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GAINING DATA, LOSING GROUND: CONTEMPORARY CHINA STUDIES IN A NEW ERA — NOTES FROM JAPAN

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Gaining Data, Losing Ground:
Contemporary China Studies in a New Era — Notes from Japan

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of China's own transformation, advances in analytical techniques, and changes in the political environment for research, contemporary China studies is undergoing a transformation that can be summarized as "gaining data, losing ground." The digitization of sources and the development of large-scale datasets have brought a quantitative increase in the data available for analysis. At the same time, amid rising geopolitical tensions, access to fieldwork and archival materials has been constrained, narrowing the opportunities to understand context, discover questions, and check data against observation in the field. Drawing mainly on the experience of China studies in Japan, the paper traces the evolution of the research environment and the constraints faced by researchers inside and outside China, and considers what functions alternative sources, research conducted outside China, collaboration among researchers, and the use of artificial intelligence can and cannot fulfill. It treats the current change not as a simple return to the Cold War starting point but as a process in which gain and loss proceed simultaneously, and it identifies two tasks in particular: restoring the verification function of research and responding to the shrinking opportunities for contact with the field.

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1. Introduction

In the field of contemporary China studies, the digitization of sources, the expansion of publicly available data, and the development of analytical techniques have made it possible to analyze large volumes of data that were once beyond reach. At the same time, participant observation, interviews, and access to archival materials (*dang'an*) on the ground, particularly by foreign researchers, have become increasingly restricted. Data keep increasing while the field recedes. The amount of information processed in bits has grown overwhelmingly, yet papers that carry the smell of the soil of the mainland have become scarcer. How do these changes affect the chain of knowledge production about China—posing scholarly questions, building multifaceted understanding, and verifying what is true?

This paper conceptualizes the change as "the gain and loss of dimensions," meaning the gain of data dimensions and the loss of field dimensions. Even as ever-bigger data become available and the number of analyzable items and features grows, there is no guarantee that researchers will have sufficient opportunities to observe context in the field, deepen their grounded understanding of reality, discover mechanisms and questions, and verify the results obtained from quantitative data. Of particular concern is the weakening of the circuit through which field observation and data are checked against each other, so that errors and inaccuracies in measurement can be recognized, and of the researcher's sense of the problem that this circuit sustains. On the other hand, even when access to the field is constrained, the possibility remains of conducting convincing research through accumulated sources, new analytical techniques, research conducted outside China, and collaboration between researchers inside and outside China. Drawing in particular on the experience of contemporary China studies in Japan, this paper examines how such gains and losses affect research and what responses might compensate for the functions being lost.

As background, I first identify three changes facing contemporary China studies. The "New Era" in this paper carries three meanings: the transformation of China as an object of study, the advance of scholarly techniques, and the change in the geopolitical environment for research.

The first is the "New Era" of China's economy, politics, and society themselves. While China retains characteristics of a developing country, its features as a technological power have become increasingly prominent. New themes for understanding China have emerged: the end of the high-growth period, the shift away from an industrial structure centered on agriculture and manufacturing, low fertility, population aging and decline, and the development of artificial intelligence, among others. In addition, the research standards of scholars in mainland China have risen, and China studies conducted by Chinese scholars themselves has gained a much greater presence. These changes also call into question the very role of research by foreign scholars: what should they ask about China, and what knowledge can they add?

The second is the "New Era" of academic research itself. Over roughly the past twenty years, the conversion of statistics and other sources into data and archives has progressed, making analysis using large-scale data possible. In the humanities, digital humanities has developed, expanding the means to collect and compare, in large quantities, historical materials and literary works that were previously read individually. In the social sciences, methodologies for identifying causal relationships have developed alongside richer data, and research using causal inference methods has gained prominence. Furthermore, advances in machine learning and generative AI have made it easier to process previously unstructured texts and images into analyzable form. The sources and techniques for observing China from the outside have changed dramatically over these twenty years.

The third is "Xi Jinping's New Era." As symbolized by the revision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution in October 2017 and the amendment of the state Constitution in March 2018, political tightening that clarifies the CCP's leadership has proceeded. Moreover, as US–China rivalry has deepened and security has become a policy priority, international academic exchange and the flow of information have also been affected by political tensions. Although the pressure on China scholars inside and outside China varies by research topic, affiliation, and research method, participant observation, on-site interviews, and the collection of archival materials by foreign researchers in particular have become more difficult. Access to sources that had been obtained online, such as

statistics and academic information, has also been partially restricted.

These three changes pose different challenges to China studies. China's own transformation demands new questions, and the advance of scholarly techniques multiplies the means of answering them, while the deteriorating research environment narrows opportunities for observation and verification. Today's access constraints have also given rise to the view that the research environment is once again approaching that of the Cold War era. However, a similarity in research environments is not the same as research itself returning to the past. How far we can compensate for the lost functions of observation and verification, while building on the accumulation of sources and analytical techniques, is the key question for thinking about the future of China studies.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the evolution of the research environment for China studies from the Cold War era to the present and examines the "coming full circle" thesis and its limitations. Section 3 considers the pressures facing researchers outside China, referring to survey results from the United States, Europe, and Japan, as well as the experiences of area studies beyond China. Section 4 organizes the changes in types of data collection along two axes, sample size and variable dimensionality. It distinguishes "data dimensions," the number of items in the data, from "field dimensions," the breadth of knowledge gained by directly engaging with the object of study and the possibility of discovering new questions, and examines the problems that constrained access to the field poses for research. Section 5 examines the research environment within China, and Section 6 discusses what alternative sources, research conducted outside China, and the use of AI can compensate for. Section 7 concludes by distilling the discussion into questions about the loss and recovery of research functions and the training of the next generation of researchers.

2. The Changing Environment of China Studies: The Cold War, Reform and Opening, and the "New Era"

(1) From the Cold War to Reform and Opening

Let me begin with a very brief review of the research environment before reform and opening. Katsuji Nakagane, who long led the study of the Chinese economy in Japan, recalled the state of research before 1976, when the Cultural Revolution ended, as follows:

> "Regarding the quality and quantity of research on the Chinese economy at that time, one point is that the constraints of data and sources were extremely severe. Before 1976, what we did in studying the Chinese economy was, first of all, to read the *People's Daily* from cover to cover." (Nakagane 2003, 54)

China studies during the Cold War was an exercise in inferring what was happening inside China from an extremely limited set of sources: articles in official media, documents released by the Party and government, fragmentary published statistics, and travelogues by the few who visited China. This style, called "China watching" in the United States alongside "Kremlinology" in Soviet studies, was a system of techniques for reading between the lines—reading political signals in the placement of articles, the ranking of leaders, and subtle changes in terminology. It was a realistic adaptation to information constraints, but it was limited by an absolute shortage of information.

This situation changed completely as reform and opening progressed. Hiroyuki Kato describes the change brought about by the publication of statistical yearbooks and academic information as follows:

> "The research style of carefully reading newspapers was immediately forced to change as raw information from China increased explosively. The *China Statistical Yearbook* was first published in 1981, local statistical yearbooks were published one after another, and statistical data became continuously available. In addition, an enormous number of economics journals, starting with *Economic Research Journal* (*Jingji Yanjiu*), the journal of the Institute of

Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, resumed publication or were newly launched." (Kato 2016, 214)

Following the publication of statistical yearbooks, from the 1990s onward joint research with Chinese research institutions, fieldwork and interviews in villages and firms, and large-scale questionnaire surveys became possible. In the 2000s, firm-level data such as the Annual Survey of Industrial Firms, transaction-level customs data, and even the microdata of general social surveys conducted by Chinese research institutions became available to researchers outside China, and China studies came to enjoy a data environment as rich as, or richer than, that of other area studies. In the humanities, too, the opening of local archives progressed, making archive-based research on contemporary history possible. During this period, many Japanese China scholars established a research style of building long-term relationships of trust with local collaborators and deepening their observations within those networks.[1]

(2) The "New Era": Narrowing "Interstices of Freedom"

Since the 2010s, however, and especially under the Xi Jinping administration, this research style has again faced difficulties. Fumiki Tahara, who has conducted fieldwork in rural China for many years, describes the change from his own experience:

"In 2010, an official from the township judicial office who had heard about my research in the village came to question me. [...] Even on such occasions, thanks to my uncles putting in a word behind the scenes, I somehow managed to get through. In the Xi Jinping era, however, protecting me, a foreigner, has become an act that carries political risk even for officials. The space that once existed—what might be called rich 'interstices of freedom'—has narrowed drastically." (Tahara 2024, 224)

What matters here is not so much that the constraints have appeared as formal prohibitions, but that the web of informal protection that had supported researchers has ceased to function. Fieldwork in the reform era depended less on formal permission than on exchanges among researchers in a broad sense and on the discretion of local people, and this has shrunk considerably in recent years.

