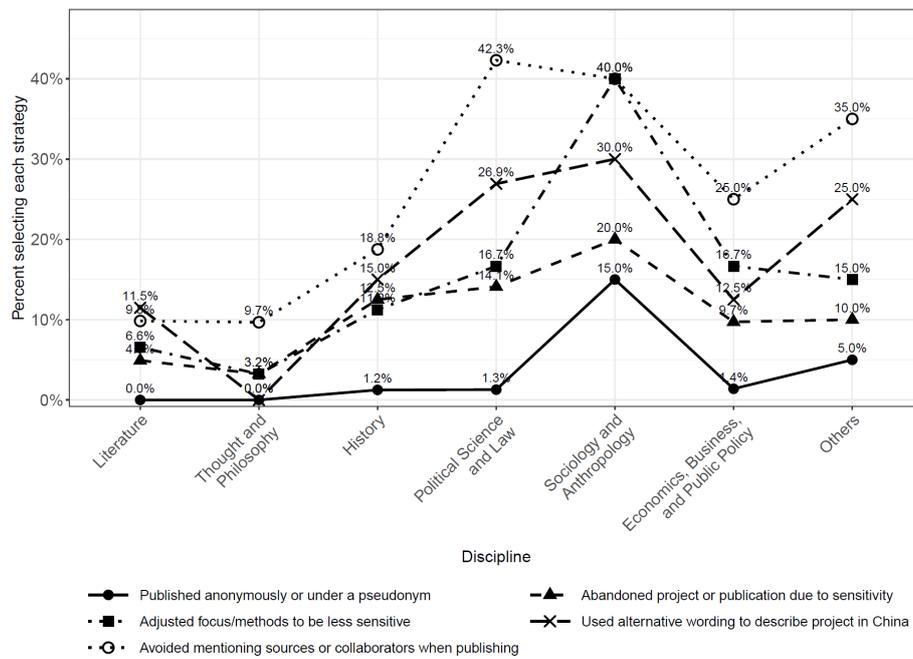
Figure 5. Disciplinary Differences

(A) Research Constraints

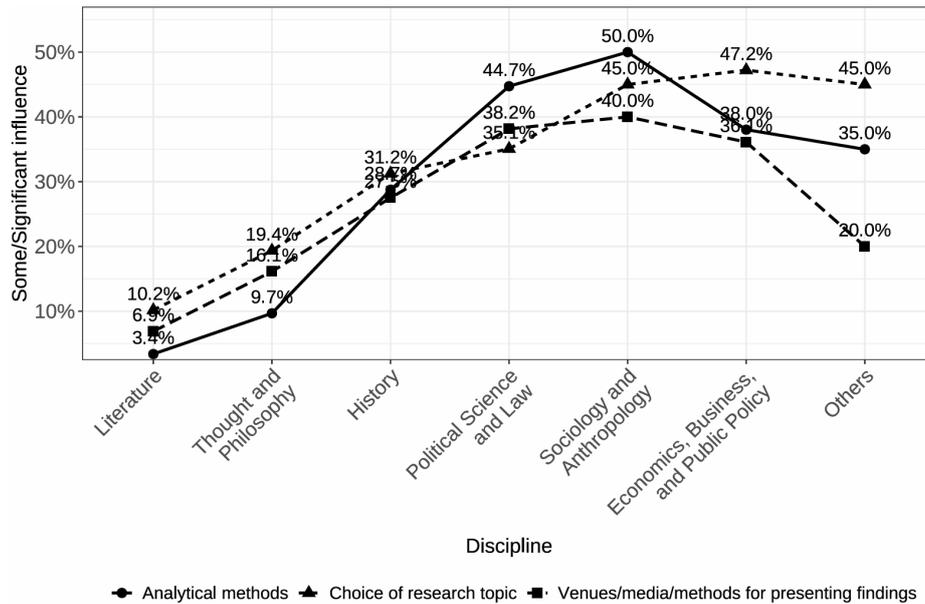
²⁴ National Development and Reform Commission, “Deeply Study and Promote Xi Jinping Thought on the Economy and Firmly Champion the Narrative of China’s Bright Economic Future” (深入学习宣传习近平经济思想 坚定不移唱响中国经济光明论 *Shenru xuexi xuanchuan Xi Jinping jingji sixiang, jianding buyi changxiang Zhongguo jingji guangming lun*), November 22, 2024. https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xwdt/ztl/NEW_srxxgcjipjjsx/jjsxyjqk/tgyg/202411/t20241122_1394656.html [final access on January 15, 2026].



