

Producing policy-relevant China research and analysis in an era of strategic competition

Dr Samantha Hoffman

Executive summary

This brief report explores the challenge of producing policy-relevant China research and analysis. Policy-relevant research is defined as work that drives action, affects decision-making, or both. It's the kind of research think tanks seek to do, bridging the gap between academia and civil servants who work on policy.

Before Covid-19 travel restrictions inhibited access to China, the Chinese Government's tightening controls on information and heavier visa screening made access to China increasingly difficult for researchers. Gaining *safe* access has also been a growing problem. With risks such as [arbitrary detention](#) rising, many researchers, particularly from countries with increasingly adversarial relations with China, are concerned about being [caught in the crossfire](#). These changes in access to China will affect governments' ability to use open-source research to support policy development. China analysts will need to develop means of obtaining reliable information from outside China.

One response to this problem is to improve knowledge sharing about conducting open-source research among China researchers and analysts globally. In 2021, with that aim in mind, ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC) held a series of private virtual training seminars for early-career researchers and analysts who work on issues related to China and technology policy. Participants were drawn from both Europe and Latin America.

Participants' insights on education, training and research challenges in China studies indicated that there are several difficulties researchers encounter in their efforts to produce policy-relevant China research. We conducted follow-on research to explore those issues further, including one-to-one interviews and private workshops and discussion groups with additional researchers in academia and think tanks, civil society actors and current and former government officials. This paper attempts to synthesise those discussions, which were understandably complex, and highlight common themes and problems they called into focus while also contributing to discussions on how the field can advance under the current circumstances.

This paper focuses on two key findings:

1. There's a distinction between conducting policy-relevant research and the process of disseminating it in a way that will effectively shape and influence the policy process in particular places by particular policy- and decision-makers. In practice, the difference between the two isn't always clearly understood and perhaps not clearly taught.
2. There's limited training that prepares the China analytical community to deal with the challenges of producing policy-relevant research under conditions of restricted access to China. Researchers require more support in navigating the research environment and filling skill-set gaps.

Policy-relevant research versus messaging strategies

This section focuses on describing what policy-relevant research is. The definition varied widely among the researchers with whom we engaged. For decision-makers and government analysts, the definition was simpler: policy-relevant research is research that drives action, affects decision-making, or both. Respondents drew attention to the need to identify the differences between conducting policy-relevant research and developing messaging, targeted at decision-makers, based on those findings. In other words, the process of shaping and influencing is distinct from the process of conducting policy-relevant research.

Often, researchers struggle to know why their research matters in a policy context, or how it fits into a bigger picture for a policy analyst who may be working on many overlapping issues in disparate areas, such as environmental policy and technology policy. This is not just a problem specific to China research: there's poor communication between government and researchers (and between government and industry) in a number of research areas. For example, a recent ASPI ICPC report, *Benchmarking critical technologies*, described the policy problem: while new and emerging technologies are of clear importance for most governments, it's hard for decision-makers to measure how research advances meet specific policy needs. In this area, making research more applicable to the needs of policymakers could start with something as simple as the development of a common language or lexicon of keywords for published research in specific technology areas.

- **To matter in a policy context, research should provide robust and evidence-based assessments of what's taking place today *and* some credible assessment of future directions.**

Decision-makers and policy analysts understand that **no one can predict the future**, so forward-leaning work doesn't require the analyst to have full confidence in what the future will or will not be. It does, however, require that they have the ability to produce rigorous evidence that underpins their assessments of **future scenarios**, beyond simple extrapolations. As one researcher based in Latin America described it, policy-relevant research should 'generate quality strategic knowledge on global issues and trends for better decision-making'.

For decision-makers, research that matters in a policy context creates a decision space. For example, work that frames a problem and explains the factors affecting it can be used to develop a set of indicators that decision-makers can use to measure and understand the ever-changing environment. It can also inform the public debate on issues and so provide space in which government decisions are more easily understood and put into context. The researcher and analyst, therefore, must be able to see the forest for the trees, and their research approach should reflect their capacity to do so.

To see the big picture is to recognise intrinsically that the problems that research identifies today aren't necessarily going to be the same in the future. This is especially true for the China and technology issues that were the focus of our seminar series: just as capabilities that were implemented 10 years ago aren't reflective of what we see today, today's capabilities will also evolve, and new ones that are powerful in ways analysts can't understand right now are likely to emerge. Complications and setbacks will occur, not just simple growth in power and capability, so the context in which one frames one's research objectives is important.