The situation is similar with regard to access to historical materials. Ei Murakami describes the current state of research on Chinese economic history and modern history as follows:

"As a practical challenge for research, access to primary sources in China—especially the use of archives—had long been difficult except in a few cases such as Shanghai, but in recent years it has become extremely closed, and for the time being research relying mainly on archives held in China has become difficult. It is therefore important to actively use historical materials held outside China." (Murakami 2026, 49)

In addition, it was reported in 2023 that access from outside China to some of the databases of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), China's academic database, had been restricted, and restrictions have also emerged on the provision of corporate information and statistical databases to users outside China (Ito, Yu, Mikiya, and Lim 2026). Similarly, China Judgments Online, which had published court judgments, has reportedly seen a sharp decline in the number of published judgments and the deletion of judgments since 2021 (Yang 2023). In addition to the "qualitative" sources of fieldwork and archives, constraints are beginning to reach, at least partially, the

[1] On the major changes in the analytical environment in the study of Chinese politics during the transition into the reform era, particularly the problem of information overload, see Carlson et al. (2010).

"quantitative" sources developed since reform and opening.

(3) The "Coming Full Circle" Thesis

In light of this situation, David Shambaugh, who divides the lineage of contemporary China studies in the United States into six generations, describes the situation of the current sixth generation as a return to that of the first and second generations—a return, as it were, to the Kremlinological methods of the first postwar generation.

> "The years when American and foreign scholars could roam the country by train and other means, live in villages, observe factory workers, interview officials, and other research modalities appears to be over. The result is that, ironically, the field of contemporary China studies may be coming full circle (to explain this article's sub-title) during the sixth generation and returning to a research environment not unlike the first and second generations confronted: peering into China from the outside." (Shambaugh 2024, 327)

Shambaugh's diagnosis is persuasive in some respects as a description of the changing research environment, but its value lies above all in the problem it raises (Ito 2024). That said, as I argue below, the research environment coming to resemble that of the Cold War is not the same as research materials and methods themselves returning to the Cold War. I return to this point later.

Interestingly, a similar problem has been pointed out in China studies in Taiwan. Wang Hsin-hsien, a Taiwanese China scholar, notes that fieldwork in mainland China by Taiwanese researchers has also become difficult and that the focus of research is shifting toward analysis of the "China factor" (*Zhongguo yinsu*) in Taiwanese society; he calls this "China studies without China" (*meiyou Zhongguo de Zhongguo yanjiu*) (Wang 2025). Research on China's influence in Taiwan is an important theme, but it is not research on China itself. As the object of research shifts toward places that researchers can access, the center of gravity of scholarship itself can move.

In the Japanese context, the phrase "China studies without China" evokes another meaning with a longer reach. In *China as Method*, Yuzo Mizoguchi criticized traditional Japanese Sinology as follows:

> "For example, the *Tang poems* and the *Blue Cliff Record* are read within Japanese literary consciousness and the world of Zen, not in order to know China in the Tang or Song period. [...] Such reading of China without China, as it were, derives from the fact that the motives for absorbing Chinese culture in the Edo period were highly autonomous, based entirely on circumstances within Japan, and that the degree of Japanization was correspondingly large. [...] This Sinology without China continued to entrench itself, particularly in the fields of ancient and medieval studies, creating cracks and distortions between it and postwar Sinology, which sought the rehabilitation of China." (Mizoguchi 1989, 132–133)

Mizoguchi's "Sinology without China" arose not from constraints on access but from Japan's own autonomous interests, which led scholars to read China by drawing it into their own context. Today's "China studies without China," by contrast, arises because external constraints separate researchers from the field in China. If researchers kept away from the field construct their image of China only from the sources at hand and their own interests, the result could become a new form of "Sinology without China."

(4) "Old yet New" Alternative Data

Yet while access to the field has become difficult, the sources for observing China from the outside have become richer than ever. Notably, some of them have an "old yet new" character (Ito, Yu, Mikiya, and Lim 2026). The *People's Daily*, for example, was a limited source that could only be read closely during the Cold War, but as early as 1964 Tatsumi Okabe conducted pioneering research that sought

to systematically grasp China's foreign policy through content analysis of the newspaper (Okabe 1964). Digitization has also opened new analytical possibilities for historical sources such as the *Qing Veritable Records* (*Qing shilu*), the internally circulated *Neibu Cankao* (Internal Reference), and collections held at institutions such as the Hoover Institution in the United States. Furthermore, data that were never created as research materials in the first place—social media posts, satellite imagery, records of labor disputes, government procurement data—have become important clues for observing China's political economy (Ito 2026).

One example of the potential of such data is the "AI-tocracy" paper by Beraja and colleagues (Beraja et al. 2023). The paper comprehensively collects data on Chinese AI firms, government procurement contracts, and social unrest since the early 2010s, and empirically demonstrates the coevolution of AI technology and authoritarian rule. This research shows that, by combining publicly available procurement information with firm data, it is possible to approach a core question of China's political economy: the relationship between the regime and innovation. Research "peering into China from the outside" is acquiring, through advances in data and analytical techniques, a resolution entirely different from that of the Cold War era.[2]

3. Pressures on Researchers outside China and Their Experiences

(1) Surveys of Researchers in the United States, Europe, and Japan

This section examines the effects of political pressure on research activities. In recent years, the pressures experienced by China scholars outside China have been systematically surveyed. Greitens and Truex surveyed more than 500 China scholars and found that about 9 percent of respondents had been "invited to tea" (*bei he cha*)—that is, questioned—by the authorities in the previous ten years, and that a variety of repressive experiences existed, such as denial of access to archives and contact with local public security during fieldwork (Greitens and Truex 2020). The survey also shows that such experiences do not occur uniformly across researchers but are skewed by research topic and method.

Pressure does not arise only from within China. In the United States, Chinese-origin researchers became targets of investigation and suspicion under the so-called "China Initiative." According to a survey by Xie and colleagues, many Chinese-origin scientists working in the United States reported feeling anxiety and fear, and said they were considering leaving the United States or ceasing to apply for federal research funding (Xie et al. 2023).

In Japan, my colleagues and I surveyed 362 Japan-based China scholars in March 2025 (Ito, Lim, Yu, and Mikiya 2025; 2026). Experiences of difficulty vary greatly across disciplines: the share reporting some research-related incident is highest in sociology and anthropology (40.0 percent) and political science and law (38.0 percent), followed by history (31.2 percent), and lowest in literature (8.2 percent) and thought/philosophy (6.5 percent). Difficulties at archives are concentrated in history, and experiences of censorship reach a notable share even in literature. The deterioration of the research environment is thus not uniform but varies in intensity by discipline and method.