(B) Variation in Adaptive Scholarly Strategies Across Disciplines



Panel (C) Impact of Recent Events, Including Cases of Detention



Note: Panel (A) reports research difficulties (C4a), censorship experiences (C6a) and being informed that one's research is politically sensitive: 'Have you ever received any direct suggestion from anyone affiliated with the Chinese government or the Chinese Communist Party that your research is politically sensitive?' (B4a). Panel (B) is based on responses to D1a. Panel (C) is based on responses to D4a.

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*.

This within-field heterogeneity is also evident in the respondents' reflections. One scholar specialising in literature noted that,

The nature of the problem greatly varies according to the research field or subfield within China studies. While my primary specialisation is literature, I am also interested in Chinese politics and contemporary history. In literary studies, I rarely feel direct interference from the Chinese government, whereas this pressure is felt much more strongly in politics and contemporary history. In this survey, I therefore responded mainly from the standpoint of literary research. [Discipline: Literature]

This observation underscores that disciplinary exposure to political risk is not fixed but dependent on the scholars' specific research foci, even within ostensibly low-risk fields.

Predictor of repressive experience and scholarly response

Building on the abovementioned descriptive patterns, Figure 6 presents a further analysis to identify

the key predictors of research experience and responses using modified Poisson regressions.²⁵ We first assess the impact of individual attributes, disciplinary backgrounds and methodological choices on the likelihood of encountering research-phase incidents. Panel A in Figure 6 depicts that scholars relying on fieldwork methods faced a significantly higher probability of encountering challenges during their research. Researchers who were previously alerted to the political sensitivity of their topics are similarly exposed to elevated risk. Fieldwork was strongly correlated with reported incidents, which indicates that greater visibility and direct interpersonal engagement increased vulnerability to repressive experiences.²⁶

Panel B in Figure 6 shifts the focus to the determinants of risk-mitigation practices including some forms of self-censoring measures discussed in the previous section. Research focused on Hong Kong and prior notification of topic sensitivity increased the likelihood of adopting defensive or self-censoring strategies. Notably, prior experience with research-phase obstacles is the strongest predictor of risk-mitigation behaviours. This pattern indicates a clear feedback dynamic in which experiences with repression—whether directly encountered or indirectly signalled—prompted adaptive responses among scholars even in the absence of an immediate threat.

Notably, the estimated confidence intervals for scholars in literature and thought/philosophy were substantially wider than those in other disciplines (Panels A and B). This pattern implies a high degree of within-field heterogeneity in exposure to repressive research experiences and the adoption of self-censoring practices. Substantively, the result also indicated that scholars who remain insulated from research-related constraints and others whose work is strongly influenced by the current political environment co-existed within these disciplines.

Panel C in Figure 6 presents the predictors of visits to mainland China for research-related purposes after the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to Panels A and B, the absence of clear predictors indicates that decisions on post-COVID-19 travel were influenced by a diffuse combination of institutional policies, personal risk assessments and logistical considerations instead of disciplinary or methodological characteristics alone.