- **Policy-relevant research is research that gives decision-makers insights that support decisions and policy formulation and implementation. Dissemination strategies determine how that research is presented to policymakers so that they understand the key findings of the research.**

Designing policy-relevant research isn't the same as designing a messaging strategy to disseminate the results of the research. If research is *designed* to reach a particular audience, rather than *written up* to reach a particular audience, the validity of that research diminishes drastically. For instance, researchers in Latin America stressed that locating policy-relevant research requires them to look for information that's 'not contaminated with ideological pre-concepts', since in 'Latin America, due to the lack of knowledge and the proliferation of disinformation about China and its government there is a tendency to receive works without a value-laden/ideological component [as in, it is difficult to find objective work].'

Knowing what one wants to achieve in one's research is paramount in designing research that can have policy impact. Importantly, however, the researcher should still take specific and measurable actions to preserve the objectivity of their research output. Otherwise, research becomes activism or the output might simply not be distinguishable from good journalism.

Some researchers highlighted the importance of issues such as representing all sides of a debate, but policy analysts said that representing 'all sides' is not the purpose of policy-relevant analysis, as it risks the researcher filtering their work through a political and ideological lens while producing it instead of seeing where the research leads and articulating that without such a lens.

- **Knowing one's potential audiences at the outset is important. It means a researcher understands why a topic needs to be explored further so that more informed decisions can be made.**

By giving decision-makers perspective on the scope of a policy problem, policy-relevant research helps them explore the landscape and credible future trajectories of an issue and critically examine how different factors, including those they previously might not have considered, could affect that issue. For example, public research on Huawei as a provider of 5G technology pushed decision-makers to think about different aspects of the security challenges in allowing what's now known as 'a high-risk vendor' into one's telecommunications network, even if, from another perspective, a company such as Huawei offered the most competitive solution to a policy problem. That research also widened the debate from one dominated by current market positions and costs.

To know one's audience in research design is also to know how certain issues affect decision-making. The more the researcher develops subject-matter expertise, the greater their ability to hypothesise about what they might find, but conclusions and assessments of how their findings should be framed and interpreted should take place after the research has been completed. Good research is raw material that then enables its communication and take-up by particular policy- and decision-makers in particular places. It's at this stage that knowing one's audience is of the utmost importance—policy research will be ineffective if the messaging strategy used to deliver its findings is flawed. As one Europe-based China analyst highlighted, multiple audiences should be considered and communicated with in different ways: 'Who are researchers writing their reports for? Is it for politicians, their advisers, the expert community, or even the broader audience?' Ideally, one should want to reach all of those audiences, the researcher said, which requires the researcher to generate relevant outputs, whether those outputs are 'media interviews for the public, executive summaries and blog posts for senior politicians, and a report (with detailed referencing) for advisers'.

That being said, research not written in a style tailored for a policy audience is not automatically irrelevant to decision-making. Academic work can be written in a purely academic style and still factor into decisions. A historical piece of research on a topic such as mass mobilisation in China, for example, might help a policy analyst to understand part of the context of new information that they're receiving on government mass-mobilisation strategies that employ digital tools.

When publishing their work, researchers who want to be policy relevant do need to understand that reaching a policy audience effectively will require them to frame their findings in such a way that the audience can make sense of them. Without that, the likelihood of policymakers happening upon the academic research and gaining the insights it enables is simply lower. This requires knowing what a policy audience wants. As one of the seminar series presenters said, researchers need to ask decision-makers what their main concerns are, and what time constraints and political factors they're operating under.

- **One can communicate at different levels for different audiences, drive action and have an impact on decision-making.**

The presentation of research doesn't always require a structure that ends with clear and targeted policy recommendations. A Europe-based researcher pointed out that 'Policy relevant analysis doesn't need to always end with recommendations. Some institutions have a policy not to do this. In this circumstance, the conclusion should speak for itself and make a few succinct points and take-aways for the reader.' There isn't always an existing policy toolkit that provides a solution for all problems. Prescriptive solutions can be useful for the government but are often simply illustrative, given not only the wide set of other inputs and considerations involved in any issue that's the subject of research, but also the constraints on public policy and action, including from important existing regulations and legal frameworks that constrain action. Changing those regulations and legal frameworks can help remove constraints that undermine effective action.

Policy-relevant research is often most effective when it's politically aware but analytically independent. While many researchers recognise that their work must be objective, many are also conflicted about how it might be used in a policy context. In policy-relevant research, research design should not involve over-thinking the end user's application of the research. That can bias and misdirect the research, bringing in personal assumptions or assessments that might or might not be shared by the end user. From the outset, policy-relevant research does not require, and to have academic integrity should not have, a political agenda. Government researchers, in theory, should leave their personal politics at the door and be able to effectively inform decision-makers of any political persuasion, as far as that's humanly possible. Some humility about unconscious bias and assumptions is healthy, for example, along with an ability to see issues from others' perspectives.