Even those without direct experience are affected, as recent incidents in which researchers have been detained or have gone missing shape the research process itself.[3] In economics, business, and

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[2] In recent years, I too have been engaged in analyses using alternative data. The first project is an empirical analysis of Xi Jinping's documents (Ito, Lim, and Zhang 2025, among others). Understanding the political economy of the Xi Jinping era requires systematic analysis of leaders' statements and official documents. Ito, Lim, and Zhang (2025), for example, examine divergences in policy orientation within Zhongnanhai and their economic consequences. This is also an attempt to reconstruct the Cold War-era approach of reading the *People's Daily* with contemporary text data and quantitative methods. The second project is the assessment of Chinese large language models (Ito and Takaguchi 2025a; 2025b). As AI developed in China spreads globally, examining what political constraints are built into these models is an important task both for using AI as a research tool and for understanding Chinese technology and its international influence.

[3] The question reads: "There have been intermittent cases in which researchers engaged in China studies in Japan (including Chinese and Japanese nationals) have been detained or have gone missing in mainland

public policy, only 27.8 percent reported a research-related incident, yet 47.2 percent reported that recent incidents had affected their choice of topics—the highest of all disciplines. In sociology and anthropology and in political science and law as well, the share reporting such effects equals or exceeds the share with direct experience. Political pressure thus reaches beyond those directly targeted, into every stage of research: what questions to ask, how to investigate them, and where to publish.

(2) Neither New nor Unique to China

That said, pressure from the country under study is neither a new problem nor one unique to China. Andrew Nathan, a leading scholar of Chinese politics in the United States, recalls how he came to be barred from entering China as he became more involved in human rights issues:

> "But the more I became involved with human rights, the more distinctive my experiences became. I was a natural contact person in New York for human rights and democracy activists who fled or were expelled from China; I did more things the Chinese regime did not like; and I got 'banned' (three times, to be precise, but those are long stories that I won't go into here). [...] As a consequence, like many of those who became my Chinese friends, I was 'forced to join the Liang Mountain rebels' (逼上梁山). My encounters with Chinese people happened mostly outside of China, and (not counting my students and academic exchange visitors) mostly with people at odds with the Chinese government." (Nathan 2025, 5–6)

What is interesting in Nathan's recollection is that the entry ban did not end his research but opened another channel of research: studying China outside China, through encounters with people at odds with the Chinese government.

Looking at area studies beyond China, similar experiences are not uncommon. Benedict Anderson, known for *Imagined Communities*, was barred from Indonesia for many years by the Suharto regime.

> "In my case, I was able to return frequently to Siam and the Philippines, but I was shut out of Indonesia for twenty-seven years. If young people were to ask me how I maintained my connection with Indonesia during that time, I would answer that it was thanks to five people. [...] Thanks to them, even during the twenty-seven years of exile, I was able to continue a kind of fieldwork on Indonesia." (Anderson 2009, 144–151)

Anderson says that even during his years of exile he was able to continue "a kind of fieldwork" through other people. Being unable to go to the field does not necessarily mean being cut off from it. What these cases show is that tense relations with the country under study are by no means exceptional for area specialists.[4]

China. Do you think this series of incidents has had any influence on the choice of topics, the methods of analysis, or the venues, media, or methods of publication of your own research projects?" (Ito, Lim, Yu, and Mikiya 2025, 21).

[4] As a recent related case in Russian studies, in November 2025 the comparative economist Professor Ichiro Iwasaki announced that he had been permanently banned from entering Russia by the Russian government: "I have been permanently banned from entering Russia by the Russian government. The reason is probably that for the past three years I have criticized the military invasion of Ukraine and discussed the problems of Russia's wartime economy. I take it as a kind of medal and will continue to speak out against the war!" (Iwasaki 2025). For comparison, I also note the case of the Modi government in India. In Indian studies as well, constraints on the entry of foreign researchers and on research visas have been pointed out in recent years (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies 2026). Constraints on on-site access are not unique to China

(3) Memories of Observing China under the Cold War

On the other hand, Japanese China studies also carries the bitter memory of observation under constraints leading to error. Ei Murakami examined the discourse of Japanese "China hands" (*chichu-ha*) during the Great Leap Forward and concluded as follows:

> "At the time of the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese government controlled information, and visitors from Japan were limited, so the responsibility of those who had the opportunity to obtain local information was grave. However, they did not observe carefully; they averted their eyes from various problems and censored themselves. China hands as a whole, including China scholars, were in no position to criticize China because they sympathized with it. Moreover, interest in Chinese society and rural areas in the public sphere had declined, and no thorough discussion was possible. In the end, the path to the truth of the Great Leap Forward was closed." (Murakami 2020, 241)

This observation is highly suggestive for the present. When access to the field is limited, observations by those who have access take on privileged value. Precisely for that reason, however, the desire to maintain access can produce self-censorship and distort observation. The lesson of the Great Leap Forward is that what is at stake is not only whether one has access but also the stance of the observer (the researcher)—what those who gain access see and what they say.

4. The Gain and Loss of Dimensions: Thinking in Terms of Sample Size and Variable Dimensionality

(1) Mapping Information Sources

I now try to organize the changes in the research environment discussed in the previous section somewhat more abstractly. Here I attempt to locate the data used in research along two axes: sample size (N) and variable dimensionality (D). Figure 1 plots sample size on the vertical axis and variable dimensionality (the number of variables) on the horizontal axis, both on logarithmic scales. Major datasets are placed according to actual values based on published sources. Qualitative methods such as fieldwork, by contrast, cannot be accurately located on a scale of the number of data items, so they are shown conceptually as ellipses.

but are becoming a common challenge for area studies of countries undergoing authoritarianization or securitization.