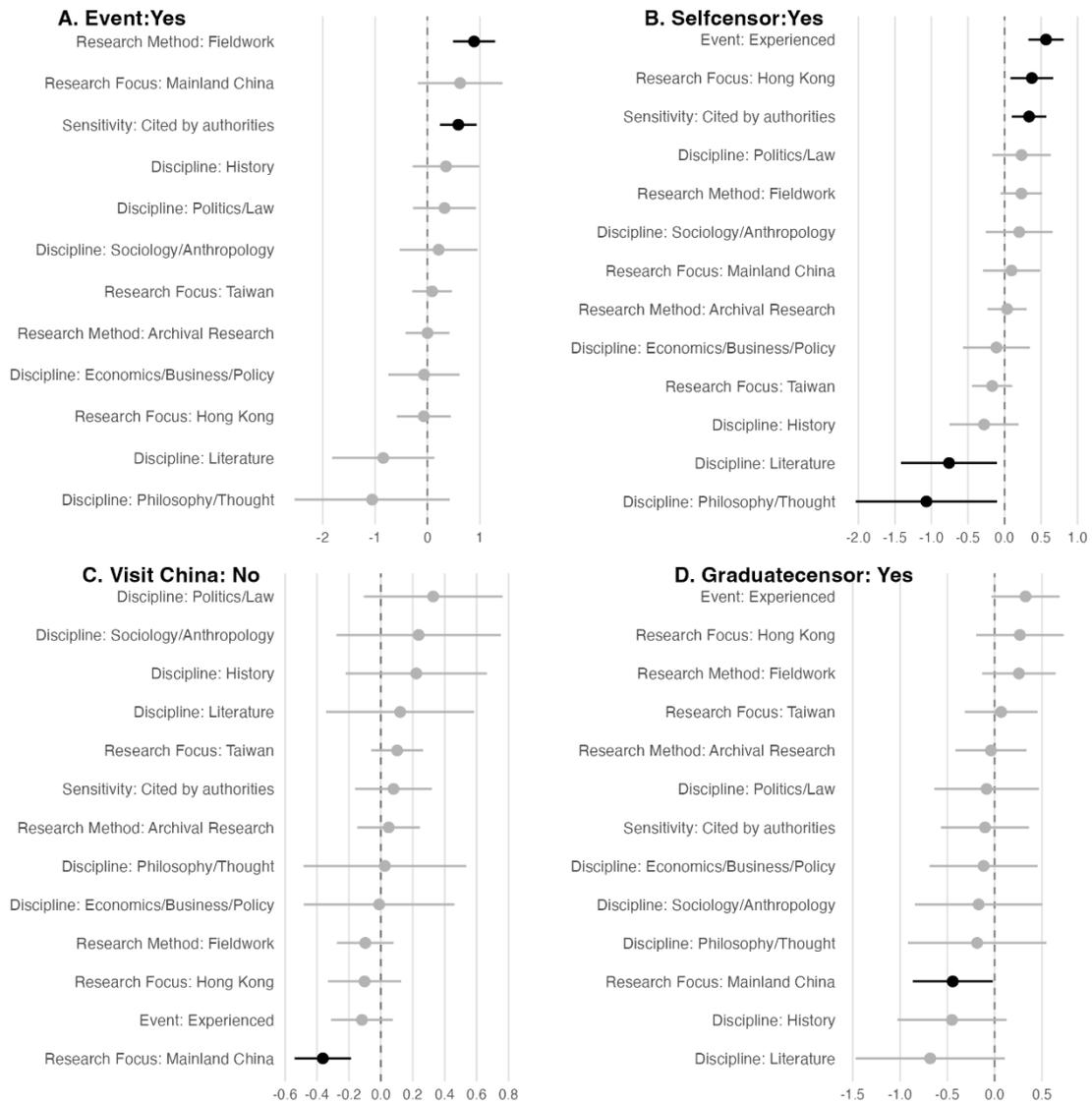
Finally, Panel D in Figure 6 features the determinants of heightened caution in graduate student supervision. While prior experience with repressive incidents plays an important role, Panel D indicates that disciplinary effects are generally weaker than those displayed in Panels A and B. Nevertheless, scholars in *Bun-Shi-Tetsu* consistently exhibited lower estimated probabilities of adopting restrictive supervisory practices, which reinforced earlier findings that these fields are, on

²⁵ These coefficients represent changes in the expected probability of experiencing research-phase incidents and self-censoring practices (instead of changes in log-odds as in a logistics model). Exponentiating these coefficients yields risk ratios, which are directly interpretable as proportional changes in the probability. See Talbot et al. 2023.

²⁶ Our additional estimation confirms that affiliation-based differences, although less pronounced, are also visible: those based in think tanks report greater risks than university-affiliated scholars, indicating that institutional profiles perceived as more policy-relevant may attract additional scrutiny.

average, less directly affected by repressive pressures—despite the persistence of substantial heterogeneity within them.

Figure 6. Predictors of Repressive Experience, Self-Censored Responses, Post-COVID-19 Travel and Impact on Graduate Student Supervision



Notes: The dependent variables in each panel are defined as follows: (A) indicator of the experience any research-phase obstacles (C4a); (B) indicator of the adoption of any self-censoring or adaptive strategy (C6a); (C) indicator of the absence of travel to mainland China after January 2020 (C3a); and (D) indicator of heightened caution in graduate student supervision due to political sensitivity (D8b). Points denote estimated log risk ratios derived from the modified Poisson regression, while horizontal lines indicate 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*.