More importantly, as a researcher writes about their research findings for different audiences, they should be aware of how their message needs to be crafted to be understood. To reach a policy audience, the researcher should be aware of the policy areas that their research affects and of the debates in those areas so that their message can be received by all audiences who have a stake in driving decision-making.

Problems in producing policy-relevant China research

Globally, the problem of producing policy-relevant China research under changing conditions of access to China affects individual researchers in different ways. Those effects depend on a number of factors, ranging from the country the researcher is from, and the relationship that country has with China, to the researcher's field or place of work, areas of interest and public profile. The Chinese Government's tolerance for particular research, regardless of who does the research, is also relevant. There are many themes to be explored related to this issue, and in fact, far more were raised than can be tackled in this brief paper. We focus on two themes that stood out in most of our conversations: one was on the research environment, and the other was focused on developing skill sets to improve methods for collecting and assessing the quality of information. Our discussion below is by no means comprehensive, and both themes deserve further exploration.

Research environment

For decision-makers and researchers alike, access to China is important because in country experience gives researchers perspective and appropriate awareness of the subject of their research. Yet, with some exceptions, there was a broad acknowledgement that research design—and hence the ability to ask research questions that are policy relevant—is hindered by the constraints of operating in China.

Most researchers agreed that, while the operating conditions in China have always required a research design conscious of political realities, laws such as the State Security Law and the Hong Kong National Security Law have increased personal risks. The issue is not simply about the individual researcher, but also about the safety of their sources in China. As one Europe-based researcher pointed out, 'There are two types of risk that we as China researchers need to be aware of when conducting research on sensitive areas—risk to ourselves, and risk to research participants. The first is often obvious to China researchers, but the second is less so.'

Importantly, most researchers we spoke with did not express concern only about lack of access to China as an impediment to data collection. They also spoke about increased polarisation affecting their ability to do policy-relevant work. Researchers are operating in a highly politicised environment. Researchers in Latin America, for example, said 'In our region, the thing is that any critique towards the one party system of China or on academic freedom or freedoms as a whole is seen through the prism of colonialism.' While this perspective may not be wholly representative, it is illustrative of an environment some researchers must navigate as they seek to conduct China research that might shift status-quo thinking.

Sometimes, this environment means that researchers avoid topics altogether, and other times it means that they have to adjust the way they present their research in order for particular messages to be received. We assess that for the field, it will be increasingly important to establish that critical research on China is not the same as an ideological critique of China, which is another reason why drawing a distinction between policy-relevant research and research dissemination to policy audiences is important.

Even when researchers are attempting to find ways to work around the constraints on doing research on China, information on China issues can be difficult to obtain from both inside and outside China. Some researchers in Europe felt that obtaining such information was easier for them than for others. For example, one researcher said, ‘Tools such as freedom of information requests to access recorded discussions between [my] government and the Chinese Government’ is one way to obtain information. Open-source information about China gained through remote means, such as satellite imagery and the collection of direct Chinese sources, is also valuable, as is informed analysis of Chinese Government and CCP documents and other material.

The situation is different for others, for whom gaining access to high-quality information can also be challenging, even within their own countries. For example, workshop participants in Latin America agreed that information coming from the Chinese Government, banks or companies is really ‘scarce’, since those entities don’t maintain relationships with civil society. They described information as being too ‘opaque and difficult to access’. ‘You do what you can to get the needed information,’ a researcher from a civil-society organisation stated. But requests to Chinese embassies or trade bureaus for comment are often left unanswered, or there are confidentiality clauses preventing the requester from disclosing the requested information to third parties.

Skill sets

Concerns about having reliable networks on the ground, in China or outside, linked to another issue raised in our discussions: networks are an important way of obtaining information, and having reliable human sources of information is essential, but those resources are not valuable in isolation. Having access to information doesn’t mean that a researcher has been trained to understand the context in which they should place that information.

In a recent [paper](#), Charles Parton stated ‘The importance of knowing, understanding and anticipating the PRC will only increase, whether its rise continues or it hits turbulence. Most foreign governments’ ministries have to take the PRC into consideration. But few officials are PRC literate.’ For the vast majority of people whom we spoke with—in both research and policy areas—they felt that access to organised knowledge-building activity directed at understanding the Chinese political system and the CCP was severely limited, and for many nearly non-existent. Across research, government and civil society, many participants said they had taught themselves to understand the CCP, or looked to colleagues and mentors to help point them in the right direction.