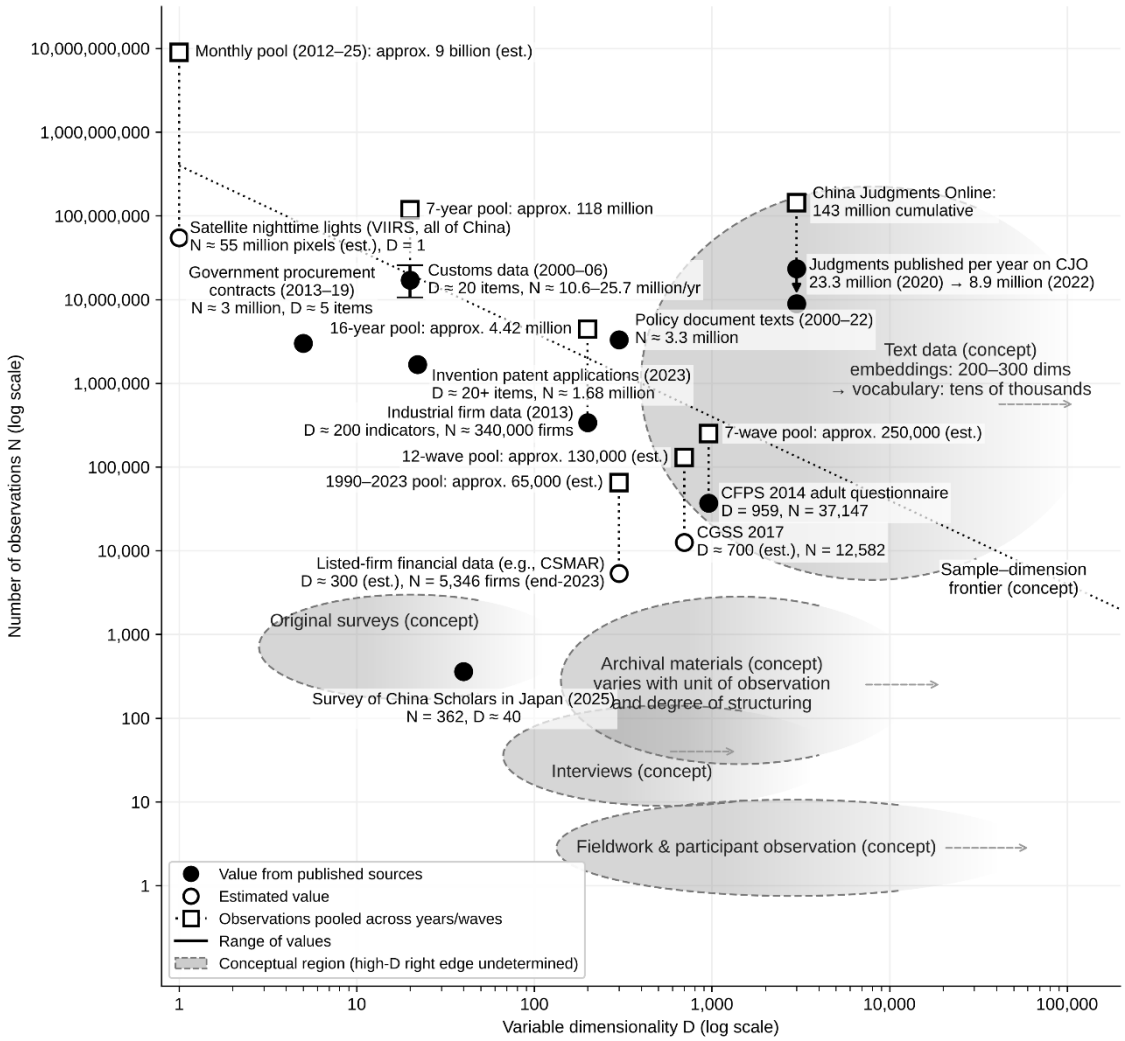


Figure 1. Locating Types of Data Collection: Sample Size (N) and Variable Dimensionality (D)

Note: The figure as a whole is schematic. Variable dimensionality (D) is taken to be the number of variables or features used in the main analysis. The ellipses are conceptual guides; their right edges (the high-dimensional side) are blurred because their extent cannot be determined. The dotted sample–dimension frontier is also conceptual and is not based on numerical evidence.

Types of data collection used in China studies include participant observation, interviews, case studies, small-scale questionnaire surveys (experimental and non-experimental), general social surveys, archival research, trade and customs statistics, firm-level data, patent data, and text data (newspapers, policy documents, and academic papers). Placing these roughly on the plane of Figure 1 yields the following picture.

Participant observation and case studies have a small N, from one to a few dozen, but what can be observed about a single case is potentially limitless. Interviews, too, remain at an N of a few dozen to around a hundred, yet they provide qualitatively rich information. In my own experience interviewing private entrepreneurs, the words spoken, which can be recorded as text, are not the only information obtained. The clothes the entrepreneur wears, the layout of the room, what is on the desk (for example, whether books by the current head of state are lined up there), whether he smokes (and which brand), and even his manner of speaking can give us a kind of inspiration. When one then meets an entrepreneur of an entirely different style, the contrast, together with what is said, can be a powerful source of inspiration. I was struck by how utterly different the style of the startup founders I met in Shenzhen was from that of the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises I had interviewed until

then. This led to my motivation to study startup people as a social group entirely distinct from the owners of private SMEs.

Small-scale questionnaire surveys occupy a region with N of a few hundred to around a thousand and D of a few dozen, while nationwide general social surveys extend to N in the tens of thousands and D from several hundred to around a thousand. Trade and customs statistics, firm-level data, and patent data reach N in the hundreds of thousands to millions, but the number of variables per unit of observation is not large. Text data, in addition to a large N in terms of the number of documents, have a dimensionality of thousands to tens of thousands if the vocabulary is treated as variables (for example, when newspaper articles are tabulated with a bag-of-words approach, the frequencies of tens of thousands of word types become the variables for each article). Archival materials vary greatly in character depending on their volume and degree of structuring, so they are difficult to simplify, but depending on the researcher's questions they can yield a wealth of information.

Bringing the time dimension into view, China studies in the Cold War era can be said to have been confined to a very limited region of the plane—official media and fragmentary statistics, a region where both N and structured D were small. Reform and opening opened up nearly the entire plane at once. The publication of official statistics, epitomized by statistical yearbooks, and of basic materials such as domestic journals provided a map of the information space. The possibility of fieldwork expanded the region of qualitative research at the bottom of the figure, enabling rich observation (high D) even with a small N. By contrast, the intensification of US–China rivalry and political tightening since the late 2010s have shrunk mainly the regions that require on-site access: participant observation, interviews, archives, and original surveys conducted in China. Meanwhile, regions that do not require on-site access, such as text data, satellite imagery, and data located outside China, continue to expand along with advances in analytical techniques. The "New Era" of the research environment can thus be understood not as a uniform shrinking of the whole plane but as an asymmetric change in which expansion and contraction proceed simultaneously in different regions.

Figure 1 also shows a conceptual "sample–dimension frontier" as a dotted line. With conventional structured data, there has been a kind of trade-off: increasing the number of observations limits the number of items per observation, and increasing the number of items limits the number of observations. Customs and patent data are typical of the former, and general social surveys such as the CFPS of the latter. The technical and institutional constraints on collecting, storing, and processing data can be said to have determined the location of this frontier. Text data, by contrast, make it possible to handle high dimensionality in the form of vocabulary and embeddings while maintaining millions to tens of millions of observations, pushing this frontier toward the high-dimensional side. What is gained there, however, is strictly data dimensions.

Text data in particular have the property that both N and D are large. This point, however, requires caution. In the case of text data such as the *People's Daily*, discourse can be measured, but it does not necessarily represent behavior or outcomes. In the case of policy documents as well, policy statements and government actions actually backed by fiscal resources can differ. And even when N is large in terms of the number of articles, the actual authors are often very few. Thus, although such data are high-dimensional, one must remain mindful of their distance from realities on the ground.

Figure 1 also adds several examples of datasets. For instance, the government procurement data in Beraja et al. (2023) consist of about three million contracts from 2013 to 2019; the number of observations is large, but the items per contract are few—product, date, amount, winning bidder, and so on. Satellite nighttime light data (Elvidge et al. 2017) reach tens of millions of observations if the whole of China is covered by a grid of roughly 500-meter cells, whereas the only variable is light intensity—one dimension (or twelve even if viewed monthly)—placing them at the upper-left extreme of the plane. Our Survey on the Experiences of China Scholars in Japan (Ito, Lim, Yu, and Mikiya 2025) is an example of an original survey with about 40 questions and 362 valid responses. China Judgments Online is an example showing that loss is not confined to the domain of qualitative research but can extend to data dimensions as well. More than 143 million judgments in total have been published on the site, but the annual number of published judgments reportedly fell from a peak of 23.3 million in 2020 to 8.9 million in 2022, a decline of 62 percent (Yang 2023). Data once gained can be lost again through political decisions.

I want to stress here that larger N and D do not make for better research. If they fit an important research question, N and D may be small without any problem at all. Okabe's (1964) content analysis, for example, was based on data that would be considered small-scale by today's standards. Yet it contributed to understanding China's foreign policy through a clear question and procedure, and because its method was made explicit, later researchers can replicate and verify it. Figure 1 does not rank research by quality. It is a map for thinking about which kinds of research the changing research environment makes difficult and which kinds it makes possible.

(2) Two Meanings of "Dimension"

What the current political tightening is shrinking is mainly the lower region of Figure 1: fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews, where N is small but careful observation of a single case can potentially yield multifaceted observations. I next reconsider this change not merely as "fewer research opportunities" but as a "loss of dimensions," and examine what problems it may pose for China studies.

Before proceeding, let me clarify what "dimension" means in this paper. The word contains two meanings that are related to but distinct from each other.

The first is the numerical meaning: the number of variables or features in the data. I call this "data dimensions." The number of variables in a questionnaire or the number of dimensions of word embeddings in text corresponds to this. The horizontal axis of Figure 1 represents these data dimensions. The right edges of the ellipses are drawn blurred to reflect the fact that the number of variables depends on how data are processed and on the survey method.