Sinological resilience

The study also examines whether the tightening research environment is merely signal a return to the Cold War period. Recent initiatives in the United States—such as the call issued by the China Research Center at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies to ‘rediscover a lost art’—indicated that a number of scholars are, indeed, revisiting and refining techniques developed under the constraints posed by the Cold War era.²⁷

However, Japan’s situation presents a more nuanced perspective. The current survey reveals that, although repression and constraints are widely perceived across disciplines, outright withdrawal from China-related research remains rare (Panel B in Figure 5). Instead of exiting the field, the majority of scholars displayed adaptive responses. Notably, 35.1 per cent reported having travelled to mainland China for research after January 2020, thus maintaining physical engagement despite heightened political sensitivity and post-pandemic barriers (Figure 3). The uneven distribution of risk across disciplines points to a structural resilience anchored in the Japanese *Bun–Shi–Tetsu* tradition, although its protection is uneven. Historians continue to face significant archival censorship, but those in the literature and philosophy are less affected by political sensitivity. Ultimately, while social scientists are faced with increasing obstacles to fieldwork, Japan-based scholars in the humanities remain largely insulated from overt political interventions.

In this light, the current moment is not only a mere return to Cold War–style Kremlinology. Instead, the Japanese case illustrates a form of adaptive, conditional and collective resilience called *Sinological resilience*. It neither implies a restoration of previous research practices nor eliminates costs imposed by political sensitivity. Instead, it reflects empirically observable patterns of adjustment and reorientation intended to sustain knowledge production under duress. Apart from Japan, parallel developments point to a broad methodological recalibration. Renewed emphasis on historical inquiry and archival depth signals, for instance, not only a fallback to speculative Cold War techniques but also a potential rebalancing towards classical and integrative methodological repertoires.²⁸

The current study advances *Sinological resilience* as a working hypothesis. Furthermore, this resilience should be viewed as provisional and temporal. Authoritarian repression is selective and dynamic and recent developments—including the CCP’s increased instrumentalisation of ancient history and classical thought—imply that domains previously perceived as less politically salient may fall within the expanding horizon of control by the regime. Given this trajectory, the CCP offers a clear incentive to extend its censorial reach deep into the realms of ancient history and classical

²⁷ Mertha ed. 2024. Also, see Shambaugh 2024.

²⁸ Wang 2022; Huang 2023.

thought, thus indicating that scholars in the humanities may eventually confront constraints similar to those experienced by scholars in the social sciences. Consequently, the relative insulation of scholars in the humanities likely stems less from deliberate scholarly repositioning and more from the field's thematic distancing from the immediate concerns of the regime—a condition that may be short-lived.

Conclusion

This study aimed to address a critical blind spot in the global understanding of contemporary China studies: the experiences of scholars based in Japan. By analysing the results of the 2025 *Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan*, we demonstrated that Japan's deep historical ties and geographical proximity to the PRC do not render its academic community immune to the reach of authoritarian constraint. Instead, the tightening research environment in the PRC generated a complex landscape of risk and adaptation that challenges the assumption of a uniform global crisis. The current findings confirmed that although Japan-based China scholars face significant hurdles—ranging from denial in access to direct censorship—a pattern of disciplinary divergence unique to the Japanese context mediated the impact of these constraints.

The findings revealed two divergent realities within the field. On the one hand, scholars in the social sciences operate in high-friction environments characterised by severely constrained fieldwork and increased risks of state interference, thus reflecting decoupling trends observed in the West. On the other hand, scholars in the humanities (*Bun-Shi-Tetsu*), particularly literature and thought/philosophy, remain relatively insulated. This finding implies that Japan's *thick* tradition of Sinology serves as an epistemological buffer, enabling the continued production of knowledge even with limited contemporary empirical access.

Consequently, China studies in Japan are not merely reverting to Cold War-style remote inference (Kremlinology); instead, they draw on established methodological traditions to navigate the current political climate. However, this resilience does not imply that such traditions are well suited for addressing immediate policy concerns or shifting societal demands. Notably, substantial variation exists within the *Bun-Shi-Tetsu* fields. At the same time, emerging developments—particularly the increased use of digital tools, including AI and large language models—point to new possibilities for the revitalisation of humanities-based research.

This aspect raises a broader question that extends beyond the Japanese case: can Sinological resilience function as a meaningful counterweight to authoritarian hardening? Specifically, can historically grounded, methodologically plural traditions sustain critical inquiry despite increasingly institutionalised political control, or do they merely enable the persistence of scholarship by avoiding analyses on current political developments? The findings underscore that the answer is crucially dependent on the reproduction of expertise. The finding that 43.2 per cent of advisors—a majority of

them belonging to the social sciences—consider political sensitivity in graduate student supervision signals the emergence of a generational filter. While established scholars may rely on deep networks or archival depth to navigate the current climate, the next generation is being pre-emptively steered away from politically sensitive inquiries to ensure safety. This precautionary approach, broadly defined as protective self-censorship, could undermine the field’s capacity to analyse contemporary dynamics.

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