Regardless of where a researcher is doing their research, or what topic they’re working on, they must understand the CCP to understand modern China. Understanding the party, its ideology and approaches to governance is essential to being able to produce policy-relevant research on China, not just on national security topics but on a range of social issues. And seeking to understand the CCP’s ideological underpinnings and how they inform and shape decisions and directions is not equal to ‘taking sides’ in an ideological debate.

Reading party documents is important, but having the ability to read them as they’re meant to be read is also important. Some researchers focus heavily on reading a document objectively, but ‘objectivity’ is based on their own perspective of what is and is not objective. In their reading, they consciously or subconsciously overlook the politics that they are *intended to see* in the documents, either in loaded CCP jargon or in the context in which the document is presented and framed. For example, when China’s Central State Security Commission was introduced, all analysts were looking at the same Chinese-language announcement. Most missed the fact that the committee was announced under a heading on ‘social governance’. This served as an indicator that the commission would be more about the party’s ability to govern and oversee an overarching security strategy than it would be about a crisis-response body, which many analysts initially assumed that the commission would be. Filtering out the ideological component of party documents removes much of the meaning.

Another issue that was raised among many researchers we spoke with, as well as government analysts, is that they lacked technical skills or access to training to improve technical skills. The ability to use these tools will become increasingly vital as access to China becomes more difficult. For example, satellite-imagery analysis has been used at ASPI to understand the Chinese Government’s campaign against the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. Sources from inside and outside Xinjiang alerted researchers

to the growing severity of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and government policy documents described the CCP's intentions and methods. Technical tools have helped to provide evidence of what's happening as a result of such policies. For instance, ASPI's *Cultural erasure* report stemmed from a researcher's interest in using satellite imagery to track what we couldn't access on the ground. Their analysis showed that approximately 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang, or about 65% of the known total, had been either destroyed or damaged since 2017, which could be connected directly to known government policies in the region in order to explain the impacts of those policies. The combination of empirical data available remotely with material sourced from inside China and from individuals with direct knowledge has proven powerful in informing policy- and decision-makers in multiple jurisdictions.

The application of technology could help to bridge the gap between information that's read in CCP sources and data collected independently of the party. The ability to collect data at scale and to cross-reference it to other sources can help to show what's happening in ways that being physically present doing field work in a country can't always achieve. Using technology as a way of conducting research on China requires more multidisciplinary research approaches. Enabling researchers to collaborate with technical specialists and explain the nature of the problems that they're trying to solve will help them jointly build tools, datasets and analytical methods that provide unique and illuminating insights.

Conclusion

Feedback from ASPI's seminar series and workshops indicated that researchers would welcome more access to structured training opportunities, both as a way to build collaborative networks and to develop new skillsets. Effective collaboration is especially crucial because of the range of analytical skills required to produce a single report, particularly in the China and technology space. Not to mention the separate communications skills required to drive action and shape decision-making.

Training and upskilling emerging talent will require the development of a cross-section of skills, preferably early in university education and for early-career researchers. Continued funding of language training and efforts to create opportunities for in-country experience and engagement are crucial, but researchers also must be trained to diversify their research methods. For example, investing in skills development, in areas such as data analytics, and other efforts to teach and encourage researchers to apply technology as a research tool will remain important.

The problems facing the China research community are likely to continue to be magnified in the foreseeable future. The importance of China in global policy debates will require researchers to continue to find effective ways to produce policy relevant research under constrained conditions. It's the responsibility of governments, think tanks and current researchers and analysts to make sure that new researchers and analysts are prepared to deal with the realities of the operating environment.

Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
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| CCP | Chinese Communist Party |
| ICPC | International Cyber Policy Centre |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |

About the author

Dr **Samantha Hoffman** is a Senior Analyst with ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the dozens of anonymous individuals we engaged to conduct our seminar series, workshops, one-to-one interviews, and reviews as part of this project. Thank you especially to Rachael Owen and Hernán Alberro for their contributions to the workshops and seminar series. Thank you to all ASPI staff who reviewed this paper and/or who were involved in this project at various stages, including Fergus Hanson, Michael Shoebridge, Karly Winkler, and Peter Mattis.

This paper was produced as part of ASPI's China Think Tank Networks project, funded with a US\$250,000 grant from the US State Department.

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ASPI

Tel +61 2 6270 5100

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First published February 2022. ISSN 2209-9689.



Funding support for this publication was provided by the US State Department.