The second is the breadth of knowledge gained by directly engaging with the object of study. I call this "field dimensions." It refers to the kind of knowledge sometimes described as a feel for the field or a grounded understanding of reality; it is not merely a number of variables but includes knowledge about plausible causal relationships concerning an issue and knowledge that rules out implausible questions (Otsuka et al. 2023). More broadly, it also includes information layered onto a single case, such as the context of narratives, the informal operation of institutions, and the atmosphere of a place. Unlike data dimensions, these items are not fixed in advance; unexpected variables and questions emerge in the course of observation. This openness is the core of field dimensions.

The two are related, but they cannot be counted on the same scale. Taking text data as an example, it is technically possible to increase word embeddings from 300 to 1,000 dimensions. But forcibly increasing "data dimensions" in this way does not proportionally increase the social aspects of China that can be observed. On the contrary, the premise underlying text data analysis is that compressing dimensions improves interpretability. What this paper calls the "loss of dimensions," therefore, does not mean only a reduction in the number of columns in the data. Its core is the narrowing of the range of aspects that can be observed, relationships that can be verified, and questions that can be discovered. While "data dimensions" are expanding dramatically with datafication and advances in AI, "field dimensions" are being lost owing to constraints on access to the field.

Figure 2 illustrates this relationship schematically. In the Cold War era, both dimensions were limited, and the available statistics in particular were very scarce. In the reform era, the publication of the *China Statistical Yearbook* in 1981 raised data dimensions by a notch, and thereafter, with the development of statistics and microdata—CHIP (1988), the Annual Survey of Industrial Firms (1998–), customs data (2000–), CGSS (2003), and CFPS (2010)—data dimensions expanded steadily. Field dimensions widened by a notch in the late 1980s, when people-to-people exchange became substantive, and then expanded greatly as fieldwork became full-fledged.

In the "New Era," by contrast, especially since the late 2010s, data dimensions have expanded rapidly with large-scale text data, machine learning, and the arrival of generative AI, whereas field dimensions have contracted sharply from around 2017–19. This means a narrowing not only of opportunities for verification but also of opportunities for new questions to emerge. Within data dimensions as well, from around the same period, what can be used inside China and what can be used from outside China have begun to diverge, as when access from foreign IP addresses is denied. The defining feature of the current change is that gain and loss are proceeding simultaneously, and in

different dimensions. Moreover, the balance between gain and loss appears to vary across disciplines. Bearing in mind the degree of research difficulty in each discipline shown in Section 3, the impact of losing the field may be especially serious in political science and in sociology and anthropology.

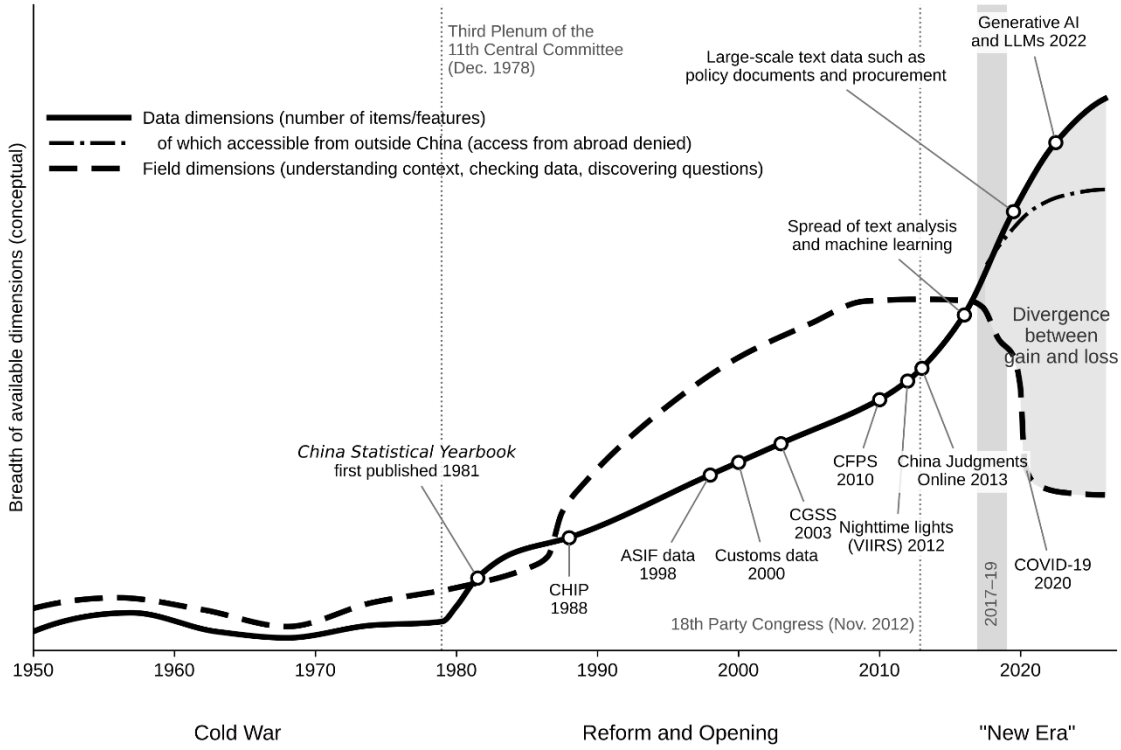


Figure 2. The Gain of Data Dimensions and the Loss of Field Dimensions (Schematic)

Note: The heights and shapes of the lines are conceptual and not based on measured values. Data dimensions and field dimensions cannot be measured on the same scale, so neither the relative heights of the lines nor their intersections carry meaning. The dash-dotted line conceptually shows the portion of data dimensions accessible from outside China. Years in the figure indicate the start year of each dataset or the year it became publicly available (for CHIP, CGSS, and CFPS, the year of the first survey wave; for the industrial firm data and customs data, the first year of the widely used microdata; for China Judgments Online, the year of launch; for nighttime lights, the first year of VIIRS observations).

(3) The Significance of Small N

The approach of observing many things about a small number of cases has long been debated in social science methodology.[5]

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[5] Lijphart (1971), a classic of comparative politics, called the fundamental problem of comparative research "many variables, small N." King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argued that when the number of things one seeks to infer exceeds the number of observations, the research design is "indeterminate." In these arguments, the combination of many variables and few cases is treated as a constraint on statistical inference. Other arguments, however, regard the same feature as a strength of case studies. Campbell (1975) argued that even a single case can be checked against many implications derived from theory, and that in this sense its effective "degrees of freedom" are large—that is, many theoretical implications can be tested against one case. Moreover, when fragmentary but decisive information about context and mechanisms can be obtained, a case can play a distinctive role in causal inference. Conversely, by discovering and examining cases regarded as "anomalous" from the standpoint of existing theory, even a single-case study can engage in dialogue with theory (Rogowski 2004). From the classics of area studies, one can cite the "thick

This is probably also why area studies emphasizes the importance of long-term observation of a fixed site, observing a particular place over an extended period. For example, from the late 2000s to the early 2010s I conducted a case study of Yiwu in Zhejiang Province, tracing the transformation of one locality from roughly the 1960s to the 2010s. From this single case I was able to observe, at each point in time, a multifaceted transformation: the persistence of a peddling tradition dating back to the premodern era, the realities of the controlled economy in the planned-economy period, its loosening and local experimentation in the reform era, internationalization with the arrival of global buyers in the 2000s, and, in the 2010s, the spread of e-commerce and digitalization led by Alibaba (Ito 2015).

In this paper's terms, fieldwork is a method of observation with a small N but potentially very large field dimensions. Moreover, those dimensions are not fixed in advance. In surveys and administrative statistics, the variables are predetermined by the design of the questionnaire or the statistical system. In the field, by contrast, as observation proceeds, variables the researcher had not anticipated—that is, new questions—emerge. Fieldwork not only yields rich information but also has an openness that generates questions themselves. Recent computational social science treats text as "high-dimensional unstructured data" (Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart 2022), and interview transcripts and field notes can be likened to such text in that they too are rich, unstructured information. This is only an analogy, however; increasing the data dimensions of text does not mean recovering lost field dimensions.

(4) Consequences of Losing N versus Losing Field Dimensions

When access to the field is lost, is it the number of observations (N) or dimensions that is lost? The distinction matters, but the difference between the two is not simple. What matters is not only how much information is lost but also the mechanism by which it is lost.

Consider first the case in which observations from the same population decrease at random. In this case, as econometrics textbooks teach, the main problem is a loss of precision in estimation. As the number of observations falls, the variance of estimates increases, but the loss can be measured as a standard error and can be at least partially recovered by supplementing observations with other years or other data.

The situation is different, however, when the objects or aspects that can be observed are systematically selected according to some tendency. For example, if only politically sensitive regions or people drop out of observation, the decrease in N gives rise to selection bias. Similarly, if the aspects that can no longer be observed are related to the outcomes under study, systematic problems can arise in measurement, identification, and interpretation alike.

For example, when an outcome Y depends not only on an observable variable X but also on a factor Z that can no longer be observed, no increase in the N of X can reveal the role of Z. Of course, research designs such as natural experiments can sometimes identify specific causal effects even in the presence of unobservable factors. But judging whether such a design holds often itself requires knowledge of the field.

The key point here is that merely increasing the number of observations in the remaining data does not resolve such systematic problems. On the contrary, the larger N becomes, the more biased estimates come with smaller standard errors. In other words, there is a risk of being "precisely wrong." As seen in Section 2, data for observing China from the outside are more abundant than ever. That is welcome. But the abundance of data, far from resolving this kind of bias, may make it harder to see. The simultaneous progression of data enrichment and the loss of politically selected dimensions may be the peculiar danger of China studies in the "New Era."

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description" rooted in interpretive capacity emphasized by Geertz (1973).

(5) Consequences of the Loss of Field Dimensions

Concretely, the loss of field dimensions can have at least five consequences.[6]

The first is that the validity of measurement can no longer be verified. Variables in structured data are merely proxies for the concepts in which researchers are interested. Information for checking gaps between indicators and reality—inflated statistics, discrepancies between policy documents and actual implementation, the informal operation of institutions—has come mainly from the field. In China studies, issues such as the distance between official documents (*wenjian*) and their implementation and the quality of statistics have been discussed repeatedly, and the basis for such judgments has been observation in the field. Losing the field means losing the field dimensions needed to calibrate indicators, and researchers lose the means to confirm whether they are really measuring what they believe they are measuring. Likewise, alternative data such as satellite imagery and text data have the potential to partially compensate for the loss of dimensions, but their validity has been established by checking them against on-site observation—so-called ground truth. When access is lost, this check can no longer be updated. The tacit knowledge that researchers have accumulated through past fieldwork—for example, a sense of plausible magnitudes for judging whether a statistic is credible—gradually becomes obsolete as Chinese society changes. The problems caused by the loss of dimensions are thus not limited to a one-time loss but may grow cumulatively over time.

The second is that the dimensions being lost are not random but politically biased. When on-site access is constrained, the dimensions most likely to be lost are those related to politically sensitive matters. The dimensions of structured data, meanwhile, are designed by the state, statistical agencies, and database providers. They reflect what the state wants to grasp, or what it is willing to show to outsiders. The data on which researchers who have lost the field rely depend, in part, precisely on a China made legible by the state. Researchers are forced to "see like a state" (Scott 1998), and this should be well recognized in analysis. For example, my colleagues and I have estimated policy agendas from official news coverage of President Xi Jinping, which is precisely an analysis under such constraints (Lim, Ito, and Zhang 2024). In this example, it is clear that data from official coverage cannot easily measure "the Chinese government's true policy agenda." Policies that are considered important internally but are politically sensitive (for example, national security policy or language policy toward ethnic minorities) are likely to be published externally only to a limited extent. It is therefore necessary to recognize that what such data capture has the character of "the policies the Chinese government wants to promote externally."

The third is that interpretations of mechanisms are brought in from outside. Structured data are powerful for estimating the magnitude of the effects of a policy or institution, but they often lack the dimensions that show "why." When there is no information from the field, the gap is filled by the theories on which researchers rely or by the experiences of other countries and regions. However refined the estimates, there is always a possibility that their meaning will be drawn toward the researcher's own context, and this risk should also be recognized.

The fourth is that discovering questions becomes difficult. As noted above, the core of field dimensions lies in their openness: variables and questions are born in the course of observation. The dimensions of structured data, by contrast, are fixed in advance by their designers. Losing field dimensions means that the very agenda of research becomes confined within the mechanisms assumed by the discipline or the variable space defined by the data designers. What is impaired here is not the precision of answers but the range of questions. And the narrowing of the range of questions is hard to make visible through the number of papers or the sophistication of methods. There are cases in which vague questions that arise from visiting villages and firms become, after some time, the questions of research papers. Difficulty in discovering questions could cost research its very driving

[6] This paper examines the effects of these environmental changes on academic research, but more broadly, the decline of China observation by businesspeople and the reduction of exchanges by policymakers and politicians could also affect business with China (investment and trade) and foreign policy.

force.

Fifth, as discovering questions in the field becomes difficult, an ever larger share of research questions will, as a consequence, be derived from the disciplinary literature or from data. When the field dries up as a source of questions, two main sources remain. One is questions that fill gaps in the existing literature; the other is questions that can be answered with the data at hand (the situation of "looking for one's keys under the streetlight"). Both are indispensable to the accumulation of research. When they become the main sources of questions, however, research is pulled toward specialization. Kevin O'Brien memorably described the potential problem that specialization poses for China studies in terms of "islands of research":

> "Topical specialization produces high resolution pieces of a puzzle, but little sense of how the pieces fit together and no boxcover that illustrates what the puzzle depicts. At a time when China's economic growth and prominence in world affairs have generated extraordinary interest inside and outside the academy, relatively few of us are willing to take a stab at characterizing the polity or addressing other equally large questions. When policymakers, citizens, and other scholars need maps of Chinese politics more than ever, we offer less insight than we might about what connects scattered islands of research." (O'Brien 2011, 539)

If the shrinking of field dimensions leaves research questions subordinate solely to the existing literature, this "islands of research" problem may become more serious.

5. The Research Environment within China

(1) Observations and Impressions

Let me now turn to the research environment in mainland China, drawing on my own observations and impressions.

What is clear, first of all, is the overwhelming quantitative expansion of researchers (including postdocs and doctoral students) and the dramatic rise in research standards. The number of graduate students continues to grow, and the number of papers produced has surged accordingly. In social science fields such as economics and management in particular, systems have been put in place that link publication in international English-language journals directly to promotion and evaluation, creating strong incentives toward Americanized social science. These evaluation criteria are codified in ranking lists of journals. In recent years, distinctions have also emerged even at the associate professor level, between fixed-term and tenured associate professors (*changpin fujiaoshou*). More recently, however, in reflection on the overemphasis on English-language journals, evaluation systems have been revised to place more weight on domestic Chinese-language journals.

The expansion of research support systems and the research ecosystem cannot be ignored either. Beyond formal institutions such as the expansion of the National Natural Science Foundation of China, WeChat official accounts, for example, share daily introductions of new papers published in major English-language journals. Peer-reviewed papers by Chinese authors have gained a growing presence in international journals, and the standard of Chinese-language journals is also rising steadily. At least in terms of empirical techniques, researchers in mainland China are approaching, or have already reached, the international frontier.

(2) "Philosophy and Social Sciences with Chinese Characteristics"

At the same time, this quantitative and technical development of research is proceeding within a political framework. The Xi Jinping administration has called for building "philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics," and following Xi's speech during his inspection of Renmin University of China in April 2022, *China Education Daily* argued as follows:

> "To accelerate the construction of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics, the first priority is to uphold Marxism as the guiding ideology. History shows that without

> adhering to the guidance of Marxism, philosophy and social sciences will lose their soul and their direction and ultimately cannot play their proper role. To accelerate the construction of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics, universities must take strengthening and improving the Party's leadership over work in philosophy and social sciences as the fundamental guarantee for the flourishing development of our country's philosophy and social sciences." (China Education Daily 2022)

When such political demands are combined with internationally standardized empirical techniques, an interesting phenomenon arises: what might be called "red" empirical papers. For example, Wu and Hong (2024), published in the *Journal of World Economy* (*Shijie Jingji*), one of China's top economics journals, is the following study:

> "Revolutionary culture and spirit are a powerful spiritual driving force for the Chinese people's advance, yet few studies have examined how they guide the micro-level behavior of firms. This paper focuses on the Long March spirit as a representative revolutionary culture and constructs a natural experiment using the series of activities promoting the great Long March spirit around the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Long March. Using a difference-in-differences method, we find that in 2016 and subsequent years, corporate misconduct decreased significantly among firms located in areas with Red Army Long March sites, indicating that the Long March spirit curbed corporate misconduct." (Wu and Hong 2024)

The paper treats the commemorative activities for the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Long March as a natural experiment and uses a difference-in-differences (DID) method to show that corporate misconduct decreased among firms in areas with Long March historical sites. In terms of method, it follows the standard toolkit of today's empirical economics. The framing of the question and the interpretation, however, are strongly shaped by the political context of extolling the contemporary value of revolutionary culture. The paper was published in a special section of the *Journal of World Economy*, suggesting that the editorial board prioritized soliciting and publishing such papers. Precisely because causal inference techniques are politically neutral tools, they can be applied to any question and can also be used to "scientifically" support politically desirable conclusions. What I wish to problematize here is not the validity of the estimates themselves but the way political demands act on which questions are asked and in what language the results are described. Here we see one form in which the "New Era" of scholarly techniques intersects with Xi Jinping's "New Era."

(3) Censorship of Research and Literature

Censorship of research itself is also evident. Through interviews with researchers at Chinese universities and analysis of more than 5,000 publications from 1985 to 2022, Leng and Plantan show that state censorship has led to self-censorship by researchers, that certain research topics have disappeared from the literature, and that some research has moved from Chinese-language to English-language outlets (Leng and Plantan 2025). They point out that such self-censorship has a broad chilling effect beyond the intentions of the regime, and that researchers based in the United States are not immune from this pressure.

Censorship extends even to research on censorship. Salganik's *Bit by Bit* (Salganik 2018), a representative textbook of computational social science, discusses the study of Chinese social media censorship by King and colleagues (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013) as a leading example of observational research in the digital age. In its Chinese edition (Salganik 2019), however, the relevant passage, spanning eight paragraphs, has been deleted entirely, and the reference is not listed in the bibliography.

As a result, research on the Chinese economy tends to concentrate in politically low-sensitivity spaces. Themes such as the SDGs, green development, CSR, digitalization, and innovation have

generated an enormous number of papers, supported by abundant data and policy tailwinds. Put simply, positive topics ("positive energy," *zheng nengliang*) appear to be favored. These themes are undoubtedly important, but if areas indispensable for understanding China's political economy—the political system, Party–state relations, social conflict, policy failures—are relatively neglected, then the quantitative expansion of papers does not necessarily mean a deepening of our understanding of China.

(4) The "Surface" of Official Discourse and the "Depth" of the Academic Community

That said, understanding research within China solely from the perspective of political control would also be one-sided. In his account of attending the "International Academic Symposium Commemorating the 80th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War," held in 2025, Toru Kubo writes:

> "These diverse research results reflected the culmination of nearly half a century of development in Chinese historiography since the beginning of reform and opening. [...] Rather than looking only at the surface, official discourse emphasizing the role of the Party, we should also pay close attention to the breadth and depth of the community of modern and contemporary Chinese historians." (Kubo 2025)

Even at official events, diverse research supported by half a century of scholarly accumulation comes into view. Researchers outside China need to look not only at the surface of official discourse when discussing Chinese academia as a whole but also at its accumulation and breadth.

(5) Are Researchers in Mainland China at an Advantage?

Are researchers in mainland China, then, in a more advantageous position than those outside China? In terms of access to data, knowledge of local realities, and rapidly expanding research infrastructure, researchers in mainland China clearly have the advantage. In terms of academic freedom, however, the advantage is limited or even reversed. Constraints on what can be asked and what can be published can offset the advantage of data access.

In addition, there also appears to be a tendency for Chinese researchers to conduct relatively little fieldwork, precisely because they prioritize writing peer-reviewed papers and work in an environment where data are abundantly available. If papers can be written by extracting variables from databases and running statistical analyses, the incentive to undertake fieldwork, with its time costs and uncertainty, weakens. On this point, Professor Lu Ming of Shanghai Jiao Tong University posed the following question to Chinese economists at the 25th China Economics Annual Conference in 2025:

> "Do we actually care about reality? Let me ask a simple question: those of you here who have read the documents of the Third Plenum of the 20th Central Committee in full, please raise your hands. Look at the result and you will see. As economists, we have not read in full the most important policy documents in China today—so how can we expect the papers we publish in journals to truly connect with the country's most important policies?" (Lu 2025)

Lu Ming's question is a scathing critique of the reality of the Chinese economics profession: hardly any economists have read through the decision of the Third Plenum of the 20th Central Committee, the most important policy document in China today. If the number of researchers proficient in data and methods is growing, and they give top priority to publishing in journals on the lists used for personnel evaluation, while interest in the reality of China is fading, this suggests that research within China also runs the risk of falling, in a different sense, into "China studies without China."

6. Alternative Approaches

(1) Beyond Data

So far, the discussion has proceeded from the perspective of data expansion and constraints on on-site access. Approaches to understanding China, however, are not limited to data. Beyond data, a wider variety of alternative approaches exists.

One is understanding China through creative works such as novels, films, and nonfiction literature. Tahara (2024), for example, discusses the current state of rural China with reference to the film *Return to Dust* (*Yin ru chen yan*), which depicts rural realities. Suzuki (2026) positions Chinese nonfiction literature, beginning with Liang Hong's *China in One Village* (*Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang*), as a search for ways to represent "the real China." Tanigaki (2026) discusses Hong Kong as "one city" of China, taking the Hong Kong film *Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In* as a clue. Furthermore, Yujiro Murata examines the nature of power in contemporary China with reference to Kafka's "Before the Law" and *The Trial*.

> "Obeying an invisible law not by coercion but of one's own free will. The unhappy life of a man for whom this, without his realizing it, results in subordination to power. And the gatekeeper who appears to rule over the man but in fact has no power to prohibit, and who, by guarding his post, may be subordinate to the man. [...] Kafka's text brings into relief the way in which the force that rules people (power) operates neither from above nor from below, but only in relations between individuals who are free and at the same time in a state of constraint." (Murata 2025, 48–49)

Murata's reading is also suggestive in the context of this paper. The self-censorship discussed in the preceding sections operates precisely in the form of "obeying an invisible law not by coercion but of one's own free will." Literature and film can provide clues for capturing the texture of such relations, which rarely appear in data.

(2) Global China and Japan as a Field or Site

The second is an approach that reconceives places outside China as a field or site for China studies. This too is not a new idea. Even during the Cold War, interviews with returnees from China were an important means of learning about realities inside China. Shimakura and Nakagane's (1980) study of the people's communes is one example of research that made use of such returnee interviews. This is what might be called diaspora research. The rise of research on Global China also has, in part, the character of a response to such information constraints.

Today, the number of Chinese people moving to Japan is increasing, and a new Chinese society is forming within Japan. The journalist Yudai Masutomo has interviewed wealthy Chinese and intellectuals who have "run" (*run*, 润)—that is, escaped—and moved to Japan, and describes their motives as follows:

> "Families who come seeking good education to escape the ever-worsening exam wars, middle-aged people trying to preserve their assets through relatively cheap high-rise condominiums and the like, intellectuals who want to escape a poisoned information space and enjoy a free space for speech, business owners who, fearing excessive patriotism, have come to want to spend a safe and secure retirement... What these people share is a stance of fleeing from oppression." (Masutomo 2025, 332)[7]

[7] Since late 2025, however, amid the deterioration of Japan–China relations, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Japan has fallen by half, and the "run to Japan" (run Ri, 润日) movement also appears to be

Ako (2026), through participant observation of "Asian Commons," a public space where members of the Chinese diaspora community gather, describes efforts to develop public space across borders. Participant observation that has become difficult within China becomes possible when the Chinese diaspora community in Japan is the object. The Chinese community in Japan is an object of study in its own right and also a mirror reflecting changes in Chinese society. A related and noteworthy development is the rise of overseas-based forums for discussing China, such as the "Bumingbai Blog" (不明白博客), launched in 2022.[8] Just as Nathan and Anderson continued "a kind of fieldwork" outside China and Indonesia, Japan, and places outside China more broadly, can become another field for China scholars in Japan.

(3) The Use of AI and Its Challenges

The third is the use of artificial intelligence technologies, including generative AI. Large language models (LLMs) are making it possible to analyze volumes of documents that could not be processed by hand. Fang and colleagues used LLMs to classify 3.3 million documents issued by central, provincial, and municipal governments from 2000 to 2022, extracting structured data on targeted industries and policy instruments to systematically decode China's industrial policy (Fang, Li, and Lu 2025). Whereas Cold War researchers read the *People's Daily* "from cover to cover," today AI reads millions of policy documents. An era of "AI-assisted Kremlinology," as it were, is arriving.

However, the use of AI also has its own challenges. When my colleague and I examined Chinese large language models, we found that they tend to refuse to answer politically sensitive questions, and our tests suggest that traces of Beijing's censorship can remain even in Chinese models fine-tuned for Japan (Ito and Takaguchi 2025a). AI can be a powerful tool for China studies, but AI itself can be subject to censorship and can embed particular political values. That the very tools used to study China may internalize China's political constraints is a new methodological challenge for China studies. Which models to use, and how to verify their outputs, will be unavoidable questions for China studies going forward.

(4) The Irreversible Expansion of the Source Ecosystem

The fourth, and a more fundamental change, is that the source ecosystem supporting China studies has itself expanded irreversibly. For example, the *Compilation of Important Historical Documents of the CCP* (*Zhonggong zhongyao lishi wenxian ziliao huibian*) has been published on a scale of 8,000 volumes and is held in libraries outside China. In many countries, the development of data and materials on China is also progressing. Zhou Jun, in light of this situation, states:

> "What should be asked is not whether 'China studies can continue' as access to China again becomes difficult, but the methodological question of how to study China under a new source ecosystem. Even if the research environment is moving in a direction resembling the Cold War, there is no need for research methods to return to the Cold War—nor could they in the first place." (Zhou 2026)

This observation is an important response to Shambaugh's "coming full circle" thesis examined in Section 2. Even if, in terms of on-site access, we are approaching the Cold War, the materials already accumulated, carried abroad, and digitized will remain. It is certainly true that the "New Era" of the research environment is not a simple return to the Cold War. Still, it can be pointed out that in an environment where the "field dimensions" discussed above are limited, it may be difficult to cultivate researchers' sense of the problem and to discover new questions, even as large bodies of sources

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changing. This development has been referred to as a second "run" (er run, 二润).

[8] Bumingbai Blog (https://bumingbai.net/).

become available.

(5) Continuing Observation

Finally, it should be noted that the possibility of on-site observation has not been completely closed. Our survey of researchers also asked about visits to mainland China for research purposes after the COVID-19 pandemic (Ito, Lim, Yu, and Mikiya 2026). Overall, 35.1 percent of respondents had visited mainland China for research purposes in the post-COVID period, reaching 48.6 percent—nearly half—in economics, business, and public policy. By contrast, the figures were only 24.4 percent in political science and law and 28.7 percent in history. Taken together with the survey results in Section 3, this suggests that the disciplines with more experiences of difficulty are those with fewer visits. On-site visits and observation (perhaps only partial) still continue, with varying intensity across disciplines.

Which functions of the field dimensions being lost can these alternative approaches compensate for? Novels, films, and nonfiction literature convey the texture of relations that rarely appears in data, supplement the understanding of context, and sometimes inspire questions; but they are representations filtered through their creators' perspectives, and researchers cannot pose and test their own questions through them. Interviews and participant observation outside China, including in Japan, are among the few means that can partially restore all the functions of field dimensions—understanding context, checking data, and discovering questions—but they involve selection bias in terms of whom one can talk to. It is clear that the experiences of people who have left China do not represent Chinese society as a whole.

Thus, each of these means restores part of the lost dimensions, but each has its own biases. What matters, therefore, is not to rely on a single alternative but to be aware of which functions of field dimensions are restored by which means and what remains lost, and, by setting multiple means against one another, to rebuild—even partially—the circuit of mutual verification between field and data.

7. Conclusion

I distill the discussion of this paper into three questions.

The first question is which functions of China studies are lost through access constraints. In this paper's assessment, what is being lost is not so much the number of observations itself as field dimensions, the basis for understanding context and discovering new questions. Data dimensions, meanwhile, continue to be gained, albeit under restrictions. Even if the research environment has come to resemble that of the Cold War, the source ecosystem, analytical techniques, and the accumulated body of China studies are entirely different from those of the Cold War. In this sense, what is happening now is less Shambaugh's "coming full circle" than an asymmetric change in which gain and loss proceed simultaneously. It is possible to envision China studies not as a circle returning to the same point but as a spiral advance—appearing to occupy a similar position, yet one level higher. That, however, depends on how far we can restore the lost verification function while remaining aware of what is being lost.

The second question is what can be restored through alternative sources and collaboration between researchers inside and outside China. Researchers in mainland China have advantages in data access and knowledge of realities but are constrained in academic freedom. Researchers outside China are constrained in on-site access, and their observations are necessarily limited, but they have possibilities in their freedom to set questions and to publish. In this sense, research inside and outside China can each be systematically incomplete in its own way. Some of these constraints can be compensated for through joint research and some cannot, and collaboration itself may introduce new constraints. What can be compensated for by combining research inside and outside China, and what constraints still remain?

The situations in which actual researchers find themselves are complex: constraint, divergent engagement, rupture, compromise, refuge, exit, meandering, transformation, or persistence. Researchers continue their work through one or a combination of these, depending on their discipline, topic, and position. The experiences of Tahara, Nathan, and Anderson discussed in this paper show

part of this diversity. Rather than speaking of the deterioration of the research environment as a uniform “access constraint,” it is worth exploring the diverse forms of response. The experiences of Anderson and Nathan show that, even after losing access to the field, research can continue through human relationships and encounters outside the country. What sustained this continuity was the relationships and accumulated understanding of the region they had already built.

The third question is how research can be launched and carried out under conditions in which it is difficult to acquire sufficient field experience. How can mid-career and senior researchers who have already built relationships in the field maintain their feel for the field and secure opportunities to update it? And how, in particular, can young scholars about to begin China studies acquire field dimensions? How can field dimensions be secured in the new environment, and how can new alternatives to the field be envisioned? This is a problem related to the reproduction of knowledge. Answering these questions is a key task for China studies in the “New Era.”

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